PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2000–01

COMPRISING PERIOD
19 March—30 March 2001

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19 March 2001

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 365**

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2000–01

House of Commons

Monday 19 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Community Involvement (Armed Forces)

1. **Mr. Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North): If he will make a statement on his Department's policy on involving the armed forces in the community. [152698]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The armed forces are an integral part of the community. As the strategic defence review stressed, the armed forces serve the community by providing it with the defence it needs and by acting as a force for good in the world. They are also actively involved in the community—whether through their support of youth initiatives, their involvement in ceremonial duties, their participation in charity work, or their support to the civil authorities when the community as a whole is faced with an emergency.

Over the past few months, they have demonstrated their dedication to the community in an unprecedented manner. More than 1,000 drivers stood ready to ensure that fuel was delivered, essential services maintained and lives saved when the effects of the fuel protest threatened to get out of hand. Twice that number helped to defend lives and property from the most damaging effects of recent flooding. They performed those tasks as an integral part of the community they serve, working with the emergency services and other representatives of the community to promote the common welfare of the community as a whole.

The armed forces are already providing logistics advice to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to aid it with the disposal of slaughtered animals. We are of course responding promptly to any further specific requests for assistance that we receive from MAFF.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his response, and I am sure that the whole House is grateful to the armed forces for their work in such emergencies. Will my hon. Friend specify the details of the specialist assistance that the armed forces are offering to tackle the foot and mouth outbreak?

Mr. Spellar: Following the discussion with MAFF last week, the Ministry of Defence has agreed to provide MAFF with help in supervising the disposal of carcases of slaughtered livestock, focusing especially on the backlog of carcases that has built up. A logistics headquarters is being established in Devon to co-ordinate the activities of small teams drawn from the armed forces and deployed in the field. Those teams will reduce the burden on veterinary surgeons by helping to co-ordinate the efforts of the private contractors employed to dispose of the carcases. In doing so, they will speed up the disposal process and release vets to tackle the spread of the disease.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I am sure that all Members will join the Minister in warmly thanking the armed forces for their work in aiding the civil power and local communities. He has touched on the foot and mouth outbreak, but could he be slightly more specific? Will he tell the House how many members of the armed forces

are involved at present, and whether he intends—if the crisis continues—to respond to any request by MAFF to use the armed forces on a larger scale, especially units of the Corps of Royal Engineers and the Royal Logistic Corps?

Mr. Spellar: Yes, we stand ready to respond rapidly to further requests from MAFF, but, as the hon. Gentleman knows, it is always a case of striking a balance between the availability of service from civilian contractors and, in many cases, the geographical disposition of that service. At present, about 300 members of the armed forces are engaged, and about 50 two-man teams will be employed on local liaison work as well. The armed forces are already undertaking that work, but of course we recognise the scale of the problem and stand ready to respond.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): We are grateful to the Minister for explaining the work carried out in association with MAFF on the outbreak of foot and mouth. Will he explain any forward planning that might involve more members of the armed forces? Will that include not only the veterinary service and the Logistic Corps but an increasing number of Engineers, with their equipment? Will he tell us why the MOD is excluded from the Prime Minister's taskforce on foot and mouth disease, given that four other Departments are involved and when—obviously—the MOD will be crucial in the operation?

Mr. Spellar: Certainly we stand ready to provide assistance, including on the engineering side. However, there are considerable resources in the construction industry that can undertake such work.

With regard to membership of various committees, I think that I have been filmed going into Downing street to attend meetings on this matter. We are clearly involved and we stand ready to respond to requests from those who are dealing with these matters at first hand—which is exactly the appropriate relationship.

Joint Military Capability

2. **Mr. Jeff Ennis** (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): What measures are being taken to enhance joint military capability between the UK and its north American and European allies. [152699]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Work is progressing in NATO on the defence capabilities initiative in the five key areas of effective engagement, survivability of forces and infrastructure, command and control, sustainability and logistics, and deployability and mobility.

We are also pursuing our commitments to the European Union headline goal, which will complement progress with the DCI to improve European military capabilities. Additionally, we are seeking greater capability and inter-operability with other nations through multinational defence co-operation.

Mr. Ennis: On the eve of his visit to the United States, will my right hon. Friend tell the House what message he will take to the American Secretary of Defence? In particular, will my right hon. Friend emphasise to Mr. Rumsfeld that the aims of the European defence security policy are consistent with the aims of NATO?

Mr. Hoon: There will be a series of meetings in Washington in the next few days to ensure absolute consistency between NATO's efforts to improve military capabilities through the defence capabilities initiative and European efforts to do precisely the same thing through the achievement of the Helsinki headline goal. That is the message that I shall take to Washington.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Secretary of State confirm that for this country to take part in any major operation involving substantial airlift or intelligence capabilities—in other words, any major operation—would require American support? At a time when we may be close to a major outbreak of fresh conflict in the Balkans, will he tell us what extra resources our European allies are making available to match the extra commitments that we shall make under the European commitment that he has just described?

Mr. Hoon: We have always made it clear that we would regard NATO and, therefore, United States support for such an operation as being the way in which we would undertake any major operation. A number of our European allies are certainly increasing their defence expenditure, but, equally, we have made it similarly clear that the vital matter is not simply how much money is spent—important though that is—but what it is spent on. That is precisely why it is so important that we pursue, through the DCI, improvements in NATO's capabilities, including heavy lift, as well as the absolutely consistent approach in the Helsinki headline goal to improve European capability. I take it from the hon. Gentleman's observations that he supports the efforts that we are making.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): On joint military capabilities, some weeks ago I asked the Ministry of Defence what happened to Kosovo Liberation Army terrorists when they were arrested by KFOR and taken to Camp Bond Steel. Perhaps I am still waiting for an answer because, far from charging the terrorists, it would appear that the US contingent of KFOR was training them in the American sector and allowing them to smuggle arms and launch attacks across the borders of Serbia and Macedonia. What are the leaders of KFOR going to do about the situation in Macedonia? Are we simply going to abandon them to this attack?

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that my hon. Friend appears to be misinformed. The United States has made it absolutely clear that it is giving no active or tacit support to any kind of terrorist activity. It remains entirely even-handed in the way it deals with terrorist activity, from whichever ethnic community it comes. I assure her that it is not engaged in activity of the kind that she describes.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Secretary of State agree that we may be about to witness a real test of joint military capability if the dangerous situation in Macedonia deteriorates any further? If that happens, does he agree that it may be necessary for NATO to do more than strengthen patrols on the border?

At a time when the United States is indicating that it intends to withdraw troops from Bosnia, does not the situation in Macedonia provide an ideal opportunity for the European nations to show that they are serious about military capability and about Europe taking more responsibility for European defence issues?

Mr. Hoon: I can assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that those in the NATO capitals have been in regular contact in recent days about the increasing tension on the borders of Macedonia. There have been discussions, which continue, about the appropriate action for KFOR to take and who should initiate it. At this stage, I am not in a position to tell the House more than that, except to say that we regard the situation there with grave concern and we will take appropriate action when necessary.

Accommodation (Service Personnel)

3. **Ms Rachel Squire** (Dunfermline, West): If he will make a statement on his plans to improve single living accommodation and married quarters overseas for service personnel. [152700]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The Government are determined that our military personnel will have good living accommodation. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a major new initiative for improving service single living accommodation in the United Kingdom. We also plan upgrade programmes for both single living and family accommodation overseas. Significant projects are already in hand, such as the rebuilding and refurbishing of all accommodation in Cyprus. The new money made available to the defence budget in the 2000 spending review has allowed us to increase the investment in upgrade programmes elsewhere.

Ms Squire: I welcome the announcement on improving the standard of service accommodation made last week by my right hon. Friend. On a recent visit to Episkopi barracks in Cyprus, I was impressed by the professionalism of the 1st battalion, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, but appalled by the standard of single living accommodation that it has endured during its two-year tour of duty, so I welcome the Minister's assurance that it will be improved. Can he also assure me that, as the first battalion should have transferred to Catterick by now, the standard of accommodation there will represent an improvement? Does he agree that one can only ask what the previous Government were doing for 18 years to allow such substandard accommodation to be provided for our armed services personnel?

Dr. Moonie: My hon. Friend will be well aware that the history of the previous Government was one of a steady and slow decline in the overall quality of accommodation. I have visited many sites in the United Kingdom and Germany and I have made it clear that I find them unacceptable. She will be glad to know that our additional money for overseas investment is projected to build up to £55 million a year over the next few years. That will go a long way to remedying the deficits. The problem cannot be cured overnight, but we have made a start and we have promised that we will continue that work.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I do not want to be churlish, so I am bound to say that I welcome the investment in accommodation, especially that for Aldershot, because the Minister knows that the accommodation in Montgomery lines is particularly poor. However, it is appalling that, five days after the Secretary of State for Defence smuggled out the information by way of a written answer and despite my representations to his office, I have still not been told what investment will be made in Aldershot. I learned from the Minister for the Armed Forces, speaking on Southern Counties Radio, that there would be £3 million of investment for Aldershot, but will the Under-Secretary tell us precisely what that means for my constituents, or whether it is just money for the future and another Labour mirage?

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman may not have wanted to be churlish, but he certainly made a dashed good stab at it. Given the many sites that need upgrading, it has sadly not been possible to notify every right hon. and hon. Member about our plans. However, when we have specific proposals, they will be informed about them. Late last year, I saw the situation at Montgomery lines at first hand and we have managed to identify separate moneys that will go towards the temporary upgrading of the accommodation on that site. However, we recognise that we cannot replace all the substandard accommodation overnight.

Ministerial Meetings (France)

4. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): When he last met the French Defence Minister to discuss European security. [152701]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I last met Alain Richard on 9 February this year at Cahors to discuss a range of defence issues of mutual interest, including European security.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that reply. When the Prime Minister referred in *The Sunday Telegraph* yesterday to those people who really may have

"an agenda to destroy NATO",

assuming that he did not intend to incriminate himself, did he mean the French? If not, who did he mean? If he did mean the French, why cannot the Secretary of State see that the Prime Minister's collusion for more than two years with the French "federasts" from St. Malo to Cologne and from Helsinki to Nice is clear evidence of knavery, folly or a potentially lethal combination of the two?

Mr. Hoon: The Prime Minister was referring not to Governments, but to those individuals who seek to undermine NATO.

Mr. Bercow: Name names.

Mr. Hoon: For example, the hon. Gentleman should think of those who go from the United Kingdom to

Washington to pour scorn into the ears of those who have not considered the matter in detail. By undermining or seeking to undermine European co-operation, they are of course undermining the United Kingdom—not something that any British Government or any responsible British Prime Minister would seek to do.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): If it was necessary to have a common European security policy with the United States to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo—a policy that I urged and fully supported—is it not now necessary to have again a common European security policy to stop Albanian extremists, who are not representative of the Albanian people, undermining the peace and security that have come to the Balkans?

Mr. Hoon: I made it clear in response to an earlier question that NATO capitals are looking carefully at the situation on the border with Macedonia. We regard the matter with grave concern and, certainly, we are taking appropriate action to deal with any kind of extremism from any ethic community.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Given that the European rapid reaction force will draw on the same forces as NATO, how will it be able to engage in an operation in which, by definition, NATO does not wish to engage, without reducing NATO's capabilities for the operations in which it does wish to participate? Have the French, for example, said that they intend to allocate a single extra soldier, sailor or airman to the defence of Europe, or will they simply raid the forces allocated to NATO?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We have made it clear that we would distinguish between the war-fighting activity in which we would expect NATO to be involved, for which forces that have been allocated to it are properly and suitably trained, and the peacekeeping Petersberg tasks, in which we would expect the European Union to engage. That is why there is no inconsistency between our efforts with NATO and the EU to improve military capability.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Given the many statements made in Washington and London about the importance of NATO and Europe working side by side, why were the French Government not informed by the Americans when they bombed Baghdad?

Hon. Members: Answer that.

Mr. Hoon: I shall try to deal with a number of factual errors that my right hon. Friend has set out. In the first instance, the so-called bombing of Baghdad was a self-defence operation, conducted by the coalition forces in defence of their aircraft. Although some targets were near Baghdad, it is stretching the facts to suggest that they were in Baghdad. As for information that is communicated to the French, it is for the coalition to determine the appropriate time when allies are informed. I am sure that they were informed at an appropriate stage.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Secretary of State is using sophistry to cover the Prime Minister's words. The Prime Minister made his position clear in an interview in *The Sunday Telegraph*, in which he said:

"well, if we don't get involved in European defence . . . then those people who really may have an agenda to destroy NATO will have control of it."

In 1997, after the Amsterdam summit, he was utterly opposed to a Euro defence programme, which he described as an "ill-judged transplant operation", but, by 1998, he was suddenly in favour of it. Which group of nationals did the Prime Minister have in mind when he referred to those who wish to destroy NATO?

Mr. Hoon: I have already answered that; I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not paying attention. Perhaps he was also not paying attention when the previous Government set out and signed up to a common European defence policy at Maastricht. Certainly, the great majority of Conservative Members supported that, although I suppose that I should excuse him because he opposed it. Does the Conservative party oppose everything to do with the EU instinctively, even when it is clearly in Britain's best interests to participate? Has its loose coalition on Europe broken down?

Mr. Duncan Smith: Yet again, it is quite clear that the Prime Minister did not tell the Secretary of State about those people who will be destroying NATO, because he has not got a brief to that effect. The reality is simple. As ever, the Government are facing in two directions at once. On the one hand, they are telling the Americans, "Don't worry. Trust us"; on the other, they are saying to the people who will destroy NATO, "Don't worry. You can trust us, too. We're all in this together." Is it not the reality that since St. Malo, they have colluded in a process that will deliver the destruction of NATO? In addition, the Prime Minister said in the interview that he was a great believer in natural law—we now know that the Government spend all their time flying by the seat of their pants.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman finds the world such a confusing and difficult place. I am sure that it would be simpler for all of us if, like the modern Conservative party, we simply turned our back on any sort of international development, irrespective of whether it was in Britain's interest, as well as on any sort of European development. The position that the hon. Gentleman sets out is that it is all very complicated and too difficult for us, so it is far easier to stick our head firmly in the sand and leave it there.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend recall that many years ago at Labour party conferences there used to be long resolutions from the constituency parties that advocated the withdrawal from NATO? I and one or two of my hon. Friends used to support that proposition, and I am not a supporter of the Common Market either. I get my cake and eat it too—I am quite enjoying this little spat and I hope that it will go on for a long time.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend will recall that in those days, I was sometimes required to appear before the Bolsover general management committee. It is fair to say that on those occasions, although I was a minority of one,

I consistently supported membership of both the European Union and NATO. I am delighted that the Labour party and now the Labour Government have also adopted that position.

RAF Numbers

5. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): How many people left the Royal Air Force in each of the past three years. [152702]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): A total of 14,138 people left the RAF in the three years ending 31 December 2000; 4,847 left the service in 1998, 4,712 in 1999 and 4,579 in 2000. That was balanced against intake figures of 4,088 during 1998, 4,759 during 1999 and 3,731 during 2000.

Mr. Gray: Those figures are accurately reflected at RAF Lyneham in my constituency, where each year up to 5 per cent. more people leave than come in. That is not merely a result of overstretch caused by Sierra Leone and the Balkans; it is also caused by very poor living conditions and failure to invest in infrastructure at RAF Lyneham. Does the Minister agree that more people are now leaving the RAF than are joining and that that makes a mockery of the fine words in the strategic defence review's "Policy for People", which stated that

"delivery of tangible improvements in overstretch and undermanning"

was entirely dependent on finding new people? Why have the Government failed to do that in the three years since the SDR, and what does the Minister intend to do about it now?

Mr. Spellar: I did not read out the outflow figures for the years under the previous Conservative Administration. We inherited a figure of 7,512 in 1997; in 1996—the Conservatives' last full year in office—the outflow figure was 10,544; in 1995 it was 5,610, and in 1994 it was 6,394. In every one of those years, there was a greater outflow than any that has occurred under the Labour Government. We are matching intake figures to outflow figures. The RAF recruited 98.6 per cent. of its requirement last year.

The hon. Gentleman has a real cheek to talk about accommodation when the Conservatives did nothing about it for 18 years and after my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary have announced a major building programme to rectify the problems. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his endorsement of our policy, but not for his party's dereliction of duty.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Will the Minister arrange for those figures to be analysed to determine whether there is evidence of a significant number of people with minor disabilities leaving the RAF when those disabilities do not prevent them from undertaking their responsibilities; and whether there is any danger of discrimination against people with minor disabilities in RAF recruitment?

Mr. Spellar: The right hon. Gentleman mixes two issues: first, requirements on recruitment and, secondly, changes in people's health and abilities occurring during their service. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is undertaking a review of service intake to match up the number of those with minor disabilities to modern day requirements.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that all the services, rightly, do a great deal to accommodate those who have already undertaken training, committed themselves to the service, and have a lot to offer. A balance has to be struck in the light of the requirement that all service personnel be available for active duty, but he will know that that is handled effectively and sensitively by the services.

RAF Bases (Commercial Development)

6. **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley): What steps he has taken to promote the regeneration of former RAF bases for commercial aviation use. [152703]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): A number of former RAF bases have been or are in the process of being sold for civil aviation purposes, including Finningley in my hon. Friend's constituency, Manston, Farnborough, and Kemble. Our usual policy is to market a former airfield for civil aviation purposes where that is consistent with the current planning process and Government accounting regulations.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. May I congratulate the Government on their decision in 1997 to stop the previous Government's proposal to turn RAF Finningley into the fourth prison in my constituency? May I also congratulate them on excluding the option of quarrying on one of the best runways in the country and disposing of it for aviation use?

Will my hon. Friend confirm that former RAF bases have made a valuable contribution to the development of regional and civil aviation? Will he also confirm that several airports, including Manchester airport before it got permission for a second runway, expressed interest in the purchase of Finningley which, with the second longest runway in the north and excellent weather conditions, is ideally suited to be a civil airport?

Dr. Moonie: I can certainly agree with my hon. Friend's final remarks. Finningley offers a superb site for an airport. I understand that Doncaster metropolitan borough council has approved a planning application to develop a major international airport site and that it has been called in for determination by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Several airfields have been or are being sold for purposes which, we firmly believe, will continue to expand civil aviation.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): In order to meet the strategic defence review's commitment to raise gross receipts of £700 million from the sale of surplus defence land by 2002—perhaps the Minister will confirm that that is on course—is it the Government's policy to

get the maximum commercial return from such spare land, subject to planning permission, or to designate particular areas of spare defence land for particular purposes?

Dr. Moonie: The position is not quite as the hon. Gentleman says. We discuss things carefully with local councils—with their elected representatives if necessary, but certainly with the planning authorities—to try to establish the best use of a site, which then goes forward for bidding in the usual tendering process. In those circumstances, we seek to get the best possible commercial return from the deal.

Ministerial Meetings (France)

7. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): When he last met his French counterpart to discuss naval co-operation between France, the UK and the USA. [152704]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I regularly discuss bilateral naval co-operation with both my French and American colleagues. When I last met my French counterpart on 9 February in Cahors, naval co-operation formed part of the background to our discussions. The close nature of our naval co-operation with the United States was most recently demonstrated by agreement to the permanent stationing of a British sailor on the USS Winston Churchill, which was launched last week.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Given the similarity in the size of the French and British naval forces, will my right hon. Friend set out for the House the full extent of co-operation between them? In particular, will he make clear the synergy between that co-operation and work with the United States navy?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. There is an agreement on naval co-operation with the French, which covers a wide range of activity, including operations. In addition, 20 formal working groups have been established, dealing with training, submarine co-operation, operational planning, doctrine communications and personnel exchanges. That agreement was drawn up in 1996 and signed by the then Secretary of State for Defence. As my hon. Friend said, the size of our respective navies means that there are significant opportunities for co-operation with the United States navy, which we pursue vigorously.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Like the Secretary of State, I welcome co-operation with the United States, but does he not accept that co-operation on submarines, especially with the French navy, is crucial to our long-term training for submarine warfare?

Mr. Hoon: Co-operation on submarines is at a relatively early stage; visits were conducted to one another's ports only recently. There are obviously matters of great national sensitivity surrounding our nuclear submarine fleet, and I am sure that the French believe that that is so for them, too. There are certainly practical benefits in co-operation, not least in the light of the appalling disaster and loss of the Russian submarine Kursk.

Armed Forces (Retention)

8. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): If he will make a statement on the steps being taken to improve retention in the armed forces. [152705]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Armed forces retention is being tackled as a matter of the highest priority. We have introduced a wide range of measures aimed at improving retention through policies that genuinely reflect the priorities of our people and their families, both at home and on deployment. Last month, we announced that we had accepted the Armed Forces Pay Review Body's recommendations in full, and our people will see that reflected in their pay packets in May, backdated to April. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced our plans to spend up to £200 million a year on an upgrade programme to bring single living accommodation up to the standards expected by service personnel in the 21st century.

In addition, I am pleased to announce that we shall introduce a further package of improvements to the operational welfare package, which will extend welfare provision to include all maritime deployments and exercises lasting two months or more. From next month, all personnel deployed on operations or on exercises lasting more than two months will receive hot shower facilities and laundry, and a comprehensive communications package, including 20 minutes of free telephone calls each week, free e-blueys and free e-mail facilities—*[Interruption.]*—to enable personnel to keep in contact with their families.

We will also be introducing an additional British Forces Broadcasting Services channel and NAAFI retail facilities in the Balkans, and providing additional leisure and fitness equipment in all our operational theatres for off-duty relaxation. *[Interruption.]* In all, this welfare package will amount to an additional £60 million over the next four years. *[Interruption.]*

Dr. Iddon: I am staggered by that answer. I do not know whether I have a supplementary question left, after that. I am pleased that my hon. Friend recognises that the welfare of our services personnel is an important component of retention. Although good housing is important, as other hon. Members have observed, does my hon. Friend agree that there are other factors, apart from those that he mentioned—[Hon. Members: "He mentioned quite a lot."] He did, indeed. I refer to factors such as counselling when people run into personal difficulties, good schooling for children, and as my hon. Friend suggested, that partners are kept in contact with one another when they are separated, especially when people serve for long periods overseas. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Spellar: We should understand the dilemma that the Opposition are in: those are all issues that they neglected over 18 years. We are rectifying matters. There is a long list of steps that we are taking to improve the welfare of our forces, who will note the way in which the Opposition responded to our announcements. The improvements have long been required, and they recognise the pressure that our people are under and the contribution that they make. As my hon. Friend knows, we are dealing with schooling in this country through the service families taskforce and also through the service

education system, under my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State. We are introducing real change; the Opposition did nothing about it.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am sure that, like me, most hon. Members appreciate that. Service men and women know only too well who let them down over the previous 18 years. Most of what the Minister announced is welcome, but will he deal with two issues for which he was responsible? One is the speedy settlement of service men's compensation claims, not least the claims of men who did not have proper malaria cover when they were in Sierra Leone. The other concerns the anomalies relating to Pay 2000 and the way in which that has undermined the rates of pay for senior enlisted personnel.

Mr. Spellar: No one will lose money under Pay 2000. We are always prepared to examine anomalies as a system is introduced. As the hon. Gentleman will know from his previous incarnation, pay systems are extremely difficult, but from the response that we have had, we believe that Pay 2000 is a welcome development. With regard to malaria, the situation has been slightly overplayed by the media. The facts that we have ascertained do not bear out the scare stories, but where there is liability, as I understand there clearly is in one case, there will be speedy settlement of that claim.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Before the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) gets too carried away by his Government's propaganda, I should tell him that a number of the announcements that have just been made are recycled and were originally made months ago.

Having had a few minutes of reflection, will the Minister for the Armed Forces accept that he gave a thoroughly disingenuous answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on the vital matter of numbers? There is no comparison between the planned reduction of our forces in the 1990s, which was consequent upon the end of the cold war, and the current Government's monumental failure to achieve the targets set out in their strategic defence review. What is more, they are continuing to go backwards. Is there now the slightest hope that the Army will achieve even its latest target of a 97 per cent. level of effectiveness by 2004, given that under the Government's mismanagement, net retention in the armed forces continues to decline?

Mr. Spellar: I have to give it to the hon. Gentleman—he is certainly a good sport and is being very fair. It is good of him to remind the House and the country of his Government's lamentable record regarding the sackings, or compulsory redundancies, that occurred in the armed forces, and of the huge numbers of people in the Army whose employment was terminated early. That had a considerable effect on recruitment; indeed, the previous Government left us with significant under-recruitment. In a period of rising employment, with the lowest unemployment figures for 25 years, it is a tribute to our recruitment teams that they have been able to maintain the position, despite the appalling circumstances with which the Conservatives and their gross mismanagement left us. It is good of him to remind us of that.

Colchester Garrison

9. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When temporary additional accommodation for members of the Parachute Regiment will be provided within the Colchester garrison. [152706]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I am pleased to say that recruitment to the Parachute Regiment is currently buoyant. We expect it to be 45 personnel over establishment by August this year. I am sorry to say, however, that that has led to a shortage of service accommodation in Colchester. The private finance initiative project at Colchester will address that problem. In the short term, temporary accommodation will be used to alleviate the situation. We expect that to be available for use by the Parachute Regiment by mid-August.

Mr. Russell: Does the Under-Secretary accept that the previous Government's privatisation of Army married quarters at a give-away sales price, added to the MOD's lack of forward planning, means that more than 200 members of the Parachute Regiment are renting more than 70 private houses in Colchester—a town that already has the worst homelessness record in the east of England? Will he give an assurance that the target date of mid-August will be advanced? The Parachute Regiment has been in Colchester for the best part of a year, so the forward planning should have been done long ago and the accommodation should be available now.

Dr. Moonie: I fully accept the catalogue of difficulties that the hon. Gentleman describes. I assure him that the temporary bed spaces, of which there will be 224 in all, will be available in August, when we need them. Regrettably, a number of personnel—primarily officers and senior non-commissioned officers—will continue to be accommodated in married quarters. Some of them may have to remain in private rented accommodation, but the new spaces will have an enormous effect on easing the problem.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I accept that the money for single soldiers' accommodation in Colchester and elsewhere is welcome, but the Under-Secretary will know that the £100 million a year extra that is being spent on accommodation exceeds the whole defence budget increase, as set out in the comprehensive spending review. It is now well known in the Ministry of Defence that the long-term costings process has been absolutely bloody and that serious consequences will be announced. When can we expect to learn the results of the long-term costings process?

Dr. Moonie: I seem to remember that the hon. Gentleman was responsible for advising the previous Government on some of the appalling policies that they introduced. I am happy to say that we have managed to secure valuable additional resources for accommodation, which should be welcomed by every hon. Member. That has not been done at the expense of any other long-term planning. We have decided that there should be a proper balance in the allocation of resources. For too long,

the previous Government allowed accommodation to go to rack and ruin—something that this Government are no longer prepared to tolerate.

National Missile Defence

10. **Mr. David Atkinson** (Bournemouth, East): What his latest assessment is of the impact of the United States proposal for a national missile defence on UK defence policy. [152707]

14. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will make a statement about the US national missile defence proposal. [152711]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The United Kingdom shares the United States concerns about the problem of missile proliferation and will continue to work with that country in tackling it. It is clearly not in Britain's interest for our closest ally to feel vulnerable to attack. We understand the role that missile defence can play as one element of a response. However, until the US makes specific proposals, it remains premature to reach judgments about the impact on UK defence policy, although, as we have made clear, we want to be helpful to our closest ally.

Mr. Atkinson: The Secretary of State said that he shared the United States assessment of threat. When the Western European Union's Technological and Aerospace Committee went to Russia last month, we found that Russia also shared that assessment. Will the right hon. Gentleman now take a robust lead in promoting discussion in NATO between the United States, Russia and our European allies on shared missile defence, which would deter any rogue state that has weapons of mass destruction from threatening to deploy them?

Mr. Hoon: We have already held several discussions in NATO about missile defence; I am sure that they will continue. We have encouraged the United States to discuss Russia's problem with Russia, which also suggested a proposal for missile defence. NATO is evaluating that. That process will continue, and it is sensible for all the countries to consider carefully the offensive and defensive systems that are designed to deal with nuclear proliferation.

Mr. Edwards: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is deep unease about the US missile defence system? Does he also agree that it is reckless for the Conservative party to give unfettered support to the project at this stage, when discussions are continuing between the US and other NATO partners?

Mr. Hoon: I do not recognise my hon. Friend's description of the UK Government's position. We have made it clear that it is sensible for discussions to take place among allies in NATO. We have always encouraged the US to hold discussions with Russia and China. Discussions with Russia are under way. However, we have also said that we should not rush into such a project. It should be considered calmly and responsibly, in full consultation with allies. I am delighted that the US has adopted that position.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): We all accept that it will take some time before a system is developed. However, why has the Secretary of State got such a hang-up about accepting the principle of the US programme? I understand from his comments that he has not accepted it.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry if the right hon. Gentleman misunderstood my remarks. He mentioned a programme; although the previous US Administration made a proposal, the new US Administration have not proposed a specific programme. We have made it clear to the US that we want to be helpful when it makes a specific proposal. However, at Camp David, President Bush said:

> "As to whether there will be sites or no sites in the United Kingdom, that's too early to determine, because I have yet to propose to the Prime Minister what will work."

It makes sense for the UK, as the United States closest ally, to work closely with it and to be helpful if it makes a specific proposal. However, it makes no sense to respond until the US has made its proposals in its defence interests clear.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Secretary of State is engaged in the new Labour process of sending different messages to different groups in the hope that they do not speak to each other. I know that the Ministry of Defence has told him that he must make a decision. There is a threat, which is likely to grow in the next four to five years, to the UK. The question for the Government is, therefore, not whether the Americans feel threatened, but whether a threat to the United Kingdom is developing. If they agree that there is such a threat, they should say that they support ballistic missile defence in principle. They said that about the euro, why cannot they say it about the defence of the UK?

Perhaps the Government fear splits. I have a long list of Labour Members who oppose and work to destroy Trident. The list includes the hon. Members for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) and for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), who are members of the Select Committee on Defence. The Labour party is therefore split and worried about the election.

Mr. Hoon: I shall deal with the hon. Gentleman's substantive point about the threat. While we have always recognised that there is a potential threat to Britain's deployed forces and we would want to investigate and examine it to seek ways of protecting the deployed forces, we have not yet been advised that there is any threat to the United Kingdom today.

I have set out this matter in the House on a number of occasions. I am intrigued that, despite my doing so, the Opposition have decided that there is a threat. I would be interested to know the source of their intelligence on that matter, if "intelligence" is not too strong a word in this context. We continue to monitor the situation, and the Government would certainly report to the House should our perception of any such threat change. However, for the moment, as I have made clear on many occasions, there is no assessment of any threat to the United Kingdom.

European Rapid Reaction Force

13. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make a statement on the development of a European rapid reaction force. [152710]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): There is no standing European rapid reaction force. Efforts in the European Union are focused on improving military capabilities to meet the headline goal. Nations identified initial contributions to this goal last November. We are now engaged in detailed analysis of the improvements required, and the action needed to put those improvements into effect.

Mr. Leigh: I do not think that I have ever heard a British Prime Minister say that the Opposition have been effective in changing attitudes in the American Administration. However, that is what the Prime Minister said in his interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* yesterday, although he was rather rude about it. I seem to remember words such as "poison", "ears" and "dripping" being used. I wonder whether this could have influenced the United States Defence Secretary's comment that

"We need to be vigilant to see that we don't do anything that could inject an instability into the alliance."

Is that diplomatic-speak for "I don't like the smell of this. It sounds like limey double-speak to me, but I don't want to criticise it openly because we need Brit support for bombing Saddam Hussein"?

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has become so tired and cynical in opposition that he cannot accept words at their face value. The United States Administration have set out their position very clearly, as did the new US President at Camp David. Like their predecessors, they want European defence to develop in a way that strengthens NATO, and so do we. The Prime Minister agreed with the United States President on that at Camp David. Mr. Rumsfeld also said, in the course of the interview to which the hon. Gentleman referred, that the devil was in the detail, and he was right. We are determined to ensure that those details continue to be developed in ways that will support and strengthen the alliance. That is the position of the British Government, and will continue to be so.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): On the development of a European rapid reaction force, does my right hon. Friend agree that training is imperative, and that Whale island in Portsmouth in my constituency has unique facilities that ought to be used to cross-pollinate the value that we can obtain from such facilities?

I thank my right hon. Friend for his visit to my constituency, and apologise personally for the bad press, which was unfounded. I hope that that will not deter him from coming again, because the visit was appreciated by my constituents and by many of the trade unionists working in the naval base.

Mr. Hoon: I had an excellent visit to my hon. Friend's constituency, and I assure him that it was not in any way affected by the somewhat tendentious headlines that followed. I was certainly very impressed by what I saw on Whale island and I thought that it provided an excellent facility. As he knows, the question of armed forces training is still being reviewed right across the United Kingdom. I cannot, therefore, give him a specific answer to his question today, save to say that he has mounted an extremely vigorous and effective campaign on behalf of his constituents and I am sure that he will continue to harry and harass Ministers with the considerable ability that he has already displayed.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I am sorry that the Secretary of State is being given a bad press wherever he goes. Some of us understand that.

As for the substantial point about European defence co-operation and European defence initiatives, any enlightened Member will welcome greater European defence co-operation as long as it is supportive of NATO, as the Secretary of State said. Do the French now see his point of view, and can he be much more specific about what might happen in Macedonia if action were required and the Americans decided to pull back? Have we yet reached a point at which the right hon. Gentleman is confident that a European presence could be effective in keeping the sides apart on the Macedonian border?

Mr. Hoon: I know that the hon. Gentleman, who was a Minister in the last Government, is an expert on bad press. I assure the House that the limited criticism that occurred in a Portsmouth paper following my visit is not something over which I am likely to lose any sleep; but should I require advice on dealing with bad publicity, I shall be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's implied offer of assistance. [HON. MEMBERS: "What was the headline?"] It is a matter of private grief. I shall leave it to the House of Commons Library to reveal.

As for the more serious matter raised by the hon. Gentleman, I cannot tell him at this stage precisely how allies propose to deal with the continuing instability along the border of Macedonia. He will understand why it is important that consultations with allies continue—there needs to be broad agreement among them on how to tackle the problem—but we are engaging in close consultation with both NATO capitals and the Macedonian Government. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that a determined effort is under way to resolve the continuing instability.

Procurement (North-west)

15. **Maria Eagle** (Liverpool, Garston): How many jobs were *(a)* created and *(b)* sustained as a result of procurement decisions in the north-west since 1997. [152712]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): It is estimated that 350,000 jobs are dependent on defence expenditure and equipment exports. Over 60,000 new contracts are placed each year. The Ministry of Defence does not record the number of jobs created or sustained as a result of each individual procurement decision, but it is estimated that a substantial number of jobs in the north-west of England depend

directly on defence equipment expenditure by the Ministry of Defence, and that many more will be created as a result of our recent procurement decisions.

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that, while the Eurofighter is important to the future effectiveness of the RAF, it is also important to the future of the economy of the north-west, where it is sustaining and creating thousands of jobs? Will he assure me that, unlike the Conservative party, he will remain committed to the project?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to give that absolute assurance. Hopefully, the development of the A400M will mean a long-term future for employment in the aircraft industry in the area for many years.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Are not the defence industries in the north-west, as elsewhere, important not just for jobs but for improving the technological base of industry as a whole? Will the Minister—in the words of his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—seek to be helpful to the United States in regard to any research programme, development and, ultimately, work that could ensue from ballistic missile defence?

Dr. Moonie: Perhaps the best example I can give of a tangible project with which we are dealing, as opposed to the fantasy to which the hon. Gentleman refers—at present, anyway—*[Interruption.]* If we could have fewer moronic remarks from Opposition Front Benchers, I might be able to answer their hon. Friend's question.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are determined to pursue the development of the joint strike fighter, with collaboration from companies in the United States. The project should provide a promising aircraft for our future needs.

RAF Pilots (Retention)

16. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What steps he is taking to improve the retention of pilots in the RAF. [152713]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The retention of pilots is a critical problem, not just for the RAF but for other armed forces around the world. Many pilots choose to leave the services at an early opportunity to pursue a second career with civil airlines. Improving pilot retention rates is therefore one of our highest priorities. Indeed, that was reflected in the announcement of the armed forces pay award for 2001, which, in addition to a 3.7 per cent. increase in basic salary for all ranks, will result in increases in flying pay. There will also be the introduction of a targeted financial retention incentive for RAF aircrew of up to £10,000 available for two years, linked to a commitment to continue serving. The scheme is an interim measure pending the outcome of the comprehensive review of aircrew retention that is being initiated.

Angela Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and welcome the response that he gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). Retention levels decreased to an all-time low in 1996, and the measures that he has introduced are welcome. However, can he assure me that the matter will be kept under constant review, and that new measures will be introduced as times change and they become necessary?

Mr. Spellar: Yes, I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are also in discussions with other NATO countries on sharing experiences of the issue. Additionally, we believe that some of the other measures that we have highlighted today, particularly those on accommodation, will help to assist with retention.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In view of the statement made over the weekend on radio and television by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the likelihood that foot and mouth originated from the illegal importation of infected material, have you had a request for a statement by him to the House? The matter is extremely important and must be cleared up. Indeed, there is a need for a ban on the importation of all such meats from all countries that may be affected by foot and mouth.

Mr. Speaker: I have had no approach from the Minister.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In the past hour, the Minister for the Armed Forces and some other Ministers have given particularly long answers not to supplementary questions, but to the initial questions. They will have been reading those answers from their brief. Will you advise Ministers and their officials that such written answers should be shorter so that hon. Members can ask more supplementary questions?

Mr. Speaker: I could also advise some hon. Members that their questions should be shorter.

Orders of the Day

CONSOLIDATED FUND (NO. 2) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills), and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question, That the Bill be now read the Third time, *put forthwith, and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]*

[Relevant documents: Second Special Report from the Deregulation Committee, Session 1999–2000 (Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the draft Regulatory Reform Bill), HC 488; Third Special Report from the Deregulation Committee, Session 1999–2000 (Further Report on the draft Regulatory Reform Bill), HC 705; and First Special Report from the Deregulation Committee, Session 2000–01 (The Handling of Regulatory Reform Orders), HC 328.]

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.33 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

All Governments regulate to protect consumers, the environment, employers, employees, and society as a whole. The Government were elected on principles of fairness, justice and equality of opportunity, and those are the principles that we have put into practice in introducing fair and effective regulation. That is not about red tape or petty bureaucracy. The Government have no need to apologise for legislating for decent holiday entitlement, safety in the workplace, or policies to make work pay, such as the working families tax credit and the minimum wage. Those are commitments that we made in our manifesto, and they are commitments that we have honoured.

Despite arguments made by Opposition Members when we introduced a fair minimum wage, jobs have not been lost. Introducing the working families tax credit has not lost jobs. Introducing proper maternity leave has not lost jobs, nor has taking action to tackle discrimination against the disabled. On the contrary, as we saw last week, for the first time in 25 years, United Kingdom unemployment has fallen below 1 million. We have a healthy and stable economy, with low inflation, low interest rates and low unemployment. I am proud of the action that we have taken and of what has been achieved.

As so often in politics, however, it is essential that we strike the right balance. Unnecessary or over-complicated regulation that is difficult to enforce is a burden on everyone. It stifles enterprise and limits opportunity, which is why we have taken active steps to ensure that the regulations that are introduced are necessary, simple, and easy to understand and implement.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The right hon. Lady said that the Conservatives had predicted a loss of jobs as a result of the introduction of the minimum wage. Does she recall that at that time the Labour party was promising a minimum wage of £5? Will she now say what the current level of the minimum wage is?

Marjorie Mowlam: We are not here to discuss the details of the minimum wage; we are here to discuss regulation and its reduction. The Tories always claim that they would reduce regulation, but the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), a Minister in the previous Government who tried to reduce regulation, said:

"We would be the first to say that we did not do very well".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1999; Vol. 339, c.250.]

Moreover, in December 1987 the Institute of Directors said:

"The excessive burden of regulation on business is halting growth and preventing companies from entering new markets . . . every year the Government has added to red tape".

Before the hon. Gentleman gets into the detail of what we have introduced, it would do no harm if he looked back at what the Conservatives did.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The national minimum wage is a great point of principle. I would have thought that the Conservative party, rather than arguing about whether it supported a particular rate of pay, would accept that this is the first time in the industrial history of this country that a large number of low-paid women have been taken out of poverty wages. The House should be proud of that.

Marjorie Mowlam: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution; the minimum wage helped poor women, but Conservative Members keep trying to use the figures to inflate the cost of regulation. They and their supporters have quoted figures amounting to anything from £5 billion to £13 billion, but those figures include the administrative costs and the actual costs of the policies. Including the cost of paying the national minimum wage and the working families tax credit, and of administering other policy changes, boosts the costs of bureaucracy in a gross, unfair and misleading way. The real cost of administering Government policies is a fraction of what the Conservatives have suggested.

As so often in politics, it is essential to strike the right balance. No one wants unnecessary, over-complicated and burdensome regulation. We have taken active steps to ensure that what regulations are introduced are necessary, simple, and easy to understand and implement. I chair a panel on regulatory accountability whose key task is to scrutinise Departments' regulatory proposals and ensure that they meet that high standard. I call Ministers to come to the panel and justify their proposals if the panel thinks that they do not meet its criteria.

In the Cabinet Office, the regulatory impact unit operates across government to ensure that Departments make a thorough appraisal of the costs and benefits of any new proposals or regulations, and to suggest changes and improvements wherever it can. Departments now have to produce regulatory impact assessments across the board. The Government are aided in that by two powerful advocates at the heart of government. The Small Business Service, set up in April last year, is headed by David Irwin and includes an independent council of outside experts to advise on the specific needs of small firms. The better regulation taskforce, headed by Lord Haskins, was set up in September 1997. Its members are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, including business, consumer organisations and trade unions. Each organisation can voice concerns about regulation and seek improvement. It would be fair to say that Lord Haskins, in particular, has not shied away from making public some constructive criticisms when he thought it necessary.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Since the Government came to power, there have been more than 300,000 net job losses in manufacturing. The textile industry is one of the sectors that has been savaged by the Government's policies. Is the right hon. Lady seriously asking us to believe that all the Government's efforts to raise its costs have had nothing to do with the job losses? Does she not see that some people have gone from low pay to no pay, partly as a result of massive over-regulation?

Marjorie Mowlam: I was focusing on the 1 million extra jobs that have been created. That is the important point for people who have no employment, and now many more people have jobs. When people have been out of work, getting a job makes all the difference.

The Bill is another tool to help the Government simplify and improve the quality of regulation. I welcome the support given to the Bill from all parties in the other place. We are grateful for the contributions made in debates there by many noble Lords and for their constructive approach to amending the Bill. I think that their contributions have improved it.

I hope that a similar constructive engagement will be possible during the Bill's passage through this House. It is, after all, designed to build on and improve the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, passed by the previous Government.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): If the Government's intention is to build on the 1994 Act, will the right hon. Lady tell us what efforts the Government have made to use it? How many deregulation and contracting out orders were made in the year prior to the May 1997 general election, and how many have the Government made in the past year?

Marjorie Mowlam: My recollection is that we have used the legislation about 10 times. That is not an excessive number, but it shows that there is a need to reform the 1994 Act, to extend its powers and to make it clear, so that it can be used more often.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in giving evidence to the Select Committee on Public Administration, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) said that the hype regarding the 1994 Act was overblown?

Marjorie Mowlam: I appreciate my hon. Friend's intervention.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. A moment ago, an Opposition Front Bencher asked a question of the Minister, and we did not have the answer. I can give it: there were 37 orders up until 1997.

Mr. Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr. Lansley: Will the right hon. Lady give way on a point of information?

Marjorie Mowlam: I have already taken interventions on that point, and I should prefer to move on.

The important point is that the Bill is based on the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, which was passed by the previous Government. I am waiting to see whether Opposition Members will point out that we voted against that Act.

Mr. Lansley: We will.

Marjorie Mowlam: Good. I will be waiting for that point, because my answer is that we needed to change the 1994 Act to make it workable. We are using it as a basis for the Bill. We need to update the Act because, among other things, its powers are limited to pre-1994 legislation; it cannot remove burdens from the public sector; it does not allow subsequent amendment of deregulation orders, which limits its scope; and it defines regulatory burdens too narrowly.

I shall give the House an example. The Government want school governing bodies to be able to offer after-school child care, which they can do at present only if they provide education at the same time. The Act does not allow positive change to address such problems. It is simply common sense that it should be possible to change the law to allow people to do things, just as it is possible to change the law to stop them doing things. In updating and improving the 1994 Act, we recognise the importance of maintaining tough, clear safeguards. The Bill itself is an example of how we want to proceed.

Mr. Lansley: Perhaps now I will make the intervention that the right hon. Lady anticipated, because the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) did indeed oppose the Deregulation and Contracting Out Bill on Second Reading, on the basis that the powers that were to be taken were exceptional and excessive. If the Government believe that those powers are no longer exceptional and excessive, will she accept that they were introduced for a specific purpose—that of deregulation? Will she admit to the House that the purpose of this Bill is not deregulatory but re-regulatory?

Marjorie Mowlam: No, the hon. Gentleman has got it completely wrong. For the reasons that I gave earlier, the Bill is necessary to build on and improve the Act passed by the previous Government.

Mr. Steen: I shall help the right hon. Lady by telling her why the Bill is needed. Up to 1997, 37 orders were repealed; in 1998, the figure was only five; in 1999, it was four; in 2000, it was one, and in 2001 only one order has been repealed. Something needs to be done to change the law. The view of Conservatives Members is that these changes are not the ones that are needed.

Marjorie Mowlam: I should like to hear from Conservative Members what changes they think necessary. I have outlined our changes, which stem from the work that we have done. We have provided the Library with a list of 50 measures—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Fifty-one.

Marjorie Mowlam: We changed the number to 50. All those measures could be taken under the new Bill. In addition, we have today issued five consultation documents on orders that will be made possible by the Bill and, between them, bring benefits of almost £40 million. The estimated compliance cost for those orders is nil.

Mr. Lansley: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes, but this is the last time because I am making very little progress.

Mr. Lansley: If this is to be the last time that the right hon. Lady gives way, she ought now to provide us with the killer fact. If the benefit that she seeks to achieve through the Bill is a reduction of £40 million in the regulatory burden, will she remind the House what has been the cumulative impact of additional regulation introduced by the Government since May 1997? The latest calculation by the British Chambers of Commerce is that the amount is more than £10 billion. Will she put the two figures side by side and tell us whether or not this is a regulatory Government?

Marjorie Mowlam: Earlier in my speech, I gave the answer to that question. The costs that the hon. Gentleman quotes include the entitlements and benefits that individuals received through the changes that we introduced and the bureaucracy involved in implementing them. The real costs are a fraction of that figure. We shall not apologise for the costs of introducing the minimum wage, improving maternity leave, giving people holidays and working to ensure that discrimination against people with disabilities does not happen. I shall not apologise for any of it and if the costs of the policies themselves are set aside, our regulatory costs are much, much less.

In addition, we introduced the legislation after listening to the views of business, business groups and consumer groups, and changes were made. As a result, it was introduced in a way that did not cost jobs. Exemptions were made for smaller businesses and most businesses were happy to acknowledge that the legislation was valuable to their work force.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: Will my hon. Friend give me a minute—perhaps two or three minutes?

Orders made under the Bill will be subject to thorough consultation and examination by scrutiny Committees in both Houses. The process will not avoid scrutiny.

[Marjorie Mowlam]

The deregulation Committees in both Houses are serious, efficient and competent bodies and the scrutiny will be up to a high standard. Legal safeguards, including the European convention on human rights, will need to be satisfied for each order.

In addition, before introducing a proposal, Ministers must be confident that the benefits of removing a regulatory burden are sufficient to justify the order being made and that the order maintains any necessary protection and does not remove any rights or freedoms that people could reasonably expect to continue to enjoy.

When proposing to introduce burdens, a Minister must also be confident that the order strikes a fair balance between the public interest and the interests of the individuals affected by it and that any burden imposed by that order must be proportionate to the benefit to be had, to the satisfaction of the scrutiny Committees.

In addition to those safeguards and consultation requirements, the order will be subject to careful scrutiny in Committee in both Houses and will proceed only if both Committees report favourably. That procedure has worked successfully to date in relation to the 1994 Act and I trust and believe that it will continue to do so.

Mr. Pike: I chair the Deregulation Committee. Is my right hon. Friend surprised to hear that no Conservative Member chose to attend its pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill? Is she also surprised to hear that Conservative Members no longer consider themselves to be members of the Committee? I wrote to the Conservative Chief Whip asking him to replace them, but even though the Conservative party considers deregulation important, that position has not changed.

Marjorie Mowlam: Those important points show the commitment of Conservative Members, and I look forward to a comment from the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on that intervention.

Mr. Steen: I would like to make a comment. As a member of the Deregulation Committee, I can tell the House that only one deregulatory order has been made this year. Last year, only one was made. The hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) knows that he does nothing, and the Committee does nothing. The Bill is being debated to give them something more to do.

Marjorie Mowlam: With those safeguards in place, and for the Committees concerned, let me outline some of what we might wish to do under the Bill that is not possible under the 1994 Act. Situations often arise in which, with the passage of time, legislation has become outdated and no longer fits people's day-to-day needs. Anomalies develop and it simply no longer makes sense.

For example, invalid care allowance can be claimed only by people between the ages of 16 and 65. Why stop at 65? People often carry on caring beyond that age, so we want to change the law so that over-65s have a right to claim too. We also want to make changes so that in circumstances where the person being cared for dies, the allowance will continue to be paid for up to eight weeks to allow the carer time to come to terms with the loss.

We propose to make changes to the vaccine damage payment scheme to reduce the disability threshold and to allow minors the opportunity to claim right up until the age of 21.

As a final example, we would like to take important steps to relieve the burden on NHS charities, which currently have to submit their accounts twice to two separate Government bodies. That is not common sense; by making a simple change, we will help those charities to keep down significantly their administrative overheads and to make the most of donations given to them by the public.

Those are just a few examples of what can be done; there are many, many others. Today, we published a list of 50 measures that could be delivered, and I have placed copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Bercow: Read them out.

Marjorie Mowlam: Certainly. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to read them, I shall do so with pleasure. *[Interruption.]* I must have left the list in my office; what bad luck. *[Interruption.]* I have been passed a copy; I do not want to disappoint the hon. Gentleman if he wants to hear them.

For the hon. Gentleman's benefit the measures include: the abolition of 20 partner limit; after-hours child care at schools; approval of local education authority curriculum complaints procedures; attachment of earnings; births and deaths—Wales; births and deaths—errors on certificates; bootleggers—disclosure of names, for Customs and Excise; building regulations; business tenancies; civil registration service reform. I think that I have made my point.

In addition, we issued five consultation documents today that will make possible, under the Bill, benefits of almost £40 million. We are consulting on orders—I shall give specific examples for the hon. Gentleman—to simplify, speed up and make fairer the procedures for new business leases; to put lease renewals for local authority tenants on the same footing as those for business tenants; to make it easier to allow pubs to open for longer on new year's eve and on the Queen's golden jubilee; to improve the grant and loan arrangements for the renewal of private sector housing; and to allow people to use bank notes and smart cards in gaming machines.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): That is important.

Marjorie Mowlam: Some of the measures may not be crucial, as the hon. Gentleman implies, but what is important is that the legislation makes sense—that is one of the reasons that we are introducing the Bill. Regulation should not be burdensome; it should be easy to implement and should protect rights while not making heavy demands on businesses. That is what good government means. The Bill is not incredibly large, but it will improve the services we offer the public. That is important—it does not matter how small the changes are, as long as they benefit people.

Mr. Steen: The right hon. Lady looked at me when I reacted to her remarks on gaming, so it is only right that I should respond. I served on the Committee for a long

time and it often struck me that a great number of the rules and regulations that we were repealing had to do with dancing and gambling, as if this country spent all its time dancing and gambling. We can dance on Sunday nights; we can gamble with a Switch card or a smart card. We must take care that the Bill does not merely encourage more and more gambling and dancing.

Marjorie Mowlam: It would take more than the Bill to increase dancing and gambling. Even though I have doubts about some forms of gambling, I think that dancing and fun are good for our society.

The estimated compliance costs for the measures that I outlined are nil.

As well as looking at where we can simplify or streamline regulations, we are also considering how to improve enforcement. Sensible enforcement—not going over the top—is a key part of good regulation. That is why the Government are working with local authorities and those responsible for enforcing central Government regulation to agree to a concordat—*[Interruption.]* This is an important point. The concordat will offer a blueprint for fair and common-sense enforcement.

We hope to have 100 per cent. of the bodies that we are working with signed up by the summer. It is a voluntary process, which we hope will succeed, but if there are cases where an improvement in enforcement practice is needed, the Bill contains a reserve power for Ministers to make codes of practice on enforcement for the benefit of business and the citizen.

As was done in another place, I trust that hon. Members will agree that the Bill will provide a valuable tool for this and future Governments to use in the fight against unnecessary, overlapping and over-complex legislation. It has already been welcomed by many people outside the House. For example, the Institute of Directors said that it is a

"good Bill . . . if it is used to its full potential, [it] should make a noticeable difference to the red tape burden".

Mr. Lansley: If.

Marjorie Mowlam: If the hon. Gentleman wants me to cite the Conservative party's record, he will find that he is not in a strong position to criticise.

Digby Jones of the Confederation of British Industry said:

"The Bill has the potential of providing the tools to deliver real benefits to business".

Mr. Lansley: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: No.

The Federation of Small Businesses believes

"that the Bill will be useful in helping to reduce the overall burden on business".

Sir Jeremy Beecham of the Local Government Association has given strong support for the powers in the Bill and its potential for

"reducing the burden of central regulation on local authorities".

We value those expressions of support, but the real test for the Bill will be the reforms achieved under it in the months and years ahead.

Contrary to some press reports, the United Kingdom is not a heavily regulated society. Independent reports, such as that from the Economist Intelligence Unit in spring last year, show that we have the least regulated labour market in Europe. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's economic outlook, published in December 1999, said that the United Kingdom had the lowest level of product-market regulation of any OECD country.

We can be proud of that record, while being proud of the fact that the Government have introduced important measures to safeguard the interests of consumers and employees and to protect the environment. It can no longer be said that social justice—the minimum wage, decent holiday entitlements, decent maternity pay and working benefits—is incompatible with economic efficiency, low unemployment, low inflation and low interest rates. It has taken this Government to show that, and it is a record of which I am proud.

4.3 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]* because it seeks to extend the use of powers intended solely for a deregulatory purpose to the creation of new burdens and to the rewriting of legislation without a specific deregulatory effect; and fails to apply sufficient consultative, scrutiny and review provisions to the exceptional powers proposed."

I listened with growing amazement to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, because this is a regulatory Government, as is shown by their record, on which she sought to base her accusations about the previous Conservative Government. Indeed, they are one of the most regulatory Governments that we have had for a very long time. That stands in absolute contrast to everything that the public and the business community were told before the election.

In April 1997, in a document entitled "Labour's business manifesto"—which seems to be a contradiction in terms—the Labour party pledged

"not to impose burdensome regulations on business, because we understand that successful business must keep costs down."

What have we discovered since then? In December 2000, the CBI published its own analysis, which stated that the Labour Government had introduced 3,000 new regulations, that regulations were being introduced at the rate of 10 a day in 2000 and that those regulations had cost the business community £23 billion since the election.

Mr. White: Is it not true that 3,000 regulations were implemented in the final year of the previous Conservative Government?

Mr. Lansley: The director general of the British Chambers of Commerce said that about 3,000 to 3,500 regulations and statutory instruments are passed each year and, in an article in *The Times* in November 2000, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office said that only about 5 per cent. of them have a direct impact on business. Let us leave aside the fact that many of them have an indirect impact but, even if the figure of 5 per cent. is correct, that means that 175 of the statutory instruments

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passed each year have a direct impact on business. Furthermore, they come on top of the 175 that were passed in each of the preceding years.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to understand what is happening under this Government, let us consider the rate at which red tape is impacting on business and on small businesses in particular. Small businesses are acutely vulnerable to the impact of burdensome regulations, and members of the Government never seem to be aware of that fact—I guess that they never run a small business. Perhaps some of them do so. In recent days, we have discovered that one or two of them have been engaged in business on their own account, but I shall not go into that.

The rate at which the cost of red tape is increasing has gone up. Each year, the Institute of Chartered Accountants conducts a survey based on information obtained by its advisers who conduct and prepare the accounts of small businesses. It uses their expertise to consider the cost to businesses each year of implementing the new regulations that were introduced in the preceding year. In October 2000, the institute showed not only that the regulations increased the costs of small businesses by an average of 4 to 6 per cent., but that for the smallest and micro businesses the rate at which those costs increased nearly doubled in the year to July 2000 compared with 1999.

Mr. Bercow: Is my hon. Friend aware that, at various stages over the past four years, some Ministers appear to have been so unfocused that they were unaware of what their own Government were doing? In particular, is he aware that the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who was then the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, said in what proved almost to be his swan-song that

"we have no intention of introducing any legislation that presents a burden on business and reduces the competitiveness of British firms."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1998; Vol. 321, c. 214.]

Which planet was the right hon. Gentleman inhabiting?

Mr. Lansley: I concur with my hon. Friend's observation. I have been interested in what Ministers seem to be unaware of, and there are two explanations for the statement of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). The first is that it has become part of his stock in trade—indeed, that of the Labour Government—to say one thing while doing something completely different. It is not that Ministers do not know what is happening, but that they want people to believe that something else is happening. They want the public at large not to understand that manufacturing and business experience daily the problem of increasing red tape.

The second explanation for the right hon. Gentleman's statement is that in November 1998 he was otherwise engaged busily raising money for the dome, for which he was responsible at that time.

Marjorie Mowlam: If we are considering issues of which folk are aware, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the Small Business Service, which we set up. It specifically focuses its work on assisting small businesses with regulations. We have extended the periods in which regulations are implemented and we have given audit exemptions by raising the threshold from £350,000 to £1 million, which has saved small businesses £180 million a year. We have taken a number of other initiatives. I will not bore the hon. Gentleman with them now, but they do not suggest that this is a Government who do not take the needs of small businesses into account.

Mr. Lansley: The Small Business Service amply illustrates the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and with which I agreed. The Government set up the Small Business Service with the objective that it would be the British equivalent of the Small Business Administration and would act as a powerful engine to represent the small business community inside government.

I have news for the right hon. Lady. She and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry may not have noticed that the business community sees the Small Business Service as no more than a repackaging of what went before. In the enterprise component of the training and enterprise councils, business links and various other bodies, the Government sought to impose initiatives on the business community. They have not allowed the business community to take ownership of the service in the way that the previous Conservative Administration intended.

The right hon. Lady seems to think that I am personally responsible for everything that the previous Conservative Administration did. She should know that as leader of the deregulation taskforce, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) made it clear that, in his view, the Conservative Government were making limited steps towards deregulation. At the same time as we were trying to introduce a substantial number of deregulatory measures, the cumulative burden of regulation was continuing to increase. That is why we have the policies that we have, which I shall deal with shortly. On that basis, she should understand that this Government have gone badly in the wrong direction by increasing dramatically the cumulative burden on businesses.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): The hon. Gentleman waxes lyrical about small businesses and the burdens that have allegedly been imposed on them since 1997. I am sure that he will agree that most farms, with the exception of agri-businesses, are small businesses. How many livestock inspectors were there in 1992 under the previous Government, and how many were there in 1997?

Mr. Lansley: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman those precise figures, but a deregulation contracting-out order relating to the Slaughterhouses Act 1974 removed duplicate requirements for the licensing of slaughterhouses. He should know that in the year up to the last election, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) made clear to the Minister, the previous Conservative Government introduced 26 deregulation and contracting-out orders. The pace of deregulation was growing. This Government introduced five such orders in the following year, four in 1999, one in 2000 and only one this year, which is a sad record.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Does the hon. Gentleman accept—will he take my word for it?—that the number of livestock inspectors decreased between 1992 and 1997? Deregulation is not always in the interests of small business.

Mr. Lansley: We all understand that deregulation has to be balanced. That is why the previous Administration were pursuing deregulatory measures while occasionally introducing regulatory measures. The hon. Gentleman seems unwilling or unable to accept the fact that the cumulative burden on business is a significant part of our competitiveness. It is no good Labour Members talking about the positive aspects of specific regulations without taking account of the context within which each regulation, which they regard as attractive, adds to the burden of the total costs on business.

At the last election, the Labour party said that it understood that burdensome costs should not be imposed on business, but the burdens barometer of the British Chambers of Commerce sets the total cost of burdens at £10 billion-plus. The analysis published for Politea by Nicholas Boys-Smith shows that the annual cost of this Government's regulations since 1997 will be £12.7 billion by May 2001.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the minimum wage, the working families tax credit, the directives on working time, maternity leave and part-time working and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 put burdens on business that, if elected, the Conservatives would remove?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman simply adds to the same point. Let us consider those measures—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman allows me, I will respond to his question.

It is pretty straightforward. My argument is twofold. First, undesirable and unnecessary regulatory burdens have been imposed: for example, the burden of trade union recognition—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—yes, and the way in which that was done. It is clear that the threshold at which trade union recognition was introduced extends the requirement down to small businesses that, in effect, have no personnel function. Labour Members should understand that the way in which that requirement was imposed will act as a major additional burden on small businesses that are not equipped for trade union recognition.

Marjorie Mowlam: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: Let me complete my point before doing so.

There has been a string of such measures, including the working time directive. We had no choice about the implementation of the working time directive in this country, although the previous Conservative Administration tried to frustrate it. The way in which it was introduced—with a lack of lead times and a lack of clarity in the regulations that it imposed—was extremely damaging to business. In examining the costs and benefits of implementing the working time directive, I meet many business representatives. When I ask about their experience, most reply that they incur massive administrative costs and that most employees simply opt out of the directive's effect. Therefore, the costs are large and the benefits small.

Marjorie Mowlam: The hon. Gentleman should get his facts right. Small businesses employing fewer than 20 people are exempt from legislation on trade union recognition. The job of the Small Business Service, which he quickly dismissed, is to consult small businesses, and each regulation is considered to ensure that small businesses do not suffer.

Mr. Lansley: I have to take issue with the right hon. Lady. The director general of the British Chambers of Commerce says that his research shows that only 21 per cent. of firms with fewer than 50 employees have a dedicated personnel resource, whereas the figure for firms with more than 50 employees is 71 per cent. It is all very well for the right hon. Lady to talk about firms with 20 employees, but a more appropriate threshold for trade union recognition would have been 50 employees or more.

I question not the principle of trade union recognition, but the appropriateness of the way in which the requirement was introduced and the threshold that was set, given that the impact on small businesses has been disproportionate. The Government say, "Think small first", but they simply did not do that. Through the costs that it imposes on small businesses, the directive is having an effect on competitiveness.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: Let me provide a couple of summaries to which I shall invite the Minister to respond. Digby Jones of the Confederation of British Industry says of the Government:

"They have a track record over three years of being one of the most regulations-keen administrations for some time".

Chris Humphries of the British Chambers of Commerce says:

"Despite all its rhetoric, the reality is that Government has dramatically increased the regulatory burdens that threaten small business competitiveness. Excessive red tape is stifling the very enterprises the Government is seeking to promote".

Mr. Stringer: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that setting a threshold of 50 employees would exempt about 98 per cent. of all businesses in this country? If he is so concerned about small businesses, will he explain why there has been a net increase of about 150,000 in the number of small businesses since the Labour Government took control, whereas there was a net decrease in that number between 1990 and 1993?

Mr. Lansley: The Minister simply does not understand the argument as business understands it. He will know that I am a former deputy director general of the British Chambers of Commerce; it was my job to represent small businesses and to understand their position. They know, as I know and he should know, that businesses constantly face the question of what will happen as the economic cycle turns down. The current Chancellor of the Exchequer has no more abolished the economic cycle than any previous Chancellor has been able to. British business most needs to be competitive when it competes in declining domestic and overseas markets. A few months ago, a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey showed that, compared with the average of EU businesses, two thirds

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of UK businesses' relative advantage in competitiveness had been lost during the four years of the Labour Government.

Such competitiveness is easily eroded and is difficult to regain. I am afraid that we will not begin to discover the damage done by the Government until businesses start to struggle and lose. Manufacturing businesses that are exposed to international trade have already discovered it; businesses in the service sector that are dependent on cyclical changes in demand will, unfortunately, discover it when the Chancellor's tax and spend policies take us down that unhappy path.

That is why, on 5 March, *Forbes Magazine* could, unfortunately, publish an article for an international readership, in which it said that the Government were

"quietly loading the British economy down with new taxes and regulations that threatened to erode the advantages of doing business in Britain".

Under this Government, we have discovered that the rate of regulation has gone up, as demonstrated by the survey of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales and other work. The position is getting worse, and deterioration is accelerating. Legislation has grown increasingly complex; Conservative members of the Committee that considered the Finance Act 2000 are only too aware of the immensity of financial and tax legislation and the complexity imposed by it.

Too often, consultation is a dead letter. The business community, for example, will have seen that the Prime Minister was so keen on consultation on the work-life balance that, before it concluded, he was prepared to pre-empt it and make announcements at the Labour party's spring conference in Glasgow. Regulatory impact assessments, as provided for by the Government, have been wholly inadequate. They have not been independently audited and are highly subjective, reflecting Ministers' need to try to justify their legislation.

The right hon. Lady talked about policy costs on the one hand and implementation costs on the other. Regulatory impact assessments are highly confusing and tend to muddle policy costs and implementation costs. They tend to exaggerate benefits and underestimate costs. Most of all, the Government's record on regulation demonstrates complete unwillingness to recognise the cumulative effects on the business community of the regulations that they have introduced and continue to introduce.

Marjorie Mowlam: I wish the hon. Gentleman would stay in the real world. We have not exaggerated benefits. We have independent business people working alongside us on the regulatory impact assessments and in the taskforce. If, like the hon. Gentleman, they felt that we had done such a terrible job and had failed, they would tell us. As I acknowledged earlier, Chris Haskins criticised one or two measures. Overall, however, our work has been welcomed.

Rather than criticise us using figures with which I do not agree, the hon. Gentleman would do much better to do what we have been doing in Europe—try to work with other member states to make sure that there is not an additional burden from Europe. We are working with other European countries, both bilaterally and in the Mandelkern group, to make sure that, by the time we get to Stockholm, we have a level playing field on European regulation. That is much more important than the hyperbole that we have just heard.

Mr. Lansley: There is no hyperbole here, just simple facts. The right hon. Lady has come to the House to introduce a Bill designed, she says, to build on the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. I have demonstrated that the Government have no interest in deregulation; frankly, Labour Members had no interest in the 1994 Act. Before the election, large numbers of orders were made and the pace was increasing. Since the election, however, the pace has diminished to the point at which virtually no deregulation and contracting-out orders are being made.

The Government blame the lack of candidates for such orders. The reality is that there is a lack of will; the Government have no will on deregulation.

Mr. Steen: I am sorry to stop my hon. Friend in mid-flow, as he is making rather a good speech, but does he intend to come on to the Bill itself? We are listening for that. I want to ask him some questions about it, and I did not want him to sit down without my having had that opportunity.

Mr. Lansley: Clearly, I gave my hon. Friend the impression that I was engaged in a peroration. There may be those who wish it, but I was not. I was simply seeking to demonstrate that we cannot trust the Government on the subject of deregulation and regulation. They wear deregulatory clothes while engaging in a regulatory objective.

The Bill is intended by the Government, in the dog days of this Parliament, by their lights, to persuade the business community that they have a deregulatory purpose in mind, whereas the business community knows, from its unhappy experience, that regulation is what the Government intend, sometimes to the point at which the utilities, for example, are experiencing nationalisation in a different format.

The Bill is a transparent example of such activity. It is about regulation, perhaps as the new Labour alternative to nationalisation, whereby the Government can get control of businesses without having to pay the price for doing so.

Marjorie Mowlam *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: I have given way many times. I shall make progress as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes wants to hear some views about the Bill, and I shall be happy to supply him with some.

We oppose the Bill and we have tabled a reasoned amendment. I shall tell the House why. The Bill is not a deregulatory Bill. It is designed to create new burdens. It is designed to allow the public sector to reduce its burdens, while it imposes burdens on the private sector. It is designed to allow the public sector to undertake additional expenditure in legislative form, without the usual scrutiny that is applied to legislation for that purpose.

The Bill lacks provision for the necessary external consultation. Most of the important information on proposals would be presented only at the point that they

went before the Deregulation Committee, but that information would not necessarily be given to the business community and all those who would be affected, who ought to be the principal participants in a consultation process before deregulation committees sit.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that the acid test of the Bill is whether, if it had been enacted, it would have prevented the Government from wasting £628 million of public money on the millennium dome?

Mr. Lansley: I am sure that the answer to my hon. Friend's question is no, the Bill would not have prevented that. However, I believe that the acid test is: if the Bill had been enacted and the Government had had the benefit of it, what would have been the practical result?

Mr. Redwood: More regulation.

Mr. Lansley: I hear the answer from my right hon. Friend from a sedentary position. The Bill would have resulted in more regulation. Moreover, the Government found that in the previous Session they had a crowded legislative programme. They found it difficult to introduce primary legislation to suit their legislative purpose, so not only have they resorted, as we know, to the routine guillotining of Bills and the constriction of parliamentary debate, but now they have found a new mechanism that allows them to amend primary legislation, bring in new regulations and take on new responsibilities for the public sector, all by means of a statutory instrument that amends primary legislation without all the scrutiny that should be the product of our parliamentary process.

The right hon. Lady thought that I would intervene on the subject of the Labour party's attitude to the Deregulation and Contracting Out Bill during its passage through the House. The right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) spoke on Second Reading about the power that was to be taken in that Act. He said:

"Ministers would be able to repeal full Acts of Parliament by statutory instrument. There would be no Committee stage in which the measure was considered line by line. Statutory instruments cannot be amended; they have to be accepted or rejected as they stand. There would be no Report stage in which new clauses could be considered. The House would have to accept the priorities of the Minister who presented the order."—[*Official Report*, 8 February 1994; Vol. 237, c. 158.]

That is an exceptional power. It is a Henry VIII power. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman described the 1994 Act as a Henry VIII Act. The power is exceptional and should be used only for the specific purpose of limiting the burden that the public sector and the Executive impose on businesses and private persons at the risk of crushing them under an increased weight of regulation. It is vital that the specific and exceptional power to remove the role of the Executive in respect of burdens on private persons should not be perverted and turned into a power that imposes on private persons an additional series of burdens without proper parliamentary scrutiny.

Mr. White: I am confused by the hon. Gentleman. A few minutes ago, he argued that the Government had not used the powers enough, but he is now saying that we are using them too much. Which argument is he advancing? Does he believe that use of the 1994 Act should be limited, or that we should be using it far more than we are currently?

Mr. Lansley: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman if I have confused him. My proposition is straightforward. The 1994 Act established an exceptional power to amend large amounts of primary legislation by introducing secondary legislation, but it did so for the specific purpose of deregulation. The current Government have not used that power, although they should have done, and are now seeking to extend it not to deregulate but to impose new burdens and to give the public sector far wider powers.

Mr. Pike *rose—*

Mr. Kilfoyle *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: If the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) will forgive me, I shall give way first to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Deregulation.

Mr. Pike: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in the previous Parliament, the then Opposition recognised that the procedure worked positively and accepted that it did not have the effect that we feared during debate on the legislation? Does he further accept that there was unanimity on all 37 repealed orders, and that we did not disagree on a single one?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I have no problem with that, which is why I did not suggest to the Minister for the Cabinet Office that the Labour party had executed a U-turn since the 1994 Act took effect. The point is, however, that the Act conferred a power for a deregulatory purpose. In the Opposition's view, the power should be confined to that purpose and used to achieve it as effectively as possible. It should not be extended to the wider aim of rewriting primary legislation to suit the Government, who may use it to introduce more regulation.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Gentleman makes much of the paucity of orders under the current Administration, but does he accept that in the early days of the 1994 Act the easier targets were obviously those that went before the relevant deregulation committees? One of the lessons learned was that it became progressively more difficult under that legislation to deal with many more outstanding orders than were already being dealt with. Thus, a Bill was needed to regularise the procedure. Does he accept that that is one of the driving purposes of the Bill before us?

Mr. Lansley: At the risk of repeating myself, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the powers provided by the 1994 Act were not increasingly less capable of being used by the previous Conservative Government before the election. Indeed, that is why I referred specifically to the year leading up to May 1997. I recall that 23 orders were presented in those 12 months and that the current Government presented only five in the following year. If the Government have used the power less since the election, it is because they do not have the necessary will.

Mr. Stringer: We are getting to the kernel of the issue. First, does the hon. Gentleman accept that any order that is passed must have a deregulatory element? Secondly, will he acknowledge that regulatory regimes are a burden in themselves and that the 1994 Act could not deal with the issues that they create?

Mr. Lansley: The Minister takes me to the point that I wanted to reach. We oppose the Bill in principle, but we

[Mr. Lansley]

acknowledge that changes were made in the House of Lords. One such change requires an order made under the Bill to have a deregulatory purpose; the Government did not originally intend that. They intended that such a purpose could be placed alongside new burdens, the removal of inconsistencies and anomalies or the lifting of constraints on public sector expenditure. As long as a Minister—a Labour Minister, in the opinion of the Labour party—decides that the consequent benefit outweighs the cost, the additional burdens can greatly exceed the reduction and removal of burdens through some other provision in the order.

Marjorie Mowlam *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: Nothing in the Bill—perhaps the Minister for the Cabinet Office will tell me otherwise when she intervenes—requires a net reduction or removal of burdens as a result of an order made under it.

Marjorie Mowlam: The hon. Gentleman suggests that every change will lead to more regulation, but some changes will decrease it. The Bill will not allow Ministers to do exactly what they want. They will have to consult the scrutiny Committees, which have a strong record of having an independent voice on deregulation. If there is any doubt, the issue can be discussed in Parliament. The hon. Gentleman tries to suggest that the Bill provides for bypassing Parliament and allows Ministers to act unilaterally; that is not the case.

Mr. Lansley: The right hon. Lady takes us to the heart of the matter. The Conservative party does not trust the Government with such a power. At the next election, we aim to remove them. After the election, I hope that we will have a Government who have the will and the way to reduce the burden of red tape on business, instead of the current Government, who are interested in imposing additional burdens.

A Bill is required, and I do not dispute that changes to the 1994 Act might be beneficial. However, they should be used for a specific deregulatory purpose, as our reasoned amendment makes clear, not for additional regulations or creating new burdens. We have the political will and a way to achieve that. A deregulation agency independent of Government should be established to make the regulatory impact assessment. The assessment should not be conducted subjectively inside Departments. The agency should have the power to block proposals rather than simply to offer Ministers advice on them, and to introduce measures on which Ministers have to act. Our Administration will be determined to impose regulatory budgets.

Marjorie Mowlam *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: I shall give way shortly, but the right hon. Lady will not distract me from explaining what business genuinely requires. It needs a Government who are committed to the progressive reduction of its total burden. Regulatory budgets are the only way to achieve that. The cumulative effect of the additional burdens that the Government have imposed damages our competitiveness, and we must remove them. That means an independent audit, which leads to regulatory budgets. If additional regulations are necessary, they should be introduced through sunset clauses so that if the costs are higher or the benefits are less than predicted, the regulations can disappear. There should also be longer lead times before introducing new regulation.

The Government's deathbed conversion after four years of regulatory excess will convince no one. The Conservative party has a commitment, a will and a way to achieve deregulation. Only the Conservative party would achieve that. We will not support the Government's desire to use the exceptional powers of the 1994 Act for the wider purposes of re-regulation, creating new burdens and giving the public sector advantages at the expense of the private sector.

Mr. Steen: I should be grateful for my hon. Friend's elucidation of one point. The Bill has two parts: expansion of the powers of the Select Committee on Deregulation and enforcement. As I understand it, the enlargement of the Deregulation Committee's powers, which will allow all sorts of matters to be brought before it, is really a gold-plating of the Deregulation Committee. It will give it extended powers. Does my hon. Friend see that as gold-plating?

The Bill's enforcement powers give people at local level the right of appeal to a Minister, which would bypass the legal system. If a local business was not happy with the decision of a local authority's enforcement officer, it could make an appeal directly to a Minister. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would make the Government judge and jury on such matters, and that that is another reason why the Bill is unsound?

Mr. Lansley: It might be as well for my hon. Friend to expand on those matters if he catches your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On the second part of the Bill to which my hon. Friend referred, I believe that, on balance, the introduction of codes of practice is not wholly a bad thing; it can be positive.

Marjorie Mowlam *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: We consider regrettable—speeches were also made to this effect in the House of Lords—the removal of any power for Ministers to use a statutory enforcement to ensure that codes of practice are complied with, if enforcement authorities fail to abide by them. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) says that I should give way to the Minister for the Cabinet Office. I have done so several times, but as she was courteous in giving way to me, I shall give way to her again.

Marjorie Mowlam: At last we have heard from the hon. Gentleman some of the proposals that the Opposition would introduce in place of the Bill. He suggested an independent deregulatory commission. The House would be interested to know whether that would be more costly and bureaucratic than the regulatory impact assessments that we have now. He also suggested regulatory budgets. How would he prevent that provision from becoming a new layer of complex bureaucracy, leading to further delays in introducing legislation?

The hon. Gentleman also suggested sunset regulations. That is not a new idea; we have already introduced them on two Bills. However, we believe that they should not be part of any order, but assessed on a case-by-case basis. Finally, Baroness Buscombe, on the Front Bench in the House of Lords, said on Second Reading that the Conservative party would not oppose the Bill in principle. Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House why his party's view has changed between the House of Lords and the House of Commons?

Mr. Lansley: A number of points have been raised, and the right hon. Lady took advantage of that intervention to make a speech on the subjects, dictated by Millbank tower. She knows that it is the practice in the other place not to vote against legislation on Second Reading, and we did not. I pay tribute to the work of Baroness Buscombe and Lord Kingsland on the Bill in the House of Lords. It was their intention to secure substantial changes to the Bill, and some were made. However, it is our responsibility to examine the Bill as it is presented to the House of Commons, and we believe that it is, in principle, objectionable to extend the use of this power in the way that the Government propose.

On Second Reading in the House of Lords, we had some hope of positive amendment. Unfortunately—such are the habits of the House of Commons—it is now incumbent on us to oppose the Bill in principle because it is our unhappy experience that the Government are deaf to good argument in the House of Commons, and unwilling to accept our arguments of principle. There is, therefore, very little likelihood of our obtaining a positive and constructive response, however we might present our argument.

We shall oppose the Bill in principle. We shall also make it clear that, however it has been amended in the House of Lords, it remains a Bill designed to use a power intended for the specific purpose of deregulation for the wider purpose of re-regulation and the creation of new burdens. That would free up the public sector at the expense of the private sector, and do nothing to roll back the regulatory excesses of this Government. It will, therefore, fall to the Conservative party, after the next election, to introduce legislation to achieve the deregulation that business needs and desires so much.

4.44 pm

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): First, let me put one or two things on the record.

As I am sure my Front-Bench colleagues will agree, the regulatory impact unit worked hard to produce the Bill. In a remarkable variety of guises, it has done a marvellous job over a long period, under the last Administration as well as this. I also pay tribute to the work of Lord Haskins and his taskforce. Lord Haskins has never shrunk from saying things that may not have been palatable to Ministers at certain times, and he has certainly been forthright in expressing his views on the need for better regulation. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and Lord Weedon of Alexander have played their part—

Mr. Bercow: Lord Alexander of Weedon.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I stand corrected. I am confused by titles, not least those of Members of the other place.

Those whom I have mentioned are people of character and distinction, who have worked very hard to make the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 a workable proposition.

Mr. Bercow: I look forward to hearing the rest of the hon. Gentleman's speech, which, judging by precedent, I expect to be both interesting and entertaining.

The reason I was so quick to intervene is that Lord Alexander of Weedon is a former resident of my constituency. He is a fine man, and Weedon is a fine village.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am sure that that is true, but it does not necessarily mean that Lord Alexander is a friend of the present Government in political terms, although he has worked assiduously on this issue and many others like it.

It is all too easy to make glib, cheap political points on the back of a serious attempt, made over a long period, to turn legislation that was plainly not as workable or effective as it should have been into legislation that is workable. I have the doubtful distinction of having spent some time in the Cabinet Office working on these matters, and I was amazed at how complex and arcane they could become. I also represented the Cabinet Office on the legislation committee. Conventions relating to confidentiality prevent me from saying too much, but my role—doubtless performed by someone else now—was to act as gatekeeper in regard to legislation before it was presented to either House, and to ensure that a proper regulatory appraisal took place, including a compliance cost assessment. The process was effective in ensuring that certain pieces of legislation were altered to provide a full and transparent description of what would eventually obtain following the passage of that legislation. No doubt someone performed a similar role under the last Administration.

At one stage, there was agreement among all parties that we needed to do much more to make legislation effective in terms of its ostensible purpose. The result, in my view, is the Bill that we are discussing now. However, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) has illustrated, things have moved on considerably over the past four years. Not only have the Government been extremely successful, introducing many worthwhile social and economic initiatives in both Houses; the whole approach to regulation has changed.

Initially, all references were to deregulation. When we took office in 1997, we changed the term to "better regulation". That was not an exercise in simple semantics. It sent out a strong message à la Chomsky: changing the language meant capturing the argument, which was not about taking away regulation per se but about recognising that there is good as well as bad regulation. We were intent on doing all we could, where there was a social necessity for us to do so, to ensure that regulation remained strong and enforceable, but was also understood by both individuals and businesses. By the same token, we recognised that there was superfluous legislation that was no use to man or beast, and should be removed—and we attempted to do that as well.

As the speech of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire showed, there is a different agenda on the Opposition Benches nowadays. Conservative Members have adopted a very right-wing position and have moved

[Mr. Kilfoyle]

far out of the mainstream of traditional British politics. They believe in a minimalist state. Their soul brothers in America, the Republican party, would endorse everything that they stand for—*[Interruption.]* I note that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is nodding. If they had their way, Conservative Members would remove almost every vestige of regulation.

I am particularly concerned about the regulatory and legislative spheres that Conservative Members seem to dismiss. In this debate, I want to hear what they have to say about—

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman will hear it.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am sure that I will be hearing from the hon. Gentleman and from other Conservative Members. I want to hear their comments on the types of regulation that are very important to people in this country, such as health and safety regulation. What proposals do Conservative Members have for that? I should also very much like to hear with what they propose replacing necessary legislation. I assume—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire says that we have already heard it. What we heard was an addendum to a political diatribe on how Labour Members could not be trusted in government. Conservative Members are paranoid about proposals from Labour Members, to whom they impute base motives where none exist. Apparently, according to them, in seeking to pass the Regulatory Reform Bill, the Government are trying to circumvent the House entirely—to frustrate the will of the House. I tell them that the will of the House will be demonstrated after the next general election. I dare say that we shall all still be sitting on the same side of the House.

Mr. White: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Deregulation Committee's procedures allow for much more extensive consultation and discussion on delegated legislation than such legislation would receive if it were dealt with under the usual procedures of the House?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I accept that unequivocally. As I understand it—I stand to be corrected either by the Opposition or by my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench—there has been extensive consultation on the Bill. As I recall it, there was a draft Bill and an opportunity to resolve the issues. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire signally failed to substantiate his claim that no opportunity has been provided to the individuals whom he has quoted as being concerned about the Government's approach to regulation. As I think my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office said, Digby Jones has welcomed our initiative. As one might expect, the Local Government Association has also approved it, as have Ian Handford at the Federation of Small Businesses, and the Institute of Directors. Presumably, they have approved the initiative partly because of the Government's extensive consultation with all parties on the draft Bill.

I can only assume that Conservative Members are opposing the Bill for broader political advantage. There is nothing wrong with that. I think that we all play that game—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) says yes. I agree with him. There is nothing wrong with that. We had hoped to tackle the very real and complex problems of dealing with regulation consensually with the other parties, but if that is common cause, they have certainly not lent their support to promoting it.

I remind Opposition Members that for every regulation that the previous Administration removed, they introduced 13 new ones. Things have not changed an awful lot in that respect. One difficulty is that we have to deal with an ever more complex world. A simplistic, minimalist approach will do nothing to cure those problems. We have to take the type of action that my right hon. Friend adumbrated in her speech. We have to ensure that people have access to transparent advice, and that they understand that something can be dealt with in just one visit, without a plethora of inspections. Those issues are being addressed in long-standing initiatives, but there are no simple, straightforward answers.

The Bill builds upon experience and seeks when possible to improve and streamline the regulatory processes. I applaud the Bill, and I applaud my right hon. Friend's initiative in introducing it.

4.55 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): I call Mr. Norman Baker. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I mean Dr. Vincent Cable.

Dr. Cable: I am not sure whether that is a compliment or not, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I start on a positive note: I welcome the fact that the Government recognise that too many of the wrong kind of regulations have been made, and propose to do something about it. However, although it took the Conservative spokesman half an hour to get round to saying so, there are serious constitutional problems with the Bill. Those are the issues that my colleagues, particularly Lord Goodhart, tried to deal with in the other place.

To do justice to the problems, one need only look at the language that the Select Committee on Deregulation initially used about the Bill—although that language has subsequently been modified. The Committee, which I believe is all-party, expressed itself in trenchant terms about some of the potential problems with the Bill.

For example:

"There are few limits to the power in clause 1 of the draft Bill to amend existing legislation . . . The proposal could allow much of the legislative programme to be implemented by orders rather than by bills".

The Committee goes on modestly defining its own capacity to act as a constraint on the legislation:

"from our own standpoint we do not consider—however flattering it might be to do so—that the fact that we carry out this work to the best of our ability within the existing framework is lasting protection against the misuse of the extremely wide powers now proposed".

That was written by an all-party group which will have the responsibility for carrying through the powers in the legislation, so there are serious constitutional problems. I sincerely hope that in what will probably be the rather short time allowed for consideration of the Bill in Committee, those issues will be properly addressed.

As for the substantive issues of deregulation, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) put the point well when he said that regulation was neither inherently good nor inherently bad. There is good regulation and bad regulation; there is excessive and unnecessary regulation, and there is necessary regulation. It is a question of costs and benefits, and of striking a balance. There are good reasons why activity has to be regulated, such as consumer protection, environmental protection and workers' rights. Those are entirely plausible, good economic and social reasons why regulation has to exist.

Indeed, much of the spurt in regulation occurred under the previous Government, as a consequence of privatisation. If one creates private monopolies and networks, there has to be a structure of regulation to manage them and oversee them in the social interest. Regulation is not inherently undesirable; the question is how regulation is managed.

There has been a tendency, which is not particular to the present Government but which has accelerated while they have been in office, towards regulatory creep—a growth in regulation for undesirable reasons.

There are three phenomena that we must try to understand. First, it is increasingly becoming the habit of Governments to regard business as a useful agent for carrying out their own policies—policies that they could have paid for and carried out themselves. For example, the working families tax credit makes businesses act as an arm of the Department of Social Security, and businesses now also have to collect repayments of student loans. Under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, business has to act as a spy agency for Government, without being fully compensated. That also happened under the previous Government, through the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to the Liberal spokesman for giving way to me, but when he talks about "regulatory creep" does he have in mind all those Liberal councils that are trying to regulate us off the roads and stop motorists using their cars? That is not so much creep as complete standstill and chaos. Does the hon. Gentleman endorse that kind of madcap regulation that stops people going about their daily lives—or do we need a Bill to stop it?

Dr. Cable: I have a Liberal Democrat council in my area, which is introducing traffic-calming measures funded under a special scheme introduced by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) when he was Secretary of State for the Environment. The scheme attracted a fairly wide measure of cross-party consensus. Much of the use of business as an agent for the Government has occurred under this and the previous Government, but the trend has certainly gathered momentum.

The second issue, to which the Chancellor of the Exchequer has contributed substantially, is tax complexity, which has been referred to on many occasions and of which the climate change levy is a good example. The levy's objectives—to reduce emissions, particularly carbon emissions—are perfectly desirable. They could have been achieved in simple ways but in fact the implementation has been very complex, with numerous exemptions. One example that was referred to me this morning will, I am sure, eventually come to the attention of Ministers. Launderettes, which have to pay VAT on energy at the full rate—as opposed to households with washing machines—now have to pay the climate change levy as well. People who use launderettes—students in particular—tend to be relatively poor. They are being penalised in a completely arbitrary way as a result of a complex piece of legislation whose consequences were not thought through.

The third way in which regulatory creep has occurred is through gold-plating. It is common and fashionable to blame the European Commission for some of this, but much of the gold-plating occurs in Whitehall. It occurs for complex reasons which I hope we will go into at some stage in the Bill's proceedings.

One of those reasons is the way in which parliamentary legislation is drafted. The whole system of parliamentary draftsmanship contributes to the complexity of regulation. Another, rather important, reason is that unlike countries such as Holland or Denmark, we do not have any common ground or consensus between employers and employees. Because there is a lack of trust and of consultation, everything has to be spelled out in enormous detail.

The working time directive serves a very admirable purpose. It is entirely desirable that workers should not be forced to work excessive hours. The difference between the British system, which I think has 75 pages of explanatory memorandum, and the Dutch system, which has one, is that in Holland it is possible for employees and employers to sit round a table and work out a modus vivendi without officials having to prescribe every detailed item of the administration.

Mr. White: Does the hon. Gentleman also accept that in Holland the people sitting around the table can understand the language that is used, which is not interfered with by parliamentary draftsmen?

Dr. Cable: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, and I do not need to elaborate on it.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) described the working time directive as admirable. Does he accept that matters to do with the regulation of working hours are pre-eminently issues with which democratically elected members of the British legislature should preoccupy themselves, and that they are most certainly not matters for supranational authority?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman and I probably disagree on the fundamental principle of whether the social chapter should be a national or transnational piece of legislation. However, that is incidental to my fundamental point, which is that, whatever the underlying authority, the British have chosen to implement the directive in an interventionist, messy and complex way.

How far is it necessary to achieve the Bill's objectives through new legislation rather than in other ways? There are many ways in which the Bill's objectives could be accomplished through administrative action. For example, a fundamental problem confronting many small companies is the enormous number of inspections that have to take place. I believe that it is possible, under various statutes, for 300 different kinds of inspection by various agencies, not just the Health and Safety

[Dr. Cable]

Executive, to take place. That number has increased by about 50 per cent. over the past 20 years. Much trouble could be saved if small businesses had to deal with just one inspector at the Health and Safety Executive. Such an administrative change could be accomplished through Government agencies without new legislation.

Many of the objectives of legislation could be accomplished through voluntary legislation backed up by general statute. An obvious problem, which the Government have grappled with, so far unsuccessfully, is that of cowboy builders. Most of us have constituents who have paid several thousands of pounds to have their drive tarmacked; six months later, when a large crack appears in the drive, the constituent rings the company only to discover that it has disappeared. How should we deal with cowboy builders? The problem is not a lack of competition—there will probably be 40 names listed in "Yellow Pages". The problem is that one does not know which of those people learned their trade in the local TEC and which of them learned it in the local nick. There must be a mechanism by which standards can be upheld.

A sensible way to do that, without being over-prescriptive, would be to have the profession of builder recognised by Parliament and the detail of consumer insurance and training decided by the Federation of Master Builders or a comparable body. That could be done voluntarily, in the same way that the British Medical Association oversees the medical profession. Many of the objectives of regulation could be achieved without over-prescriptive and highly detailed legislation.

The Bill raises major constitutional issues. My colleagues in the other place tried to address those and feel that they have helped to improve the Bill, but some issues remain. One is the lack of clarity about the organisations that can claim to suffer excessive burdens. I understand that the provision can apply to the public sector as much as to the private sector. If a Department or a local council wants to be exempted from regulations, it will be able to use the Bill in the same way as a private company. That will cause all kinds of problems that are not related to deregulation in the sense that we have been encouraged to think about it. How will the Bill prevent Departments from simply obstructing or ignoring the powers that Parliament has bestowed?

The second issue is proportionality. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) has already made the point that regulations give rise to issues of cost and benefit. We must ask whether the additional burdens of regulation or, in some cases, deregulation are offset by compensating benefits. How will that balance be measured? How will costs and benefits be defined in the Bill? In the other place, an attempt was made to encompass the idea of "desirability", although I am not entirely sure how that common-sense word can be used in a legal context.

The third and most important point is how we prevent large, controversial measures being introduced under cover of the Bill. Clearly, many small changes, such as the 50 listed by the Minister for the Cabinet Office may well be highly appropriate, but who will define what measures are controversial? How will a limit be set so that the Bill is not abused?

I accept that in many cases regulation is necessary and desirable for environmental and social purposes. However, we must ask whether it is necessary, what burdens it imposes and what its costs and benefits are. If the Bill provided a workmanlike mechanism for reducing excessive legislation, I would welcome it, but I suspect that it contains hidden constitutional traps about which we need reassurance.

5.8 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in the debate and I certainly support the Bill. It is an important step in enabling us to introduce more deregulation and to tackle many of the problems found by the Deregulation Committee since its inception, following the introduction of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994.

I was very disappointed by the speech of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), particularly in view of the fact that in the other place the Bill was not opposed, even at its final stage. I understand his argument that, traditionally, the Lords do not vote against Second Reading and that they try to scrutinise and improve legislation. However, having done so with some measure of success and having amended the Bill, they accepted it and sent it to this House to be debated and scrutinised in accordance with the normal procedure.

Having read the Opposition amendment, I am concerned that their view is that the Bill

"fails to apply sufficient consultative, scrutiny and review provisions".

That is absolute nonsense, and it fails to recognise what has happened since the passing of the 1994 Act. That failure can be traced back to our reasons for opposing the Act: we were outraged by it and said that it was Henry VIII legislation under which Parliament's ability to debate proposals made under the Bill would be bypassed. However, when the Act was implemented, we on the Deregulation Committee found that that was not the case. Indeed, everybody has found that the proposals have resulted in deregulatory measures being dealt with in such a way as to be subject to better consultation and better scrutiny. The procedure is better than tagging measures on to big Bills.

Some Departments and their officials perhaps have not made more use of the legislation because they fear that the scrutiny and treatment of proposals would be much more rigorous, and on several occasions the Committee has sent proposals back to the Home Office. I held the position of Vice-Chairman and the Chairman was Barry Field, who was the Member for Isle of Wight. We met Ministers and officials to give them a severe dressing down, because we felt that some proposals were not being dealt with in accordance with the 1994 Act.

Mr. Lansley: It is no criticism of the hon. Gentleman's Committee that the Government have not chosen to put orders before it, nor is the reasoned amendment a criticism of the scrutiny carried out by that Committee. It is a criticism of the Bill.

We believe that the Bill is inadequate because the proposed consultation outside Parliament is inadequate. Scrutiny is also inadequate because of the limits on the nature of the material to be provided in the document to be laid before Parliament; and notwithstanding what the

Minister of State, Cabinet Office in the other place said, the review of the overall effects of the legislation and of the extent to which it should continue to be used is inadequate too.

Mr. Pike: I understand what the hon. Gentleman says, but his remarks are misjudged and give a mistaken impression of the Bill. However, we are debating that matter here and there will be further debate in Committee.

The hon. Gentleman's view is that the Bill will add to regulation, not deregulation. Importantly, however, two main changes dealing specifically with that point were made in the other place, and such matters were of concern both to the Deregulation Committee and to its opposite number in the other place and Lord Alexander of Weedon, its Chairman. There is excellent liaison between the Committees and their members maintain a good relationship—they know what we are doing, we know what they are doing and the two Chairmen correspond. Although we do not always exactly agree, we try to work together to ensure that we are doing the job that we are there to do.

In all fairness to my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, who will make the winding-up speech, he told the Committee that the Government, after further consideration, would accept amendments in the other place to change and improve the balance between regulation and deregulation, and we were glad to hear that. As a result, amendments were made in clause 1 to introduce a major restraint; it is now essential that provision must be included so as to reduce or remove burdens. There will therefore be a balance, so that the main purpose is the consideration of such reduction or removal. That point is extremely important.

Clause 3 was amended to prevent new burdens, unless a Minister is satisfied that there has been an overall reduction of the burden or that there are

"other beneficial effects for persons affected."

In the view of the Committee, those amendments meet many of the earlier criticisms of the draft Bill.

There has been no example of a better scrutinised draft Bill. There has never been better liaison between the Department that produced the Bill and the Committee that considered it in draft. A consultation paper was issued. The Committee made known its views to the Government. They responded, and the Committee replied to that response. We then considered the draft Bill. There has been every opportunity to express our views.

There may not have been 100 per cent. agreement with every provision, but the Government have moved a long way and have taken cognisance of the constructive proposals made by the Deregulation Committee. Indeed, last week we produced our first special report of this Session—"The Handling of Regulatory Reform Orders". That follows the publication of a report by the Lords Committee after the completion of the Bill's passage through that place.

I am the only Member who has been on the Committee since it was established—I joined it on day one—and I am not sure whether that is a reward or a punishment. I have chaired the Committee since 1997.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) referred to the number of proposals that the Committee had considered before the last general election. However, most of them were of little importance; they generally dealt with measures on gambling and bingo. Indeed, the first proposal that we dealt with was for the reform of betting on greyhound racing, allowing people to bet on the Tote—off the track. The Committee visited Walthamstow race track to see what the proposal involved. We had a meal there and were told which dog would win the last race. Disappointingly, it did not, so deregulation certainly did not guarantee the Committee a winner.

At one point, I even asked a parliamentary question asking whether our Committee was a deregulation Committee or a gambling and bingo Committee, because most of the measures that we dealt with before the election were on precisely those matters.

All along, the Committee has said that it is time there was some uniformity of age as regards soft gambling—for bingo, lottery tickets and so on. We have still not achieved that, so there is more to be done.

The most important measure that we dealt with was one that most people would not even notice—banks and cheque truncation. That measure was to be implemented in two stages—I am not sure whether the second has been fully implemented—and it means that when a cheque is paid into one branch it does not have to go back to the branch where it originated. In these days of modern technology, it was nonsense for millions of cheques to move around the country every day. That must have cost financial institutions—and, ultimately, their customers—a great deal of money.

Our original fears about how the legislation and the Select Committee would work very soon proved totally unfounded. As I said in an earlier intervention, we did our job strictly as any Select Committee would do. At the end of the day, after a lot of debate and discussion on some issues, we reached unanimous decisions on every item that we considered before the election. Indeed, in all our time as a Committee, we have divided on only one measure. We did so after the election, on a measure about which the employers and the trade unions agreed, involving a change in the trade union check-off provisions—but the Opposition decided to vote against the proposal at the last minute.

The Committee already provides good scrutiny. It is a good system; it has been proved to work, and good consultation is tied up with it. There is a good procedure of reporting to the House and debating any matter on which the Committee divides. Indeed, the House had to debate the check-off provisions because the Committee had divided on them. That was totally different from the procedure of European Standing Committees A and B when they were set up. They could amend a Government motion, but the Government could still table the original motion in the Chamber, and the House would have to agree to it without debate, forthwith. That is nonsensical, because the fact that a Committee has amended a motion should be reported to the House. Of course the Government always have the right to reamend the motion so that it states what they originally wanted. When I was a member of European Standing Committee A, I thought it nonsense that its proposals could be totally ignored and a motion different from the one agreed could be tabled in the Chamber, and agreed with a Division, if necessary, but without debate. So the Select Committee's procedure is good.

[Mr. Pike]

Right from the day after the general election, when I became Chairman of the Select Committee, its view and that of all my hon. Friends has been that it has not had enough business. The Committee has been disappointed about that and has tried to ensure that more proposals come before it. Indeed, we have met every Minister who has been involved, and they share our concern; they also want more proposals to go before the Committee. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) laughs, but that happens to be true.

The Labour party is in favour of doing something, but the participation of Conservative Members on the Committee has been almost nil. The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) nods, because he has taken a full part in the proceedings from the Liberal Democrat Benches. Indeed, I wrote to the Conservative Chief Whip, because the Committee was extremely worried that the Conservative Members were not taking part in its proceedings. One Member no longer wants to be a member of the Committee, but has not been replaced to this day. So, far from being advocates and campaigners for deregulation, the Tories have been backward in that work.

The then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), was concerned from the start. Indeed, we looked at the position, and it was agreed at a fairly early date that a consultation paper should be issued. Unfortunately, that was not done as speedily as one would have hoped, but it was ultimately issued. I met my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), when he was the Minister dealing with deregulation issues, and he too was anxious that we should increase the Committee's work load and encourage more Departments to put matters before it.

One of the effects of the Committee's not having enough work is that its staffing has been reduced—not in calibre, but certainly in number. That point must be addressed if the Bill makes progress and if the Committee's work load increases.

The Committee called my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields to give evidence and we had a good evidence-taking session. The chairman of the better regulation taskforce, Lord Haskins, also came before us to give evidence and the Committee produced a report.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields was replaced, my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) took responsibility for deregulation. He was also concerned about the position, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), and the latter came before the Committee before this Bill was introduced. The Bill is a result of all the steps that have been taken over the years, so it is important to examine how we reached this stage.

The Committee considered the possibility of a Bill and published a report. In due course, a draft Bill was introduced; my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office appeared before the Committee and we considered the draft Bill in a useful evidence-taking session. In May 2000, the Committee published its second special report. The Government considered the report and produced their response and, quite rightly, the Committee examined their views. We did not agree with everything that the Government had said, so we produced our third special report outlining a few points that we wanted the Government to note.

When the Bill was introduced, it was clear that the Government had not taken account of everything that the Committee had said, but some of our key points have since been accepted. Amendments made in the other place take the Bill very much nearer to what the Committee wanted, and we welcome the positive approach that the Government have adopted. They have not taken a rigid view and they have been willing to consider other views and accept improvements to the Bill. I and my Committee welcome that.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the Committee was a little concerned by the Government's lack of commitment to an annual review of the Bill's operation? It is an important Bill, and although the Committee said that it would carry out an annual review, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be far better if it were carried out far more publicly by the Government?

Mr. Pike: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point; I was going to touch on it in my speech. It is clear that the Committee was not 100 per cent. happy with what the Government said. The latter have moved and said that they will carry out a review after three years to see how the Bill is working. That review will be published and debated, but the Committee has made it clear that it intends to produce an annual report. That is legitimate. I do not know who will sit on the Committee after the general election or who will chair it—the new Committee may take a different view. However, I hope that it will take note of our reports.

The Government are aware of the differing views. Indeed, I spoke to the Parliamentary Secretary about them in the Division Lobby and mentioned them to him last week when we had finalised our report. They are not confidential. The Committee has a right to its opinion, which I accept is slightly different.

The other place amended the Bill. It is now closer to what the Committee wanted. We certainly welcome that. Assuming that the Bill receives early approval and Royal Assent, the Government must act speedily to ensure that it is implemented. Initially, the measures will be contained in two pieces of legislation—the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 and the new Act. I understand that the Government intend to introduce three proposals next week, which I shall deal with shortly. The measures to which my right hon. Friend the Minister referred are being consulted on and will be part of the new legislation.

I have touched on staffing resources. That will need to be dealt with speedily so that the Committee can carry out its work efficiently. We have always been served by excellent Officers of the House, but we will need sufficient staff to cope with the amount of work. My right hon. Friend mentioned some of the matters with which the Committee might have to deal. Indeed, they are listed in an annexe to the Committee's first special report which was published last week. They are a response to a parliamentary question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and they relate to issues that the Government have every intention of addressing at an early date.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman mentions the Committee's regret at the paucity of deregulation proposals that it received. Has it had an opportunity to consider the 51 proposals that have been mentioned by Ministers in relation to the new power and examined whether, and to what extent, those could have been introduced as part of the 1994 Act?

Mr. Pike: We have not done that; perhaps we should have. However, the list has now been published.

We have spelled out our opinion on producing reports. It is an extremely important job. I am sure that the Parliamentary Secretary will recognise that the report makes it clear that we intend to conduct an annual review. If need be, the Committee will call a Minister to give evidence. That could be the Minister with responsibility for deregulation or a departmental Minister. We have the power to do that and to consider particular failings. We may, of course, decide that the Government are doing an extremely good job and are giving us too much work to do in the new Parliament.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) will want to refer at great length to paragraph 13 of our report. It reiterates the need

"to produce legislation comprehensible to those affected by it".

However, the Government have not included such a provision in the Bill. The report continues:

"If the Bill is not amended to this effect"—

let us assume for the moment that it will not be—

"we (and, we trust, our successors) will nonetheless scrutinise all future proposals and draft Orders with these objectives in mind, and will expect Ministers to do the same."

I hope that Ministers will take note of that. Reference has been made to legislation in Holland. We want to have legislation in this country that is clear and understandable. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East has pursued that issue both in the Committee and in the Chamber, but he is not the only one who is concerned: many hon. Members on both sides are concerned about it.

Three proposals are to be tabled next week. It is important that Ministers recognise that, once they have been tabled, the Committee clock starts to tick. We have a specific number of days in which to consider the proposals: all days count, including weekends, unless the House is not sitting for more than four days; therefore the timetable stops for the duration of an election, but restarts on day one of the new Session. I mention that because it means that the Committee must be established with all possible speed after the general election if it is to be able to carry out its responsibilities under the Bill.

The first special report also proposes a new name for the Committee and provides some draft Standing Orders. Our attitude to our draft Standing Orders is not rigid; we have published them to provide helpful guidelines, in the hope that they will be taken into account by those responsible for formulating Standing Orders, as they too will be required fairly speedily if the Committee is to carry out its work. We propose that the Committee's name become "the Deregulation and Regulatory Reform Committee",

because we believe that "the Deregulation Committee" will not adequately describe the work of the new body.

I welcome the Bill as a move in the right direction. The 1994 Act has proved too tight and too rigid for the amount of work.

Mr. Lansley: I should be interested to hear the Committee's and the hon. Gentleman's personal view on precisely what is too tight in the provisions of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act. The comments of the Minister for the Cabinet Office suggest that if the purpose is deregulation, the only real restriction is imposed by section 1(5)(c) of that Act, which limits the measures to which orders can be applied to those that were enacted in Sessions up to and including the 1994–95 Session. Would it not have been simpler to amend that provision than to engage in a wholesale extension of the power?

Mr. Pike: I do not accept that view. It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman appears not to have listened to the opening speech made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and that Conservative Members did not take part in scrutinising the Bill. The second special report of the 1999–2000 Session addresses those very issues, as does the previous report. Anyone who becomes a member of the Committee on the Bill will, during the few days available to that Committee, find the Deregulation Committee's reports an extremely useful aid to constructive debate on the legislation.

Before I gave way, I was making the point that the Bill will open the door to more deregulation. Finally, to answer the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, from day one the Committee found that one cannot deregulate without putting some other regulation in place. We want sensible, workable and better regulation, and the Government have tried to achieve that. We all want to remove unnecessary bureaucratic regulation that serves no useful purpose. Even when the Committee was under the chairmanship of my predecessor and had a Conservative majority, almost every time we looked at a proposal, we found that we had to replace deregulation with something else to make the system safe and secure, and protect those from whom we were trying to remove burdens.

I fully support the Bill; I shall certainly vote for it and against the reasoned amendment at the end of our debate.

5.40 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I have declared my interests in the register.

What a sad testimony we have just heard from the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), the Chairman of a Committee that once rejoiced in the title of the Deregulation Committee. I am delighted that he was so honest because one thing became crystal clear in his long narrative: the Government do not believe in deregulation. They are not at all apologetic for the massive increase in regulation in their four years in office. They have left the Committee entirely devoid of purpose. We saw a rather pathetic image of members of a Commons Committee sitting around having meetings and writing letters to members of a Lords Committee, who were also sitting around having meetings, because they had nothing else to do, and wondering if they could have more meetings together.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles) *rose*—

Mr. Redwood: I should like to make one little point, but shall then be delighted to give way.

[Mr. Redwood]

We then heard that if there were a serious chance of any deregulation emerging, the Committee would need a massive increase in staffing because, poor things, its members were already enormously overworked. The only argument against the Conservatives was that some of them did not always turn up. I am not surprised, given that the Committee was boring and did nothing; I am sure that my hon. Friends had better things to do with their time.

Mr. Stewart: If boredom is the criterion to which we pay attention, I fear that many Labour Members would leave every time that the right hon. Gentleman stood up to speak. However, on a serious note, if a Commons Committee has concerns and wishes to share them with a Committee in the other place, it would be appropriate for the right hon. Gentleman's team to be in Committee to add its voice. Conservative Members were not in Committee and they did nothing; the country knows that.

Mr. Redwood: For four years, the Conservative team has put across strenuously and consistently the message that the Government are over-regulating, not deregulating. My right hon. and hon. Friends on, and beyond, the Committee would willingly give of their time to work on serious deregulation. The truth is the Government have no interest in that and have no proposals.

Today, we heard the Chairman of the Deregulation Committee make one serious proposal to the House: the Committee should be renamed—and, no doubt, rebranded with a new logo at considerable expense to the taxpayer—thus letting the secret out to the world at large that it cannot deregulate, does not want to deregulate, does not know how to deregulate and has no idea why it should deregulate. Instead, it would like to join in the game of more regulation, more cost, more burdens, more trouble, always putting more impositions on the private sector in the naive belief that there will never be another bust when all around is plenty of evidence of plenty of busts in plenty of sectors.

Mr. Cotter: Does the right hon. Gentleman genuinely think that rhetoric is a replacement for action? We have heard a lot of rhetoric from Conservative Members. When the Tory Government were in power they introduced as much legislation as the present Government—indeed, possibly more. May I emphasis the point that Conservative Members did not attend the Committee at the very point when they could have influenced the Bill? They had an opportunity to discuss it. They are wasting time talking about getting deregulation when they had a chance to influence things. To stand here talking is rhetoric, not action.

Mr. Redwood: I thought that speaking in the House of Commons was a great privilege, and that speaking in the House about policies might persuade the Government to do something sensible. Earlier, I heard my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), the shadow Cabinet Office Minister, make three proposals about a process for deregulation rather more sensible than the mean and difficult proposals in the Bill, which will undoubtedly backfire.

The Bill has "3 May is election day" written all over it. The Government do not seriously expect to get the legislation through or to do any real deregulation, but clearly, the runes have been consulted, the focus groups have been paid off, the polls have been plumbed, the Government have taken all sorts of factors into account, and they have discovered something that we have been telling them for four years: that the business community feels that it is massively overregulated.

Much of that overregulation has taken place under the present Government—*[Interruption.]* The Liberals, in the form of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter), are leaving the Chamber because they know that they are partly guilty, as the junior coalition partners. The regulations have built up massively under the Government. The business community does not like that. The famous peace or truce—

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I shall give way in a moment. I should like to finish the point, then I shall be happy for the hon. Gentleman to have another shy. It will not work either, but we are always willing to encourage talent, if only we could find some on the Government Benches.

Too much regulation is being built up by this Administration. The business community no longer thinks that the Government are friendly to business, so they are in pre-election panic mode. The Cabinet Office has been asked to produce something that the Government can spin to persuade business that after four years of getting it wrong, they will get it right. The Government want the British people and the British business community to sign a blank cheque. The Government say, "Trust us. We now understand that deregulation is important."

Mr. Stewart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for his courtesy in giving way. It may surprise him to hear that I understand and accept his protestations on behalf of private industry. However, it would be good to hear from him and other Opposition Members some protestation about sensible, appropriate and relevant regulation and how it protects workers.

Mr. Redwood: I hope to give examples of measures that the Government have imposed that I should like removed, as they are totally unnecessary burdens. The Conservative party has always supported sensible regulation for employee conditions, and we are not proposing to scrap worthwhile protections for employees. It is a matter of balance and degree. An avalanche of regulation and taxation has been thrust at businesses. A £10 billion regulatory burden and a taxation burden of more than twice that sum have been added by this Administration. That is becoming the straw that breaks many camels' backs throughout British business.

No wonder the Government want a general election on 3 May. It will not be long before all that comes home to people. Businesses will go bankrupt, businesses will shed labour, entire industries will get into worse trouble, and much of it will be the direct responsibility of Ministers and Labour Members, who willingly imposed tax after tax and regulation after regulation, to cause those troubles.

Mr. Pike: When the right hon. Gentleman went to the Back Benches after losing the leadership election in the

previous Parliament, did he vote against all the additional tax burdens that the Conservative Government forced on business?

Mr. Redwood: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the record, he will see that I produced a number of alternative proposals for less tax and less government. I have gone on to support an Opposition who clearly want to lower the tax burden, compared with the Government's very high one. That, surely, is the position of a sensible person who wants to make the case for a more prosperous country.

I draw to the attention of the House a particular concern, in the light of the extraordinary clause 9, which deals with enforcement practice. Clause 9(1)(b) states:

"the practice followed by enforcement officers in relation to the enforcement of the restriction, requirement or condition ought to be improved so far as fairness, transparency and consistency are concerned".

Seemingly, the Bill sets out the need for a code of practice to try to improve the way in which Ministers regulate. I would be delighted if Ministers regulated more fairly, transparently and consistently, but it is extraordinary that they need to introduce a Bill to allow the House to impose on them a requirement to set out enforceable standards of conduct. Why are not sensible enforcement procedures already in place, and why do Ministers need legislative permission to introduce codes of practice that they could issue anyway?

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend speculated on why the Government are so keen to have the general election on 3 May. I suggest that it is because they know that the Bill is unenforceable. He referred to clause 9(1)(b). Does he realise that any clause that provides that a standard "ought to be" enforced is unenforceable in practice?

Mr. Redwood: That may be the case, but my criticism of the Government is that they try to introduce so much legislation that is half-baked, ill-thought-out and inconsistent, and that lacks transparency. Furthermore, they keep changing their minds.

One of the farmers in my constituency, Mr. Russell Butler, has a large number of sheep in fields that range over a 70-mile area. Last week, he needed to move the animals, but he came up against bad Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food regulation. Presumably, it was exactly the sort of regulation that clause 9 is supposed to tackle, but we cannot wait for that measure to take effect. The Minister of Agriculture should deal with the problem today. Mr. Butler asked for permission to move his sheep, which, I am pleased to say, are nowhere near a confirmed outbreak of foot and mouth disease. He was told that he could not move them more than 5 km because of the regulations that were extant last week. He needed to move them over a greater distance, because his fields are spread out over a large area. The sheep on his grass were getting into considerable trouble. It is lambing season and he wanted to return them to the farm for the lambing to occur properly. Even if he had to leave them out in fields, he wanted them to have grass to eat. The fields in which they had remained were getting muddy and the grass had worn out. Some of the fields—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will return fairly quickly to his point about regulation.

Mr. Redwood: I am trying to illustrate the problem with clause 9 by citing a clear example of legislation that is muddled and lacks transparency. Perhaps a stronger measure than a code of practice is needed, but we cannot afford to wait for primary legislation, and my constituent, Mr. Butler, would obviously like to know that the matter is being taken seriously by Ministers and the House.

Mr. Butler applied for information on whether there was anything else he could do. He was then told that the regulation would be changed during the week and that he could obtain a movement order because the restricted distance was to be changed to 15 km. He was told that the change would occur on Tuesday. I then intervened personally, as he wanted to move the sheep 15 miles and not 15 km. Subsequently, however, he was telephoned and told that he could kill all the sheep, even though they were perfectly healthy. He was assured that a licence would be granted for that purpose. Of course, that worried him considerably and caused me enormous concern. Before I had to intervene again, however, I was telephoned with an entirely different story. I was told that some time during the week, on an unspecified date, MAFF would lift any limit on the distance of movement for farmers in unaffected areas. In effect, I was told that my constituent could hang on in the hope that the regulation would be changed, although his sheep would probably starve to death on muddy fields in the meantime.

I hope that you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, that that example deals with a point that is central to the Bill, as it demonstrates muddle, incompetence and lack of transparency. It also shows the lack of decent feeling for animals that could die because Ministers do not see—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman can give an example, but as I have pointed out, he must return to the principle of deregulation.

Mr. Redwood: I am happy to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Clause 9 states that enforcement should be fair, transparent and consistent. I agree with those aims, but why is such provision needed? Surely those conditions should apply now. Why should we introduce a Bill to make Ministers behave transparently and consistently, when that is how they should behave now? What is wrong with them? Why do they have to rely on the Minister for the Cabinet Office—one of the less dangerous people among them—to introduce the Bill? They are introducing legislation in the hope that, if they stay in government, they will at some stage introduce codes of conduct on regulation. However, we have seen in all too many instances that they have no idea how to regulate sensibly, how to be open and honest or how to leave people sure of what is required.

I have spoken about agriculture and I shall not bore the House with more examples. Business men and farmers want fair, proportionate regulation. They want to know

[Mr. Redwood]

why it was arrived at and what they need to do to comply with it. How can a farmer comply with a regulation when he is given three different versions of what he should do? Should he kill his animals, or wait in the hope that he can move them a shorter or a longer distance? We need immediate action on such issues.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the explanation of the Government's appalling failure on regulation can be found in the two characteristics that the six Department of Trade and Industry Ministers and three Cabinet Office Ministers in the House have in common? First, none of them has ever run a business or worked in one, and, secondly, they are all fanatical European "federasts".

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point.

Marjorie Mowlam: Let me take the right hon. Gentleman back to the nature of the Bill. He spoke about lack of consultation, but there has been unprecedented pre-legislative scrutiny. The draft Bill was published last October and was the subject of extensive consultation. He said that it was a last-minute measure, but that is patently incorrect. He suggested that the provisions had not been costed, but they have been, in comparison with his Government's costings. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) spoke about an independent deregulatory commission and a regulatory budget without telling us why his proposals would not create greater budgetary and administrative costs. It would be useful if the right hon. Gentleman could describe such costs in his meandering speech.

Mr. Redwood: I think that the Minister wanted to intervene on my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire, as her points relate to his speech rather than to mine. I gave way to her because I always do so if time permits, and I hoped that she would feel like defending the Government or would have something better to offer to my constituent and to the many farmers throughout the country who want proper regulation. The Bill concerns not only deregulation, but better regulation. Indeed, the main burden of the provisions is amendment of the 1994 Act to allow the Government to use similar powers to increase regulation, rather than diminish it.

Mr. Stringer: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the clause 9 provision to which he referred is lifted word for word from the 1994 Act, which he supported when he was a Cabinet Minister? Why does he not support that measure now?

Mr. Redwood: I have made it clear that I fully support the Bill's principles in that regard, but why is the Bill needed to achieve what should be happening now? When we consider the chaos and confusion caused by lousy regulation in agriculture, we are desperate for an immediate solution. We need to know how many animals must be killed and why. If the Government have settled on such a policy, we need to know whether the killing can be carried out more quickly, so that the risk can be reduced, rather than increased.

Those are today's anxieties in respect of better regulation, but the Bill does not sort them out. I do not challenge the principles of regulatory reform. As the Parliamentary Secretary said, I supported those principles—fairness, transparency and consistency—in 1994, and I still support them today, but I want action, rather than more words on a piece of paper that is merely a pre-election stunt that demonstrates no understanding of the seriousness of what is occurring in the countryside or in businesses elsewhere.

I should like to move away from agriculture and clause 9, and consider earlier clauses.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when we consider suffering farmers or business men who are burdened with over-regulation, the primary problem is not the regulation but incompetence? The countryside is especially affected by the incompetence of Ministers and managers. The Government are saying that the ship is heading towards the rocks and that we must therefore give it a complete refit and change the engines when we need to change the officers on the bridge. That is all we need to do to help farmers.

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He represents many more farmers than me, and he speaks with feeling and understanding from experience. He could also have said that many abattoirs were killed off by regulation, much of it from the European Union. The Government did not oppose it, and they are paying a high price in agriculture, partly because the closure of many smaller abattoirs requires more movements over long distances. I do not claim that that caused the outbreak, but it has made its spread more rapid and more difficult to contain.

If we consider the number of businesses that are desperate for proper deregulation, we can understand why so many people will believe that the Bill is not man enough for the task. Let us consider fishing. Our industry is being killed off by common fisheries policy regulation, whose purpose seems to be to ensure that cuts in catch and quota are borne mainly by British fishing vessels to enable Spaniards and others to take the catch.

Why do not the Government deregulate our fishing industry and press for re-regulation of the foreign fishing industry to change the balance? That is what our fishermen want. They understand the need for some overall controls, but sensible ones, not flinging dead fish back into the sea and believing that that will transform the position. They would like a fairer system that gives them more chances and the foreign vessels commensurately fewer.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): The previous Government signed the common fisheries policy, which largely led to the current position. The Government have done much to reform it. Also, the number of abattoirs more than halved in the two years before the Government came to office. The rural White Paper, which was published in November last year, pledged £8.7 million for abattoirs.

Mr. Redwood: My constituents do not recognise the world that the hon. Gentleman describes. In their world,

European regulation considerably damages the industries that are most affected by it, and a supine Government provide soundbites about being at the heart of Europe and getting on frightfully well with our partners, while being unable to challenge them about anything or stand up for British fishing or agriculture. That has led to the most murderous reductions ever—and there have been all too many over the years—in the British industry's catches. If British fishing is to have a future, we need a Government who believe in the right sort of regulation and deregulation.

The Bill will not help. I cannot go to a fishing village on my travels and say, "Great news. I was in the House of Commons on a marvellous occasion. We had a debate during which Ministers at last realised that European regulation is smashing the fishing industry, and they have introduced a measure to get regulation right." Ministers do not care; they do not even admit that there is a problem. Government Back Benchers are prepared to make foolish points, which will read badly in dwindling fishing communities around our coast.

There is also the meltdown in telecommunications. Share prices have crashed and we have heard announcements that that glamorous and growing industry is about to suffer job losses on a big scale. That process began when the Chancellor of the Exchequer imposed a windfall tax of £22 billion on that successful industry. He perceived no irony in saying simultaneously that he would impose a massive licensing, tax and regulatory bill on the industry and that there could be a new economy with a faster growth rate. He said that there was a new paradigm, led by telecommunications and the dotcom revolution. He believed that it was a great idea to tax the industry to a dangerous extent. Now a bitter harvest is being reaped. The Germans foolishly followed that example; over-regulation took £50 billion out of a lead industry. That has led to difficult consequences in stock markets and telecommunications throughout the European Union.

Mr. White: Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why he was elected in 1997 on a manifesto that supported the action that he has outlined?

Mr. Redwood: I did not recommend that policy. I made a speech in the House explaining the difficulty. The Conservative party would not have modelled it as mathematically brilliantly as did the Government, who optimised the take and ensured that businesses were left short of cash and unable to make the investment in the next generation of technology as quickly as they should. I pay full tribute to the Chancellor's ability to take the right advice from a mathematical professor, and to ensure that he took most of the money and left nothing for new investment and new ideas. However, that is not a success but a great failure.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: Willingly—perhaps the hon. Gentleman can do better than his previous intervention.

Mr. Hendrick: Does not the right hon. Gentleman accept that the halving of the value on the Nasdaq exchange in New York has much to do with profit warnings by major American multinationals and little to do with the Government's sale of the spectrum, which brought so much money to the Exchequer?

Mr. Redwood: I am talking about the United Kingdom. That is our country, where I have a constituency and represent people. The combined impact of the British and German auction is a major factor in the collapse of telecommunications share prices in Britain. As I explained, the German auction was modelled on the British version. Cannot the hon. Gentleman understand that if a Government suddenly take £5 billion from the main participants in a successful growing industry that leads an economy, its growth will be damaged? The crucial companies in Britain were affected by that.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): As I worked in telecommunications for 30 years, I know a wee bit about it. BT has made exorbitant profits and given them to shareholders for many years. It has not invested them properly, and that has now come home to roost. The telecommunications industry—or the communications industry, as it likes to call itself nowadays—has been affected by the global market. That has nothing to do with Britain and the Government. More people are employed in telecommunications than before. Would you not agree—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. First, the hon. Gentleman's intervention is too long. Secondly, he is not using the correct parliamentary language. He has had long enough for his intervention.

Mr. Redwood: My case stands. The British Government, followed by the German Government, took huge sums from the leading telecommunications companies in this country. Massive over-regulation and the sale of licences when the public sector had a monopoly stranglehold on marginal spectrum is the important issue. That has done enormous damage. The hon. Gentleman can argue until he is blue in the face, but he should watch what happens next. More redundancies will occur—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is going rather wide of the mark. We are getting into a general history of financial affairs in recent years. Will he please return to the Bill?

Mr. Redwood: I am happy to do that.

The Bill does not offer the sort of deregulation that industry desperately needs. Over-licensing and over-expensive regulation of the telecommunications industry is an example that the Government will not tackle.

Mr. Lansley: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the consequences of the Government's policy on the telecommunications industry is that it has left them unable to pursue the extent of deregulation required by the introduction of full competitive pressures, especially on local loop unbundling, that would appeal to a broader business interest in stimulating broad-band access? The Government's desire for additional revenue and their propensity for regulation are intimately connected.

Mr. Redwood: I quite agree, and I notice that there is nothing to tackle that problem on the list of 51 varieties of possible deregulation. There is a case for the right

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kind of additional deregulation in telecommunications. Although that would not offset the massive tax burden, it would at least send a signal that the Government have not lost all interest in and enthusiasm for such a leading sector. However, I see from the rather blank looks on ministerial faces that we are not going to get that.

Another area in which I would like further deregulation—which I am pleased to see that the Conservative party has pledged to achieve as soon as it has regained power—is IR35 regulation of the computer industry. That is another important lead industry alongside telecommunications. If the new revolution was about anything, it was about the application of telecoms, dotcoms and computing to create exciting new economic developments. What did the Government do? They smashed not only the telecoms industry with their taxes but a lot of the entrepreneurship in the smaller computing businesses by imposing IR35.

Will the Minister use the so-called Henry VIII powers in the Bill to get rid of IR35? I checked with the Clerks, and was told that the proposal can cover any tax matter. If I give way now, will the Minister say that the Government will get rid of IR35? The computing industry would love to get that provision off the statute books. I see from the Minister's staying in a sedentary position that we have drawn a blank.

Mr. Ian Stewart *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I should be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I am sure that he cannot make such a pledge.

Mr. Stewart: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought that the right hon. Gentleman had finished his speech. I was rising to speak on my own behalf.

Mr. Redwood: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman thought that at all, but there we are. I shall proceed.

There are terrible problems in a raft of rural businesses that are being worried to death by too much regulation. The Government have heaped general regulation, employee regulation and other forms of regulation on them. They are required to have much more sophisticated payroll activities to handle the working families tax credit and other measures that have been introduced—and, of course, the rates keep going up. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) has said that, at this time of crisis in rural businesses, the Government should at least get rid of the business rate for a few months. Will the Minister use the powers in the Bill, or elsewhere, to do that? That would be a sensible gesture at a time when those businesses are being grossly damaged by over-regulation.

The Government started their response to the agriculture crisis by saying that people should not go walking in the countryside. That obviously flattened a lot of the hotel and leisure businesses that were making a reasonable living and whose big season was coming up at Easter. We now hear that the Government might relax those instructions. Will Ministers take the opportunity of this debate on regulation to tell those businesses what they are going to do for them? This is an immediate problem: the Easter holiday bookings are being cancelled now. Will the Government deregulate some of those movements, or is it unsafe to do so? If it is unsafe—as it may be—will the Government offer rate relief or some other compensation? This is a serious point.

I was contacted by constituents today, who pointed out how silly some of this regulation has become. My constituents, who, like me, would like any sensible action to be taken to clear up this dreadful disease in our sheep and our cattle, went to the local park. They were banned from walking in it, but were prepared to accept that regulation. They then discovered that a football competition was going to be held in the park for teams from outside the area, and that permission had been given for the competition to go ahead. Yet my constituents did not have permission to walk on their normal route through the wooded area, which is quite ridiculous, but again shows that Ministers are not living up to expectations—even the expectations in the Bill—of transparent, fair and sensible regulations.

Mr. Fabricant: May I give another example? There is a long list of legislation that needs to be changed. Is my right hon. Friend aware that pig breeders are breaching welfare regulations? Weaners are being born and are now overcrowding their pens—thus breaking the law—yet breeders are not permitted to move the pigs away or even to slaughter them in situ? Would not this be an ideal point in the debate for the Minister for the Cabinet Office—who I see has now left her place—to make the position clear on that matter?

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend has come up with a powerful and worrying example of conflicting regulation, yet no Minister is prepared to speak for the Government on which part of the regulation is the more important, or to offer any hope at all to people at their wits' end trying to run their businesses against this awful background.

Mr. Leigh: I go back to a point that I made earlier. Businesses in rural areas are going out of business because regulations are driving our rural tourism industry out of business, yet we are wasting hours of House of Commons time debating a Bill that will never become law because there will be a general election. Is there anything to stop Ministers acting now? Do we need this Bill? What is going on?

Mr. Redwood: That is our point about Second Reading. On Second Reading, we are allowed to discuss the wisdom of introducing the Bill. My hon. Friends and I feel that Ministers could take action today to clarify the inconsistencies and the awful muddle. We are saying not that they have to be clarified in one way rather than another, but that they must be clarified.

Ministers must go on television and explain how they are going to handle this awful crisis, and tell us which regulations apply and which do not. If many of the regulations needed to be changed, I am sure that Conservative Members would be willing to take some time today or tomorrow to change them, so that it would be done and rural businesses would know where they stood and had some chance of producing a plan for their own survival.

The haulage industry is another example of a set of businesses gravely damaged—in some cases, bankrupted or wiped out—by over-regulation, over-expensive

licences and over-taxation. A combination of the highest diesel taxes in Europe, very expensive licence fees and a very complicated bureaucracy to regulate so many aspects of those businesses has led business to go to foreign hauliers. It has also led some British hauliers to flag out altogether and run their operations from northern France or Belgium, and it will lead other businesses into bankruptcy.

The haulage industry will undoubtedly suffer even more because of the spread of foot and mouth disease and the lack of cattle movements. That is a natural event that is extremely sad, but the Government had set the haulage industry up for bad performance long before that disaster hit. It is because the industry was so weak going into the crisis that we shall lose many more haulage businesses as a result of it.

Mr. Pike: Why did the previous Government not deregulate the road haulage industry between 1994 and 1997, and why did they introduce the fuel duty escalator?

Mr. Redwood: If we could get back to the levels of taxation and regulation that we enjoyed in 1997, the haulage industry would be cheering in the streets. I am delighted that the Conservative party is now committed to reducing the regulatory and tax burden, but this Government must answer the charge. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the burden was too high in 1997, why did he support all the measures to increase it between 1997 and today? It is absurd to say that because there were some specks of dust in someone's eye in 1997, sticking a twig into it thereafter does not matter. That is what the Government came along and did.

It was this Government's fuel escalator that did the real damage. They increased the rate of increase in the fuel escalator, and dragooned their Back Benchers into voting for the measure. It was not a Tory fuel escalator after 1997; it was a Labour fuel escalator. It was bigger and worse after 1997, and it has done much more damage as a result. Will the Minister tell us what action will be used to help the haulage industry under these deregulatory powers, if they are finally implemented? Will it not be too late? Does not the Minister realise that hauliers will be going bust now, tomorrow and for the rest of this week because the Government are over-taxing and over-regulating?

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House whether his party had any plans to remove the fuel duty escalator before it lost power?

Mr. Redwood: I was very keen to stop it. I think that my right hon. and hon. Friends would have seen the wisdom of my arguments, because when one is on an escalator one reaches a point at which one wants to get off. There is no way in which a Conservative Chancellor would have increased the rate of ascent, given how high it had already gone. A Conservative Chancellor would have listened to the representations and said, "Yes, the duty is now at the same level as that of our continental competitors. It would be dangerous for the industry to raise it further."

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend has almost anticipated the point that I am going to make. Does he recall that, at the time of the implementation of the fuel duty escalator, our petrol prices were mid-way in the European range, whereas they are now 10 per cent. higher than the second highest petrol price in Europe?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman answers that question, I must advise right hon. and hon. Members that they are again straying from the Second Reading of the Bill.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I ask the Minister to take into account road haulage regulation, and explain to the House why this weedy Bill does not tackle that problem. Will he come back to the House with a Bill that deregulates some aspects of the road haulage industry? He must know by now what the industry wants, because the Government have been in consultation with it for many months. Costs are too high, so business is going abroad and hauliers are being driven into bankruptcy by wrong regulation.

Mr. Bercow: I hope that my right hon. Friend will not allow his natural shyness and self-effacement to cause him to understate his case. May I put it on record that on 26 September 1996, during a speech at Haddenham school in my Buckingham constituency, he advocated deregulation on a massive scale, and that there was cheering afterwards?

Mr. Redwood: I am delighted to hear that—but you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be delighted to learn that I shall not regale the House with the text of my speech. Indeed, as it was made off the cuff, I do not think that I could remember all of it. Anyway, I am delighted that my hon. Friend enjoyed it, and I still believe what I believed then.

Manufacturing has also suffered badly from too much regulation under this Government. Their feeling has been that any amount of regulation can be poured into manufacturing—regulation affecting jobs, and making the industry do their work for them in regard to tax and benefits—without any trouble being caused. There have already been more than 300,000 net job losses; how many more will it take before the Government wake up to the sad truth that my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire revealed, in general terms? We are losing competitiveness. It is no longer cheap enough to make things in Britain—the Government have made it too dear to make things in Britain—so many jobs are draining away to other countries.

Even this Government must have understood the tragedy that is Corus, and the massive cuts in the steel industry. Even this Government, with Members representing practically all the major textile locations, must have noticed that the textile industry is being gravely damaged by the combination of a weak euro—allowing European competitors more of an edge—with massive increases in costs, many pushed through by too much regulation and taxation. The Opposition look for some relief for textiles, steel and the other basic manufacturing industries, but we look for that in vain in this badly drafted Bill.

The Bill is an example of cynical manipulation—typical spin. We are told that the Government need greater powers to introduce deregulation. With their majority they could introduce any deregulation they liked as primary

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legislation, and given that they shove everything through in two or three hours anyway it would not take very long to do the job. Why do they not simply present some deregulation measures in the form of primary legislation? They might even find that we would expedite the passage of such measures, and would not be as worried about being given so little time for debate as we are in the case of many of the massive regulatory measures that they regularly propose.

We are told that these are Henry VIII powers in a good cause. That does a grave injustice to the late king, who, after all, introduced all his reformation measures in the form of primary legislation, in this House of Commons. Perhaps it is because he was an early Eurosceptic that the Government are taking such exception to him, and giving the powers that name.

The power that the Bill introduces is wholly undesirable. It is the power to regulate anew, and to impose additional burdens on an already massively overburdened private sector without the normal questions being asked and without the normal processes of primary legislation. It is true that there is long-winded consultation, which the Government will undoubtedly ignore when they have decided what they want to do, and it is true that there is a statutory instrument procedure. I think it wholly undesirable, however, that the House should be bypassed—in several ways—when the Government want to impose new regulatory burdens.

It is very different from getting rid of things. People have too much government. I have more government than I want, more government than I need, and certainly more government than I can afford. I speak for many of my constituents in saying that. The Bill will create an additional power to allow more regulation, without proper scrutiny.

I am surprised that the Government think it worth bothering, given that they have developed so many other ways of avoiding proper scrutiny of their measures and regulations. We now have an almost perpetual guillotine, pushed through to ensure that there is as little debate as possible. Labour Back Benchers are asked to occupy all the time available, so that the number of critical remarks can be reduced. Often, Ministers show a contemptuous attitude to those of us who seek to ask legitimate questions about how measures will work and whether they will work.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not sure what this has to do with regulations. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will return to the Second Reading debate.

Mr. Redwood: I accept your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I am trying to discuss the power by order to make provisions reforming the law, which I consider to be a wide-ranging power. My worry—subject to your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker—is that it constitutes a method of avoiding even the perfunctory debate that we are allowed under the guillotine and primary legislation procedures; and, because it is so wide ranging, I fear that it is possible to talk about more or less anything. The Government have not made it entirely clear what they will introduce.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is certainly not possible to talk about more or less anything.

Mr. Redwood: I accept your wise words and your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I think you would agree that the Government want to take wide-ranging powers to reform, in unspecified ways, a wide range of law—all law, indeed, that affects persons carrying on an activity or business. That is why I have confined my remarks to the subject of regulations affecting businesses. As the Clerks advise me, that clearly encompasses tax regulation, which is often the most onerous and expensive.

Mr. Pike: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the two amendments carried in the Lords, to which I have specifically referred, ensure that a balance of deregulation must offset any new regulation?

Mr. Redwood: I am not sure that it must offset any new regulation in the way that I would like, but my point is rather different: I believe that any new regulation should have to go through normal procedures, and I see no objection to Ministers' presenting such measures in the form of primary legislation, according to their proposed truncated method of dealing with such legislation.

I defend the principle of the 1994 Act: that those who wish to strike something off the legislative list might want an expedited procedure. The principle was fairly tightly controlled, but there was some sense in it. I see no case for—effectively—allowing primary legislation to go through to re-regulate increased regulatory burdens under this kind of procedure, and I think the House would regret consenting to that.

The Bill shows that the Government are into a cut-and-run election. They know that the telecoms business, the City, the computing businesses, farms and agri-businesses, haulage businesses and manufacturing businesses are going into a bust. The Government know that many of those firms will shed labour, and that some will go bankrupt: they are suffering very badly.

In all cases, there is a common thread. Yes, there are world conditions; yes, there are currency movements. The common thread, however—the thing that makes it worse here—is the Government's attitude and their action in over-taxing and over-regulating, usually by means of very expensive licensing, artificially restricting the supply of something that a business needs, and then charging the earth to enable that business to obtain it.

It is high time that this Government were well and truly rumbled, and my feeling is that the business community is well and truly rumbling them. Far from calling an end to boom and bust, they are creating boom for some and bust for others at the same time. Far from behaving with respect to Parliament, they are introducing massive new powers to bypass, sideline and spreadeagle Parliament in the wrong direction. Far from giving us any deregulation, they are going to give us more rules, regulations and costs. Far from understanding the deep trouble in which many of our businesses find themselves, they ride on, taxing

and regulating those businesses as if nothing was wrong. I hope that the people will reach the right conclusion on 3 May.

Mr. Leigh: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am slightly concerned about the interpretation that you placed on points that may be raised on Second Reading. I genuinely seek your guidance, for future reference.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman may be seeking my guidance, but it sounds suspiciously as if he is questioning the judgment of the Chair. I can say only that I will judge each speech and each point entirely on its merits.

Mr. Leigh: Of course I am not questioning your judgment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a genuine request for guidance on what we should discuss on Second Reading. I was rather under the impression that, in the case of a wide-ranging Bill with a very open preamble relating to all "burdens affecting persons", Second Reading—as opposed to Report and Committee—was the one occasion when Members could range widely in discussing the principles behind the Bill. I feel that that is an important freedom, which Parliament must retain.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right that the matter of how widely hon. Members may range in their speeches is entirely for the occupant of the Chair. I shall bring them back to order if I think that they are out of order.

6.30 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): The long speech by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) demonstrates the current state of the Conservative party. Conservative Members have raised many issues concerning regulations that they themselves introduced. Many of the issues that they have raised are not properly related to the debate. My neighbour the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) gave the game away when he said, "It is all Europe's fault." Those comments sum up today's Tory party.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, as it is always a pleasure to joust with one's parliamentary neighbour. There are many things that I am content to blame on the institutions of the European Union, but at no stage in any intervention did I say that it was all Europe's fault. The hon. Gentleman really should correct himself.

Mr. White: I am glad to hear that the hon. Gentleman thinks that there is something good in Europe.

I welcome the Bill. The speeches of both the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and the right hon. Member for Wokingham have highlighted the interesting paradox that, although the United Kingdom is one of the least-regulated countries, we are one of the countries that complains most about regulation. The debate has not yet dealt with that paradox. I think that we should judge the Bill on the basis of whether it addresses the issue of what constitutes appropriate regulation. I believe that the Bill does not go far enough. As I shall explain later, I believe that the Bill is not sufficiently radical and only tinkers with current processes.

There is a real problem with the regulation-deregulation debate. We seem to be saying that deregulation is good and regulation is bad. It is reminiscent of the 1980s debate in which it was maintained—depending on one's point of view; Conservative Members maintained the opposite—that the public sector was good and the private sector was bad. I believe that that is a sterile debate, as it ignores the complexity of the modern world and confuses issues of principle with specific bureaucratic policies. The confusion of principle with policy serves no one who is engaged in the regulation-deregulation debate.

Cynics may assume that, in this debate, Conservative Members are playing a game—which is either to do with a post-general election leadership bid or with preventing the Bill from being passed before the next general election. I am not a cynic and I would made no such assumptions. However, I predict that, at the first meeting of the Programming Sub-Committee, there will be a manufactured row designed to demonstrate Conservative Members' outrage about the Bill.

In their speeches so far, Tory Members have gone on about red tape and the burden on business, but not one has identified what he meant by "burden" or "costs" or has defined "regulation".

Mr. Redwood: Did the hon. Gentleman not listen to what I said? I gave a whole series of examples of massive costs—costs of licences and costs of taxes—that should not have been imposed. Will he now address those issues?

Mr. White: The right hon. Gentleman listed various issues and industries, but confused cost issues in those industries with the bureaucracy that deals with those matters. When some of us talk about regulation, we are talking about the costs of bureaucracy. The right hon. Gentleman was addressing issues that have nothing to do with regulation and had to be reminded of that fact on several occasions. The Bill addresses specific regulation issues, not the principle of measures such as the working families tax credit or the working time directive. The right hon. Gentleman was attempting to deal with those matters of principle. I do not think that anyone should have to apologise for saying that working people should have a right to a decent working life and support.

Mr. Hendrick: Does my hon. Friend agree that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) failed to recognise that spectrum, for example, is a finite resource and should not be given away free, willy-nilly, to telecommunications companies? It is in the interests of the Government and the public that we maximise revenue from the sale of spectrum, and thereby help to pay for schools, hospitals and the Government's other priorities, on which they are doing so well. Does my hon. Friend also agree that it is a matter not of whether we should have more regulation or less regulation, but of how we ensure that we have good regulation rather than bad regulation? That is the issue that the Deregulation Committee has been addressing.

Mr. White: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on the latter point—the choice is between good regulation and bad regulation, and I shall give some examples of bad regulation later. As for spectrum, as one who worked in the information technology industry before the general election, I do not think that any of those companies would

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have been prepared to invest such sums if they had not judged that the investment would bring them very high returns. The private companies that the right hon. Member for Wokingham described are not so stupid that they do not judge the market before investing. I do not think that they would be in business for long if they were. The right hon. Gentleman belittled them when he said that they did not make such a judgment.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said that the Tory Government intended to reduce burdens. However, as those of us who were not part of that Government know, the reality was very different. There was extensive regulation. Just recently, Virgin railways has offered half fares to people travelling on the west coast main line. I see the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) nodding; he is probably one of those who has benefited from that offer, which was an excellent initiative. My constituents in Milton Keynes could not take advantage of the Virgin offer because, according to the licences and regulations issued at privatisation, the fare had to be determined by Silverlink, the local operator, which decided not to allow its customers to benefit from its rival's promotion. The Conservative Government introduced that regulation when they were privatising the industry, effectively to create a cartel.

Conservative Members' rhetoric is undermined by the previous Government's actions. They go on as if the Tory Government did nothing but deregulate but in fact that Government introduced various regulations from which people have not benefited.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman has misinterpreted the regulations that applied on privatisation. Just as Virgin was, and is, free to choose the fare that it wishes to charge, so Silverlink is free to decide its fares. The hon. Gentleman has just admitted as much. It is not a matter of regulation. It just so happens that Silverlink, unlike Virgin, has chosen not to make such arrangements. Next year, Silverlink may decide to have an offer, and Virgin may not. That is what competition is all about.

Mr. White: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point. Silverlink does have offers. However, as consumers, my constituents and I are being prevented by regulations introduced by the Conservative Government from choosing Virgin's lower offer. We can take either the lower fare that Silverlink has rightly decided to offer, or Virgin's higher fare, but regulation prevents us from taking Virgin's lower fare. That is the point that I was making. As I said, the Conservative Government added to the regulatory burden. Although Conservative Members try to create the impression that the Conservative party is a great deregulator, such an impression is belied by the facts.

The issue of abattoirs has been mentioned. The previous Government's passage and implementation of over-zealous regulation reduced the number of veterinarians in abattoirs.

Conservatives keep talking about deregulation, but what they actually mean is poorer working conditions, poorer health and safety arrangements, lower pay, and the removal of parts of our disability discrimination legislation. If that is what they mean by deregulation, they will be judged at the general election and found wanting.

When the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) introduced the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, he said that he would try to reduce the number of business licences from the "absurd" number of 265. My understanding is that by 1997 that number had risen to 355, so I do not think that that was a particularly good example for the right hon. Gentleman to use.

The parliamentary procedures have already been mentioned, and I would argue that the deregulation and contracting out procedures under the Bill are much better than the present statutory instrument procedures. I serve on the Select Committee on Deregulation, the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and the Select Committee on Public Administration, so I see the procedures from three different angles. My experience on the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments leads me to believe that the procedures outlined in the Bill will be a much more effective way forward, and will also involve more consultation.

Simply focusing on the number of regulations and the need to deregulate pays no heed to the benefits that regulation can bring to business, and does not consider how regulations work. It does not consider environmental issues, either. I suspect that Conservative Members will complain about environmental regulation. They claim that the Government are not green enough, but we have achieved a lot compared with the Conservative Government. Conservative Members ought to realise that what they say now belies what they did then.

We could play a game of ping-pong about regulation all night, but that would diminish the seriousness of the Bill. As I have said, we are one of the least-regulated countries, and when we do introduce regulations we do not really debate why we are doing it, or to what categories of people and businesses they apply.

Another key aspect that we ignore is how regulations are to be enforced. Far too often, they are designed for administrative convenience, rather than from the point of view of the businesses, individuals or consumer groups that will have to use them. That criticism applies to all parties.

We need to consider the types of burden, and costs are another important element. We also need to think about how people react to regulations and the reorganisation that they require. I can remember having to rewrite computer systems and backdate them, because regulations introduced by the previous Government did not allow time for companies to make the changes.

One of the important benefits of the Bill will be pre-legislative scrutiny, which will allow such issues to be highlighted to the Deregulation Committee or its successor, and to the House. We never talk about the burden of time that regulations impose, either. That is one of the fundamental ways in which we as a Parliament ought to examine legislation.

We also ought to think about who the burdens fall on. They do not impact on the business community alone, although of course that community is important. The burden of regulation also falls on local authorities, education authorities, health authorities and so on. We need a way of ensuring that those burdens can be relieved where appropriate.

We tend to ignore the question of cross-border and multinational regulation, despite the fact that we live in the age of the internet. The Regulation of Investigatory

Powers Act 2000 has already been mentioned, and some of its provisions are already irrelevant, having been superseded because the technology has moved on. Some of us would say that that was a good thing.

That example shows us that in a complex modern world, the way in which we introduce regulations in the House is not necessarily the best way. We need to take a fundamental look at the type of regulation that we should be implementing. We should approach the matter from a 21st-century standpoint, rather than simply carrying on with our present procedures.

One of my criticisms of the Bill is that it perpetuates the way in which Parliament enacts legislation. We should consider light-touch regulation; the Government, to their credit, have done that on a number of occasions. We should set an objective. We should ask what the objective of any particular regulation is, and then set out measures by which we can judge whether that objective has been met.

How people deliver the objective should not be the subject of the regulation; that is one of my fundamental disagreements with the Opposition. I do not think that the Bill goes far enough. We should be able to use the procedures within it to go much further and make legislation more appropriate. We should be able to use codes of practice much more, as that would simplify many of our existing regulations.

Enforcement practices are important, too. The Bill starts to go down the road towards simplifying them—but that should not be something tacked on at the end; it should be set in stone in the consultation procedures. Too often in our regulations, we add on at the end the enforcement procedures and the details of the way in which the regulations will work.

There will be 109 statutory instruments before the Joint Committee tomorrow, yet the Committee will probably spend no more than 20 minutes dealing with them. That is no way to deal with regulations—and before the Tories start crowing and saying how disgraceful that is, I have to add that the same thing happened under the Conservative Administration. What is more, by opposing the Bill, the Tories propose to remove a way in which much regulation could be scrutinised more effectively.

I realise that I shall not persuade the Government to move towards setting objectives and introducing more light-touch regulation today, but they will have to come back to such ideas in due course.

One of the reasons why people in Holland and other countries can sit round and talk about their regulations is that they are understandable. I was going to say that they are written in plain English, but of course they are written in those countries' own language. In some places that could be, and probably is, plain English.

How are people to understand what is required of them? An example that came to my attention a few weeks ago is one sentence in one regulation, which reads as follows:

"In the case of any outstanding request which has been made (in the case of the Gas Act) in accordance with a licence condition imposed under section 7B of that Act either to the Director General or the Secretary of State for a determination of such questions arising under the licence, or under any document specified or described in the licence, as are specified in the licence or are of a description so specified".

I have read out only five of the 15 lines of that sentence, and nobody can understand what they mean. What the provision actually means is, "If the application's already in the pipeline we'll deal with it under the old regulations; if it's a new one, we deal with it under the new regulations." Nobody can understand 15 lines of gobbledegook.

Too often we introduce unnecessary complexity in our legislation. People do not understand the issues because they do not understand the language that the provisions are written in. That is what gives rise to the Opposition's comments about the need for more deregulation, when what we actually need is more understandable regulation.

Mr. Pike: I agree with my hon. Friend's point. Does he agree with me that we often do that just so that the legal profession can make a lot of money determining what the laws we pass mean?

Mr. White: My prejudice against the legal profession is another matter.

We do people a disservice when it comes to understanding and, indeed, implementing regulations. I used to be a systems analyst, and had to interpret the previous Government's legislation. I once programmed changes to a computer system, having got the regulation back to front, simply because I did not understand that a "not" was in the wrong place. I had programmed the system according to what I had read and believed was right, when it should have been the exact opposite. That could have cost my company a lot of money; luckily, the mistake was spotted before the system went live. Such complexity does the country a disservice.

Simply to talk about the deregulation, as the Tories do, is not to address the issue. That is why the better regulation taskforce is such a good initiative, as is the Small Business Service, which looks at regulations. It is not only small businesses that should be looking at them, however; public bodies, trade unions, voluntary groups and the community as a whole should all be asking what regulations are trying to achieve.

I regret the concession given to the Conservatives in the House of Lords, which made the first objective, deregulation, the primary objective of the Bill, when in fact there are places where we could change the nature of the regulatory burden, helping to simplify the legislation and ensure better understanding of it. That is where I fundamentally disagree with the Opposition.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting argument, but I think that he is missing the point. The comparison with continental systems is essentially to do with the nature of those countries' legal systems. For simple, purposive legislation and regulation of the kind that the hon. Gentleman is looking for, one needs a wholly different legal construction. In the United Kingdom, we are essentially free to do what we like unless the law specifically provides that we shall not, so deregulation is of the essence in achieving a reduced regulatory burden in this country. Under the codes systems in European countries, people are not able to do things unless the code allows them to, so the purposive form of codes often makes it easier to have regulations in that form.

Mr. White: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about Europe, but I was not arguing from a European perspective. I was arguing for what I believe is right for this country. The way in which we enact laws acts against

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the interests of ordinary citizens. We have been described as dotting every i and crossing every t, which causes many problems that we could do without. I am not arguing for deregulation. I am saying that the achievement of regulation should be viewed differently in relation to its objectives. We need to separate those two points in a more transparent way than we have in the past.

Our parliamentary process should also change. I do not think that we have the best system of parliamentary scrutiny of regulation. The Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments has a very good Clerk and very good legal support, which its members find tremendously helpful. However, I do not think that the Committee's work represents the best scrutiny of regulations. We have not used the Select Committee on Deregulation and the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in the other place in the most effective way. I do not see the point of many of the statutory instrument committees; there is a lot of talk but not many changes. The system for holding Ministers to account regarding regulations should change.

The Bill deals with preliminary consultation, but a lot more could be done. The Deregulation Committee should do a lot more proactive work, and I think that the proposed changes to its Standing Orders will allow that to happen.

Removing politically controversial regulations will diminish the role of the Bill. There is so much more that the Bill could do. The successful measures in the 1994 Act would, along with these provisions, enable us to go a lot further and deal with issues such as deferred voting.

A number of changes were made to the Bill in the Lords. It is typical that the Conservatives agreed those changes in the other place and then oppose them here; I suppose that that sums up the modern Tory party. The original four objectives are now one objective and three aspirations. It is important to recognise the change in clause 1(3). It undermines everything that the Conservative party has said, because it makes deregulation the key part of any proposal. I regret it, but in terms of reaching a consensus, it is probably the best way. It is a major step forward, but there will still be anomalies, inconsistencies and inappropriate legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) made a number of points that I was going to make about subordinate provision and the changes that have been made. I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office has committed himself to reviewing the Bill. I would like to see it reviewed annually. I hope that in his winding-up speech my hon. Friend will give the commitment that Parliament will review the legislation on a regular basis and that when there is an adverse report from the Committee, the current convention that it should not proceed will continue.

This timely Bill will take us a step forward. However, we should be looking for much more radical reform. We need appropriate regulations, appropriate processes and an open and understandable regulatory system. People need to be able to understand the laws of this country, what the burden of regulation is and why they have to comply.

6.58 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I think that the Bill is designed for a general election: it is not designed ever to become law. This is a Bill in the subjunctive—for example, clause 9(1)(b) refers to "ought". However, the best bit is in the explanatory notes:

> "A number of potential reforms could be brought forward . . . The following proposals might be capable . . . Full details of the proposals have yet to be developed . . . "

If ever there was an example of spin and no substance, this is it.

Talking about spin, we have heard that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is the 10p up, 1p down Chancellor. The Minister for the Cabinet Office said that the Bill will *ensure that £40 million is returned* to businesses. That makes her "£10,000 million up, £40 million back" Mo. We have already heard from the British Chambers of Commerce that some £10 billion of extra burdens have been placed on business. Although I would welcome just £1 back, when one considers that £40 million in the context of £10 billion, one gets an idea of the size of the problem that we face. I remind the House that the £10 billion of burdens have been imposed on businesses by this Government since 1997.

I began by mentioning spin, and I want to ensure that the Government do not try to spin my speech to make it sound as if I said that we should abolish the national minimum wage. I make it plain, as I have in the past, that I have never personally opposed a minimum wage. However, as the Minister for the Cabinet Office said, it must be set at a balanced rate. She said in her opening speech that at the last election the Conservative party claimed that the minimum wage would create 1 million unemployed. That was based on the rate of £5 an hour which the Labour party was talking about at the time. As it is, the Government initially set the rate at £3.20 an hour, and it is now about £3.70 an hour, which is very different from the figure on which we based our unemployment predictions.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend rightly referred to the British Chambers of Commerce. The last publication of its burdens barometer showed that the total cost of additional burdens had reached £9.62 billion. It made it clear that that did not include the recurring cost of the national minimum wage, so the consequent increase in wages as distinct from the administrative cost was left out.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, which is directly concerned with the nature of the Bill. Members of all parties are concerned about the impact that the minimum wage may have on the national health service. We must recognise that while all working people deserve a decent basic minimum wage, the rate at which it is set will affect the rates of those higher up the scale—those are the famous differentials that we heard so much about in the 1980s and 1990s. A change to the minimum wage affects workers all the way up the scale, and unless there is a consequential increase in the money given to the NHS, there will be insufficient funding for hospitals and all the other services that people need.

Marjorie Mowlam: I repeat that the figure used by the hon. Gentleman adds the administrative costs of regulation to the cost of the policies themselves. The cost

of the minimum wage and the working families tax credit combined means that the figure is enormous, but the real regulatory burden is much smaller.

Mr. Fabricant: I do not believe that that is correct. We questioned the British Chambers of Commerce on that very issue, and it disagreed with the Government's assumption. It argued that the total consists of direct costs imposed on its members. When we questioned the organisation further, it said, "Hang on a minute. We're the ones who did the calculation and we based it directly on additional costs." I note that the right hon. Lady is indicating dissent. I accept what she has said, but I hope that she will accept what I am saying when I simply report that the British Chambers of Commerce, which produced the document and did the calculation, says that the Government are wrong. Those burdens have indeed been placed on its members.

I would add that those members are the very companies that employ a majority of people in the United Kingdom. Many of them are manufacturing companies, so should we be surprised that jobs have been lost? The world economy is expanding and Britain, on the whole, is enjoying a healthy economic climate, not because of actions taken by the Government but because the United States economy is so strong. We have the largest overseas direct investment in the United States, and vice versa. When the United States catches a cold, we sneeze, and vice versa. The economy is doing reasonably well at the moment, except in manufacturing. Unlike the United States, or even Germany, the United Kingdom has lost 300,000 jobs because of administrative burdens. *[Interruption.]* I think that my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) wants to intervene.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I thought that I had no prospect of interrupting his flow, because he was being so eloquent. I want to make it perfectly clear that the British Chambers of Commerce burdens barometer includes in its gross estimate of £10 billion both a figure for one-off administrative costs for the introduction of the national minimum wage and recurring administrative costs at an average of the various compliance cost assessment figures that have been produced. The organisation expressly states that the total of £674 million for the cost of the national minimum wage does not include the £2.4 billion estimate for additional wage costs and the maintenance of wage differentials consequent on the policy itself, as distinct from its implementation and administration.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I refer him and, more importantly, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, to www.britishchambers.org.uk/cutredtape/burdensbarometer.htm, where the right hon. Lady can read those facts for herself. Her Department is trying very hard, but largely failing, to achieve the good aim of introducing the internet to Departments. Assuming that she is on the internet, she might care to look at the site and read for herself the point that my hon. Friend has made.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I am only too happy to give way to my old sparring partner. I owe him that, as he voted for me to be joint chairman of the all-party internet group.

Mr. Stewart: I was frightened lest I referred to the hon. Gentleman as my hon. Friend. He has gone on at length about the British Chambers of Commerce and the so-called burdens imposed by the minimum wage regulations. How does he reconcile that view with the statement made by the Institute of Directors earlier this month? It said:

"In the past we have expressed some concerns about earlier drafts of the Bill. However, following the amendments made in the Lords, I can assure you that we regard this as a good Bill. If it is used to its full potential it should make a noticeable difference in the Red Tape burden."

Mr. Fabricant: I shall not refer to the hon. Gentleman as my hon. Friend, but I thank him for his intervention. The Institute of Directors was concerned about what might be in the Bill, but if he wants to trade reactions to the Bill, I am only too happy to do so. I can tell him that the CBI is not so confident about the Bill. Its president, Digby Jones—a name to conjure with—said that

"it will not ease concern about the relentless build up of new regulations".

The British Chambers of Commerce said that it is

"concerned that the benefits of this measure will be completely overshadowed by government plans to introduce further layers of employment regulation".

That regulation has created 300,000 job losses when, as I said, other countries, including the United States and Germany, are doing so well.

Mr. Bercow: I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that it was singularly inept of the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) to intervene to invoke the alleged support of the Institute of Directors, in view of the fact, of which I hope my hon. Friend is aware, that its head of policy, Ruth Lea, is on record as saying:

"This Government has no idea what it is like to run a business. Business is facing one regulation after another. There is no respite."

Is that not game, set and match?

Mr. Fabricant: Game, set and match indeed. My hon. Friend is right; were he playing at Wimbledon, he would be holding the silver chalice high.

Mr. Ian Stewart *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: I give way to the hon. Gentleman once more, although I want to move on. I do not want to monopolise the debate.

Mr. Stewart: The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) talked about balance. Let me bring Conservative Members up to date with the CBI view. Mr. Digby Jones said:

"It would be worthwhile reiterating CBI support for the Regulatory Reform Bill at this stage. We believe that the Bill has the potential of providing the tools that could deliver real benefits to business by cutting unnecessary red tape".

It would have been illogical of Mr. Jones to make such a statement before making the one referred to by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant).

Mr. Fabricant: We could spend all evening trading remarks about the Bill made by various people. The Conservative party does not oppose the principle of

[Mr. Fabricant]

deregulation. Indeed, although I cannot possibly tell, I imagine that we shall not vote against Second Reading. However, I make it clear to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), the Government Whip, who is reaching for his pager to send a message to the Government Chief Whip, that I am merely speculating. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) reminds me from the Front Bench that we have a three-line Whip for 10 o'clock. We shall certainly vote for our reasoned amendment: although the principle of the Bill and any reduction in regulation where that is not dangerous to employees and where it does not create an uncontrolled free-for-all are to be welcomed, we are not sure that the measure will improve legislation considered by the House or reduce the burden of legislation.

In an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire, I pointed out that the Bill contains considerable weaknesses. One is that it will reduce the scrutiny of legislation by the House. I asked my hon. Friend whether it would have done anything to prevent £628 million of taxpayers' money from being spent on the Prime Minister's folly—the millennium dome. The answer is no. Will it do anything to reduce the £4 billion a year that is lost in benefit fraud? The answer is no. Will it do anything to reduce Government administration costs, which have gone up to £15.3 billion? That is £1.8 billion more than in the last year of Conservative government. Once again, the answer is no. The real fear is that it will further enable the Government to rubber-stamp legislation and whip through the House of Commons measures that would otherwise be scrutinised.

Mr. White: The hon. Gentleman suggests that the Government will be able to whip legislation through the House. How will they be able to do that, given that consultation will be built into Deregulation Committee procedures? He also suggests that everything can be covered by the Bill. Surely that is not the case, as some matters are outside its remit. I would be interested in his comments on both issues.

Mr. Fabricant: The whole point is that everything cannot go into the Bill; I wish it could. Those matters that involve burdens as defined by the Bill can be dealt with, though I do not think that it will be enacted, as this cut-and-run Government will clearly announce a general election in the middle of a national crisis. The definition of burden is another loose provision. The Bill is subjunctive—it is all ought and might, not will and shall be.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I appreciate that my hon. Friend has read the legislation in great detail, so I put to him an example from Italy. To relieve burdens, industrial concerns employing fewer than 15 people and agricultural concerns employing fewer than five are automatically exempt from much of the onerous employment legislation that causes them great difficulty there. Does he agree that the Government would emulate the Italians if they were serious about helping small firms?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is right. There are exemptions in the Bill, but only some, and they are for small businesses employing fewer than 20 people. However, in this day and age a firm employing 20 is not necessarily small.

I am one of the few Members of the House who did a real job before being elected.

Mrs. Gorman: Me, too.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is another, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), who is on the Front Bench.

In 1979, I set up a broadcast electronics and radio station financing company with a partner. The company was small for some time, but in 1991 we were fortunate enough to sell to an American corporation, which gave me the ability to be a Member of Parliament without outside interests. The company had grown and it employed more than 600, but there were fewer than 10 for a long time, let alone fewer than 20. I shall tell you something, Mr. Deputy Speaker: had I started my company after the election of the Labour Government in 1997, it would not have employed five people, because it would have gone bust because of the regulatory burden that we now face.

Sadly, the Bill will not be able to stop the Government accepting and gold-plating European Union regulations. I shall give an example of a measure that destroyed a business in my constituency, and I ask hon. Members on both sides of the House not to break into grins when I mention the company's name. Every time I refer to it in the House, which is not often, Members start laughing—even though this is a serious matter and several hundred jobs were lost. The village of Armitage, which is in my constituency, is famous because Mr. Shanks was based there. *[Interruption.]* It has started already—my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is smiling.

Armitage Shanks is one of the largest manufacturers of toiletware in the world, or it was. For many, many years, the Conservative Government resisted a European directive that changed the definition of the mechanics by which toilets are flushed. Until recently, this country used a siphonic system. When the chain is pulled or the lever is pushed, a vacuum is created and the toilet cannot leak. However, every year in France, leaky toilets lead to the waste of 500 million gallons of water, as they use a flat-valve system which corrodes after a while. As we see in France, Germany and elsewhere, water trickles out of toilets constantly, but that system was illegal in the United Kingdom because it wastes water.

Here is the irony that should have been addressed by the Bill, but which will not be because of its drafting. In 1997, the first year under Labour, the Government went on the attack, telling the private water companies, "Every year, 100 million gallons of water are wasted through leaky pipes." They were right, although similar amounts are wasted in other countries, and it seemed like fair play to attack privatised companies such as Severn Trent Water and Thames Water.

What did the Government do at the same time? They introduced legislation that put several hundred people at Armitage Shanks out of work. Cheaper toilets from Italy and France will be allowed into this country. When they are introduced, they will leak, which will result in 500 million gallons of water being wasted every year—that is a French Government figure. Where is the logic in that process?

One of my criticisms is that the Bill will do nothing about gold-plating and over-regulating legislation. Indeed, it will do nothing whatever to control the Government's obsession with appeasing Brussels and accepting any measure that emerges from there.

Mrs. Gorman: My hon. Friend will be aware that the flush toilet system that he is talking about was invented by one of our own early pioneers—Mr. Thomas Crapper; his invention set that industry going. Does my hon. Friend think that, in the present climate—of regulatory organisations and legislation on employment, health and safety and the rest—people such as Mr. Crapper, with his excellent invention, would ever have got off the ground?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is right. Although I do not want to be out of order, I want to make one point about her comments before I move on, especially for our many American viewers—we are watched not only on the Parliamentary Channel but on C-Span in the United States. The first managing director of Armitage Shanks was Mr. John, who went over to New York to sell the British system. That is how they came by the slang name "john" for what we call the "loo"—it is not realised that that too came from the small town of Armitage—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Fascinating though that may be, I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman returned to the contents of the Bill.

Mr. Fabricant: I was about to do just that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank you for your patience while I made those points.

The problem with the Bill is that it makes no real difference to the increased burdens that have been put on businesses. There is a backdrop of anger in the business sector as a result of all the red tape that has come from the Labour Government.

In another place, Lord Falconer said that the Bill

"facilitates reducing the burden of regulation."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 December 2000; Vol. 620, c. 850.]

However, that remark is as reliable as his comments about the viability of the millennium dome, or indeed as reliable as the Prime Minister's remark that the dome and its success would be the first paragraph of Labour's next general election manifesto. We look forward to reading that manifesto—especially its first paragraph.

In fact, the Bill can do nothing to reverse the heavy regulatory burden that has already been imposed by the Government. They have no plans to repeal any of the key burdens that they have introduced so far—on pay roll, the social chapter or fairness at work. Neither I nor my Front-Bench colleagues are arguing for repeal of all the burdens costing £9.62 million listed by the BCC—far from it. However, there is a point at which the straw breaks the camel's back; we reached it two or three years ago. The Bill would be more welcome if it actually achieved something—but it will not.

The Government have wasted billions. I have already mentioned the millennium dome. There are many more examples of pet projects and spin that ought to—but will not—be controlled by the measure. For example, this year alone, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is spending £1,852,896 on opinion poll research and focus groups. Actually, I have unwittingly told the House an untruth. I said the DETR was spending that money—but it is our money. Taxpayers' money is being spent on opinion poll research and focus groups. The Government are spending our money—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is not talking about matters that come under the heading of regulation or of the Bill. I should be grateful if he did just that.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall not go through the long list of issues that should be covered by the Bill, because you are right. Ironically, if the Bill were all-encompassing, I could list those issues and could congratulate the Government on the fact that they would be covered by the measure. The great flaw of the Bill is that it is one gigantic loophole. This thin Bill is inadequate; it has merely 11 pages and does not encompass the issues that should be covered.

The hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) mentioned the support of the CBI, yet that organisation identified the fact that since the Government were elected in 1997, they have issued 3,000 new regulations that impinge on businesses. The CBI pointed out that every day 10 new regulations affect businesses and that that has destroyed 300,000 manufacturing jobs. It stated that additional costs of £23 billion have been imposed on manufacturing by the Government since they were elected in 1997.

Mr. Ian Stewart: The hon. Gentleman clearly will not want for matters to raise in future. He recites a range of statistics on the volume of regulation since 1997. I am not sure of the exact statistics, but is he aware that the volume of regulation since 1997 is little different from the volume under the previous Government?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman is wrong—he is reading his Labour party brief. However, he is right to point out that the volume is similar to that introduced under the previous Conservative Government, but they were in power for 18 years. I am grateful that he makes that point, because we can be clear about the fact that the Government have had at least one achievement: in just four years, they have introduced the same amount of regulation—burdens on business—as Conservative Administrations introduced during 18 years. As I said earlier, not only do the Government constantly invent their own burdens for business, they gold-plate directives from Europe. They accede to Europe—far from being at the heart of Europe, they are the appeaser of Europe. They agree to provisions that benefit French and German businesses at the expense of British businesses.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend alludes to regulations from Europe. Did not the previous Conservative Administration actually make strenuous efforts to slow or stem the flow of regulation from Brussels? Indeed, through the opt-out from the social chapter, we put in place one of the most critical impediments to over-regulation. By removing that opt-out, the Labour Government have opened the floodgates and have ensured that an increasing torrent of regulation will come into the United Kingdom. We shall have no say in whether we either accept or implement it.

Mr. Fabricant: In his typically calm way, my hon. Friend hits on the heart of the matter. Not only has that

[Mr. Fabricant]

surrender to Europe on social legislation meant that we have had to suffer burdens during the past three or four years, but it is a blank cheque for the future. During the next few years, a whole tranche of regulation will be directed at us; we shall have no right of veto over it. Sometimes I wonder why I stand up in this Parliament when it is becoming—at least in this area of activity—a county council to the European Parliament; indeed, not even to the European Parliament, but to the Council of Ministers, who are unelected.

Mr. Hendrick: As someone who has served in the European Parliament, I point out that it introduces legislation that wipes out thousands of regulations throughout the EU—resulting overall in a net reduction in legislation in the 15 member states. Furthermore, I note that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said that with regard to regulation

"as a Minister under the previous Government . . . We would be the first to say that we did not do very well".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 250.]

May I ask—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman might not ask—two bites at the cherry are enough.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman raises two issues. I am glad, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you did not allow him to make four or five points. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). Some 3,000 regulations in 18 years represents far too much regulation, but we must control any regulation that hinders employment. Although we want regulations that ensure that people are cared for and protected at work, including the minimum wage, it is no good if those regulations prevent people from being employed in the first place. After all, did not a famous man once say, "You can't make a poor man rich by making a rich man poor"? Can any hon. Member tell me who said that? Abraham Lincoln said it.

Mr. Hendrick: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the previous Government introduced 3,367 regulations in 1995, 3,291 in 1996, and 3,199 in 1997?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman can quote as much as he likes from his Labour party brief. I agree with him that there is too much legislation that burdens business. That is why Conservative Members support the principle of the Bill. However, we oppose the Bill itself because it is a sham. The hon. Gentleman knows that we shall have a general election on 3 May, unless there is a major increase in the rate of foot and mouth infection. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the county council elections will take place then, which is simply code for there being a general election on 3 May. So let us not kid ourselves—the Bill cannot become law unless, God forbid, the rate of infection of foot and mouth disease becomes far worse, in which case even this Prime Minister would have to accept that the general election should be postponed.

I welcome any legislation that will get the balance right, but the Government have nothing of which to be proud. I make that point again because it must sink into the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick), who, all the time that I am speaking, reads his Labour party brief. I remind him that the United States and Europe have enjoyed a very healthy economic climate and that the Government have enjoyed the good fortune of inheriting that legacy and also that of the previous Conservative Government. *[Interruption.]* The Minister for the Cabinet Office laughs, but I remind her that the rate of growth in the economy has been increasing constantly—boom and boom—since 1993. It has slowed down only since 1997, but, because of the success of the Labour party's spin, she believes her own party's lies.

It is untrue to say that economic growth and good fortune have happened only since 1997. There has been continued growth since 1993, but it has slowed down since 1997, and it has done so in manufacturing, where, uniquely among the G7 countries, we have lost 300,000 jobs through European legislation and the sheer volume of expensive legislative burdens introduced by this Government.

Mrs. Gorman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I shall make another point before giving way to my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Preston lists the number of regulations introduced by the Conservative Government during the past 18 years, but he does not list the cost of those burdens on business. I should prefer 10,000 regulations that cost my company £1 than one regulation that cost it £20,000. He is singularly silent and looks into the middle distance.

Mr. Hendrick *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: I have challenged him, so I shall give way.

Mr. Hendrick: The hon. Gentleman says that he agrees with the minimum wage, but he obviously does not because he calls it a burden on, not a benefit to, the workers. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that crocodile tears are shed over the figures quoted? Does he also accept that the figures from the Institute of Directors differ greatly from those given by the chambers of commerce?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham has already eloquently told us what Ruth Lea, director of research and policy at the Institute of Directors, has said, so I need not repeat it. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on asking two or three questions where another colleague would merely ask one, but he did not answer my challenge and say what was the cost to business of Conservative legislation and burdens on business. All he did was quote the number of regulations. That is a key point.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I promised to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman).

Mrs. Gorman: Is my hon. Friend aware that the local schools in my constituency are unable to undertake the

repairs now available to them under Government funds for education because of the dearth of small building firms? When I investigated the problem, I found that the Health and Safety Executive now demands contracts that measure something like an inch thick and specify the safety requirements for each individual at every point in a job. The business man—who is a small builder, not a form filler—has to complete a form for each employee at every point in the job. All that legislation has been introduced under the HSE, and it is making it impossible for people to repair schools and hospitals in my constituency.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The Minister for the Cabinet Office said in her introduction that it is important to achieve a balance. That was echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), but no hon. Member, least of all my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay, would argue for the repeal of health and safety legislation. There needs to be protection for employees. Similarly, I do not oppose the minimum wage. I shed no crocodile tears, as the hon. Member for Preston put it, but the balance must be right.

Many Labour Members, especially those who sit below the Gangway, were very disappointed when the minimum wage was set at £3.20—I believe that it is now £3.70—given that before the election the Labour party promised to set it at least at £5 an hour. The hon. Member for Preston shakes his head, but if he were to look at the documents that his party produced, he would see that they clearly stated that the minimum wage would be between £5 and £5.50 an hour. I am being generous to the Labour party by using the £5 figure. Nevertheless, the Government were right not to set the minimum wage at £5 an hour. If they had done so, our predictions of 1 million unemployed would have come true.

Is it not appalling that the Minister for the Cabinet Office twists that argument? She said that we were wrong to argue against the minimum wage and suggest that it would create 1 million unemployed people, but it has not done so because the Government showed some sense of reality when they came to office and set the minimum wage at a more reasonable rate. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham is right to say that there must be a balance and that we must ensure that legislation is not so burdensome as to mean that no one is employed at all because firms go out of business.

Mrs. Gorman: Is my hon. Friend aware that the care homes industry, which is very extensive, has said that care homes will have to be closed because the minimum wage has increased, but there has been no increase in the payments that they receive for taking care of elderly people? The elderly people will be shunted around like packages, looking for somewhere that can squeeze enough care from the system. This Government will be responsible for that problem.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which involves not just the minimum wage. The Minister for the Cabinet Office will know that in every constituency—Labour as well as Conservative—private care homes are closing because a minimum bedroom size has been specified. That has meant that homes that previously accommodated 20 people will have to be altered at high cost and may be able to accommodate only 15 people.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I shall give way in a moment.

If the minimum specification means that a firm goes out of business or has to increase its rates so much that people cannot afford to keep their elderly parents there, will the Government be proud of that? I hope that the hon. Member for Eccles has a helpful suggestion.

Mr. Stewart: The hon. Gentleman's information is plain wrong. The regulations to which he refers will not, in the main, come into force until 2002, and some of them will come in even later. He cannot possibly argue that they are causing economic problems for companies.

Mr. Fabricant: I said that companies are having to close—and they are. I challenge the hon. Gentleman: if this debate is being watched in Eccles on the Parliament Channel, I bet you anything you like, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not the correct parliamentary language. It is not appropriate to refer to people outside the Chamber who might be watching the debate.

Mr. Fabricant: You are right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but probably no one is watching us.

Firms are having to make decisions now about what will come into force in 2002. I remind the hon. Member for Eccles that we are already in 2001, so we are talking about next year.

The hon. Gentleman has a long and respected background in the trade union movement, but I was in business and I know that businesses have to plan more than a year ahead. If I owned a care home and I could see a brick wall less than 12 months ahead of me that meant that my firm would go bust unless I did something now, I would have to do something now. Therefore, the regulations are causing problems. I declare an interest: I have a 90-year-old mum, so I am very conscious of this issue.

I had hoped that I could have said that I support the Bill unequivocally. Unfortunately, I cannot say that because it is such a loose Bill. We have witnessed an admission from the Minister for the Cabinet Office that has identified her as the £10 billion up, £40 million back Mo, but I suppose that is a little bit nicer than the 10p up, 1p down Chancellor.

European Union regulations, which have so damaged legislation in this country, have already affected many industries, creating 300,000 unemployed.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman three times, but he never asks a short question. He always asks two, three or four questions in one, so I will not give way. I am reaching the end of my speech because other hon. Members on both sides wish to speak.

[Mr. Fabricant]

Instead of making faces at me, I hope that he will catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and make his own useful contribution.

Mrs. Gorman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Fabricant: No, I will not give way because I am concluding my speech.

The Bill is condemned by virtue of the fact that it is ineffectual. I repeat one more time that the CBI has said that 3,000 new regulations have been introduced since the Government came into office and the British Chambers of Commerce has identified £9.62 billion worth of legislation that is damaging business. The real proof of the pudding is that, since the Government into power at a time of world economic prosperity, we have lost 300,000 jobs in manufacturing. If the Government are re-elected, the sad thing is that many more than 300,000 jobs will be lost over the next few years.

7.44 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). I am sure that my contribution will not be as exciting as the one that we have just heard.

It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman made comments similar to those of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). They both talked about a cut-and-run Government, but I was interested by the final comments of the hon. Gentleman. It is not a question of if another Labour Government will be returned, but merely of when. The contribution of the right hon. Member for Wokingham was perhaps nothing more than a pre-emptive strike in a leadership bid.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak because I recognise the Bill's importance for two reasons. First, like some of the other hon. Members who have spoken, I am a member of the Deregulation Committee—albeit for just over a year. The general consensus on the Committee is that this Bill has been needed for a considerable time to simplify the current system. Secondly, I represent a rural constituency that is like many others in that it is dependent on small and medium-sized businesses. That fact has come into sharp focus in the past couple of weeks because of the foot and mouth outbreak. My area has been badly affected and we have seen the impact on the local economy. Therefore, it is right that we should try to remove the burdens on small and medium-sized businesses.

A lot has been achieved in my area thanks to the work of Scottish Enterprise Dumfries and Galloway, which has done much to sustain small businesses over many years. That success can easily be measured by the survival period of many new businesses.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman rightly said that the burden of regulation should be lifted from businesses in his and many other constituencies. Does he believe that the burden on small businesses in his constituency has become greater or less during the four years that the Government have been in office?

Mr. Brown: I have spoken to many businesses, and I would say that the burden is less. My constituency can tell a success story and that is reflected in the survival period for small businesses.

Mr. Hendrick: Does not the Conservative party wish to introduce privatisation arrangements for the industrial injuries compensation benefit? That would add considerably to the costs of small businesses and industry in general, because they and not the Government would be asked to stump up the money for the cost of those arrangements.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right and makes an important point.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office noted earlier, when Lord Falconer opened the Second Reading debate in the Lords, he said:

"The Bill will provide a major tool for this and future governments to reform entire regulatory regimes and to tackle unnecessary, overlapping, over-complex and over-burdensome legislation."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 December 2000; Vol. 620, c. 850.]

That is one of the Bill's key aspects. It is part of the Government's drive to reform outdated, overlapping and over-burdensome regulations on businesses and the public sector. The Bill will enable whole regulatory regimes to be reformed using a tried and tested parliamentary procedure, and that will result in clearer legislation, better targeted regulation and a climate that encourages thriving business while providing proper protection for people at work, consumers and the environment.

Mrs. Gorman: On protection at work, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that all small firms—in fact, anyone who employs anybody—have to have public liability insurance that covers people against injury at work. A small firm could not legally exist without such insurance.

Mr. Brown: That is right, but we need to consider business and the people whom business employs. Clearly, there is an onus on us all to protect employees. I am sure that the hon. Lady employs staff and that she does her utmost through her insurance to protect them. However, that is not an additional burden that has been put on business by this Government.

Mr. Ian Stewart: In response to the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), my hon. Friend may have implied that insurance prevents accidents from happening, but it does not. Good regulation and good working practices—employers and employees working together and following safe practice—are what stop accidents.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is correct.

Mr. Pike: Is it not the simple fact that without regulation, many companies would not have insurance and would have to be taken to court in pursuit of a claim? It is those regulations that benefit the worker.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. He has years of experience and I am sure that he has had to tackle cases of employers who flaunt and break the law.

The Bill is at the core of the Government's regulatory regime. It will allow them to tackle problems caused by existing regulations. Such measures can cause problems. Fire safety legislation is scattered across 120 Acts of Parliament, which makes it difficult for companies to be sure that they are complying properly with the rules. As someone who comes from an industrial background and who worked for 23 years in the chemical industry—18 of those in the explosives industry—I can say from experience that fire safety regulation is a minefield. It is extremely difficult to understand, even by major employers. Many small and medium-sized businesses find it hard to follow. If we only simplify fire safety regulations, that will be a major step forward for many businesses.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and interesting point. Does he agree that there needs to be consistency between fire brigades? I see him shake his head. Does he not think that it is confusing to have a national organisation with several branches throughout the United Kingdom? Surely it would be helpful to have a consistent standard throughout the country, or at least in England and Wales, because fire brigades interpret legislation differently.

Mr. Brown: That is not what I am saying. I am concerned about 120 Acts of Parliament, not about fire and safety regulations as followed by fire and safety crews in different fire authorities.

The Bill could be used to simplify and consolidate rules by means of powerful secondary legislation. Pressure on parliamentary time means that such worthwhile reforms might not be tackled. Hon. Members voiced concern about such pressure in the run-up to a general election.

The Bill will also give Ministers the power to introduce a code of practice for enforcers if they believe that there is a problem of overzealous enforcement. The code of practice would be taken into account at subsequent hearings, although it would not be binding. The Government have had considerable success in getting local authorities to sign up to their enforcement concordat. The additional power will enable them to intervene to give added protection to business if enforcers are failing to adhere to best practice.

On the more general issue of regulatory policy, the Government have a wide range of measures in place to ensure that regulations meet the five fundamental principles of good regulation as set out by the better regulation taskforce. They are transparency, accountability, proportionality, consistency and the need for targeted regulation. Since 1998, no regulatory proposal with an impact on businesses, charities or voluntary organisations should be considered by the Government without a thorough assessment of the risks, costs and benefits, a clear analysis of who will be affected and an explanation of why non-regulatory action is insufficient. The regulatory impact assessments are usually published for consultation at an early stage so that interested parties can comment, suggest improvements and make corrections.

The Government have been accused of being more willing to add to the burden of regulation than previous Administrations. We have heard that loud and clear. In fact, the number of statutory instruments is of the same order of magnitude under this Government as it was under the previous Administration, ranging from 3,367 in 1995 to 3,475 in 1999. The vast majority of statutory instruments have no impact on business. The separate process of regulatory impact assessments is used to consider burdens that are imposed by regulation. The number of the assessments that show significant costs on business ranges from 180 in 1995 to 166 in 1999.

Mr. Fabricant: Although I said that we do not want too many regulations because of the amount of paperwork that they create, it is their cost that is important. The hon. Gentleman referred to the number of regulations that have been introduced. What did they cost business?

Mr. Brown: I have to admit that I cannot answer that. However, I am making the point, as did as my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick), that the statement that there were 3,000 additional regulations over 18 years was way off the mark. There were 3,000 a year in the past three or four years of the previous Government.

Mr. Hendrick: Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) has not said how much his Government's regulations cost business. It is bizarre of him to expect us to give such a figure when he will not.

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. He is right. I apologise to the hon. Member for Lichfield for not furnishing him with the figures, but I shall be happy to give way if he has them.

Mr. Fabricant: I was simply going to respond to the point raised by the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick). Conservative legislation cost a lot less than legislation introduced by this Government because we did not lose so many jobs at a time of boom.

Mr. Brown: No doubt we shall all rush to the Library to check that statement.

We have to consider the Government's approach to regulation. They continue to strengthen systems for controlling red tape. We have established a new ministerial panel to hold Departments to account for their regulatory performance. We have heard again about the creation of the Small Business Service to ensure that the voice of small business is heard throughout Whitehall. A Minister for regulatory reform has been appointed in each Department to advance the better regulation agenda throughout Government. We have established a central unit in the Cabinet Office—the regulatory impact unit—to ensure that new regulations are necessary and meet the principles of good regulation. We have revised guidance on regulatory impact assessments, which was issued in August 2000. New regulatory proposals must satisfy the criterion of benefits justifying the cost. That is vital.

The independent better regulatory taskforce has been appointed to advise the Government on improving the quality of regulation, taking into account the needs of small businesses and ordinary people.

Mrs. Gorman: I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman genuinely wants to help the small business sector. However, the Conservative Administration established similar organisations, such as the group on small business

[Mrs. Gorman]

deregulation, and they simply do not work. We have to take small firms out of regulation and trust them. By covering themselves with insurance, should anything sadly happen to an employee or even to the firm's proprietor, they are at least protected. That is about the best we can do if we are to encourage enterprise and small firms to start up.

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for acknowledging that I want something to be done. All Labour Members want that. However, I am not convinced that the measure at which she hints would set everything right. What we want is regulation that is not burdensome, not to sweep away regulation altogether, as she implies is desirable.

The hon. Member for Lichfield and I might remain at loggerheads over the cost of regulation. Many wild estimates have been made of the current costs of regulation and its impact on business, ranging from £5 billion by the Institute of Directors to as much as £12 billion by the British Chambers of Commerce. Clearly, both cannot be correct, and I would argue that neither is. The figures confuse the cost of the policy itself—for example, money paid out in the form of the national minimum wage—with the cost of administering the policy, by keeping records, filling in forms and so on. True administration costs—red tape—comprise but a tiny fraction of those sums.

As one who represents an area that has had extremely low pay, I am not prepared to apologise for introducing the national minimum wage. I served on the Committee that scrutinised the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. I do not know what the general election holds for me, but even if I leave Parliament as a result of it and do nothing else in life, I shall be able to hold my head up and say that I served as a member of a party that introduced the national minimum wage in this country. I am proud of that measure, from which the people of my constituency have benefited greatly.

We make no apology for improving maternity leave, introducing paternity leave, giving millions of employees for the first time the right to paid holidays, or tackling discrimination against the disabled. Those measures also protect good employers—a point that we must always bear in mind. The overwhelming majority of employers are good employers, and our actions must be about protecting them against unfair competition from the unscrupulous few. When introducing those measures, the Government listened to the views of business and made changes to the working time regulations and the national minimum wage to meet concerns and reduce the administrative burden. I believe that the Government will continue to listen.

Millions of people have benefited from those measures. About 1.5 million workers are now entitled to higher pay as a direct result of the introduction of the national minimum wage; of those, about two thirds are women. The business community now accepts the national minimum wage, and the recent announcement of an increase to £4.10 will be applauded by those who have already benefited from it. Under the working time regulations, 3.1 million workers have for the first time ever the right to paid annual leave. New maternity rights mean that 85,000 women benefit from the increase in the minimum duration of maternity leave from 14 weeks to 18 weeks.

The value of benefits accruing to part-time employees under the part-time workers directive will be £17.6 million. The number of people receiving an increase in non-wage benefits will be 400,000, and 27,000 will receive an increase in pay. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 provides more than 8.6 million disabled people with the choice and opportunities that others have long taken for granted. Sometimes people feel that such serious issues are overlooked, so that Act has made a huge difference. Stakeholder pensions will give millions of employees access to a good-value, reliable pension scheme.

It is right and just that we make the comparison with the previous Administration. The number of Acts of Parliament passed in each parliamentary Session is of broadly the same order of magnitude under the current Administration as under the last, as is the number of statutory instruments issued. Less than 5 per cent. of statutory instruments have a significant impact on business. Focusing on the number of regulations pays no regard to the benefits to business, society, individuals and the environment that can accrue from well-designed regulation. In international comparisons, Britain is one of the best places for companies to start, invest, grow and expand. According to the economic outlook published in 1999 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in 1998 the UK had the lowest level of product-market regulation of any OECD country, including the United States.

The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) has acknowledged that there is no evidence that regulation is damaging economic performance. The fall in UK unemployment to below 1 million for the first time since 1975 clearly backs up that view.

Mr. Fabricant: We have to put the lie to that assertion. The Government talk of there being fewer than 1 million unemployed. That is to be applauded, but the truth is that there are fewer than 1 million claimants, whereas the 1975 figure referred to actual unemployed people. There are about 1.5 million people still unemployed. None the less, I congratulate the Government on having at least bucked the trend in manufacturing industry, wherein unemployment has increased.

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am prepared to listen to what he says, but I remind him that when the Conservative Government claimed that there were 3 million unemployed, the true figure was closer to 4 million.

On small firms and regulation, the Labour Government's policy is to regulate only when necessary and to ensure that regulation is fair and effective. Should regulation be necessary, the first priority is to make sure that each regulation passes the "think small first" test. We have set up the Small Business Service to work closely with the regulatory impact unit and other regulators to ensure that regulations are enforced in a way that recognises the problems of small businesses.

As expected, there has been criticism: for example, it has been said that the Bill moves debate on important reforms away from the Floor of the House. In fact, the Bill will not undermine the proper parliamentary process for legislation. It requires thorough public consultation coupled with a tried and tested procedure of thorough

parliamentary scrutiny. The accusation has also been levelled that the Government have increased the burden of regulation and that the Bill merely loads more burdens on business. The figures do not bear that out: the number of new regulations issued under the current Government is no different from the number issued under the previous Government. In any case, the vast majority of regulations have no impact on business.

The Government have important plans to use the powers under the Bill. As already announced, we plan to use them to reform our cumbersome fire safety and weights and measures legislation, as well as to free schools to provide the out-of-hours child care services that are so desperately needed and so well used in many parts of the country. Those are the sort of worthwhile changes for which the Bill has been designed.

It has also been said that the Bill will allow Ministers to bypass Parliament. I totally disagree with that. The Bill merely extends the existing deregulation order-making power, which was introduced by the Conservative Government under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. The safeguards on the existing power, which has been policed effectively by the Deregulation Committee in this House and the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in the Lords, will be supplemented to reflect the breadth of the new power. The Government will not be able to steamroller proposals through using the new order-making power, as the Select Committees have an effective veto and the Parliament Acts will not apply.

In concluding, I shall comment again on the Conservatives' record. Tories always claim that they will reduce regulation—we heard it said early this evening—but they do not. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), as a Minister under the previous Government who tried to reduce regulation on business, said:

"We would be the first to say that we did not do it very well".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 250.]

In fact, as has been said on several occasions, the Tories introduced 3,000 regulations in each of their final three years in office. Back in December 1987, the Institute of Directors said:

"The excessive burden of regulation on business is halting growth and preventing companies from entering new markets . . . every year the Government has added to red tape".

Talking about the previous Government, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea admitted the truth. He said:

"We passed volumes of new rules and laws, interfering in almost every aspect of business and social life."

Back in 1995, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) pledged that he would reduce the number of different business licences from more than 250. However, his colleague Roger Freeman admitted in January 1997 that they had increased to 365.

I shall look at endorsements of the Bill, of which we have heard a number today. In response to its publication in draft form in April 2000, the Prime Minister received numerous letters of support—much to the surprise, I am sure, of Opposition Members. Mr. Digby Jones, who has been well quoted this evening, said:

"I believe the Bill will allow Ministers to more easily remove regulatory burdens on business."

Mr. Jones hoped that the Bill would

"be enacted as soon as possible."

Mr. Ian Handford, national chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses, was similarly supportive. He said:

"I am writing to say how much we are encouraged following a perusal of the published draft Regulatory Reform Bill . . . We believe that the Bill will be useful in helping to reduce the overall burden on business."

George Cox, director general of the Institute of Directors, wrote:

"I would like to make you aware of our support for the Bill and for the aims which it reflects . . . We very much hope that Parliamentary time will be found for the Bill."

This Government are finding time for the Bill.

Like my right hon. and hon. Friends, I welcome the Bill. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), I am delighted that our hon. Friend the Minister will review the Bill, and I look forward to its steady progress to the statute book.

8.12 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I am pleased to speak in this debate. First, I must declare an interest as I have a small business; naturally, I have an interest in introducing things that will reduce the burdens on us.

As other members of the Select Committee on Deregulation would accept, we must take a great step in reducing regulation in this country. As a Committee member, I am not alone in saying that we do not feel that we have a sufficiently effective remit. The Bill, or a similar measure, is certainly required to tackle the issue.

Mr. Bercow: I look forward with eager anticipation to the hon. Gentleman developing his argument. At the outset, will he give me his assessment of the Cabinet Minister's speech?

Mr. Cotter: I have not made any particular assessment and do not wish to be drawn into anything, but if the hon. Gentleman wants me to make an assessment I shall happily assess the speech of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who carried on at excessive length in a dying speech. Presumably, with the election coming, he was trying to mark the Conservative party's cards regarding the reduction of red tape, even though it is very much responsible for it. As I pointed out, Conservative Members were notable by their absence from the Deregulation Committee, which at least tried to address the issues.

Unlike other hon. Members who spoke, some of whom waxed on, I do not wish to speak for long.

Mr. Steen: As a fellow member of the Deregulation Committee, it is only fair to say that one regulation alone has been made this year, and one was made last year. Members who have other things to do cannot be expected to hang around on a Committee that does not do anything.

Mr. Cotter: I would have expected them to be there when we discussed the Bill, but they were notable by their absence.

I want to press on, as other Members wish to speak. I wish to concentrate on important points and to try to highlight where we must go. We must argue against

[Mr. Cotter]

having regulation in the first place. I welcome the Government's establishment of the Small Business Service, which, I hope, will go some way towards ensuring that we do not have unnecessary regulation and that businesses can have more input into the legislative process than they have had in the past. I continue to urge Ministers to ensure that the Small Business Service knits in and is effective. It is in its early days, but Conservative Members do not support the initiative. Indeed, their manifesto proposes cuts in the trade and industry budget, which helps to provide the representation that small businesses need.

A Bill has been introduced, but the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) talked about consultation with small business being a necessary precursor to ensuring that we do not have regulations that we are now trying to get rid of. I hope that consultation will take place through the Small Business Service and that business Bills will be given longer lead times, so that firms and organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, the Forum of Private Business and others can give their views before they are enacted.

I also support the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East on plain speaking. I know that he has been running with that issue; it is essential that we have clear regulation and plain speaking so that we can all understand what is being got at. That should be part of our general approach in Parliament. We should not pass regulations and Bills that we do not understand, but which we expect people in the outside community to understand. I therefore support the proposals made by the hon. Gentleman.

Following my intervention, the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), who chairs the Deregulation Committee and was here for much of the debate, accepted that the Committee wanted the Government to introduce an annual review of the Bill—or a review at least one year after it was passed. Unfortunately, we did not manage to persuade the Government of that. However, the hon. Gentleman and other Committee members agree that we must have a way of assessing the Bill to see whether it makes improvements. The Committee has decided that it—and, we hope, the new Committee—would wish to undertake that, as parliamentary scrutiny is far more effective.

Apart from the Bill, any regulation that affects business should be examined by Parliament annually so that we can reassess it and assess the cost of regulation for business and industry, thereby doing the job properly on a rolling basis, year by year.

The Government, in their wisdom or otherwise, have resisted impact assessments of the Bill. Despite strong arguments from colleagues in the other place, the Government have said that they cannot accept the words "impact assessment" being attached to the Bill. Will the Minister explain what they propose to do instead?

During my time in Parliament, I have noticed when serving on Committees that an impact assessment of the Bill in question has not always been available at an early stage of our deliberations. Had such impact assessments been available to members of the Committee, many Bills, even over the past four years, would have been improved. I understand that the Cabinet Office is looking into the matter. Relevant and accurate impact assessments of Bills at the consultation stage and beyond would be beneficial in ensuring that we do not have the unnecessary regulation that sometimes burdens us.

Mrs. Gorman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his unfailing courtesy in giving way. On impact assessment, does he agree that each new regulation creates a crime, and almost every regulation creates a penalty, which often includes imprisonment for failing to carry out that regulation? Is not that an important reason for us to assess what regulations will do to small firms, to say nothing of the massive bills that will have to be paid to solicitors for taking cases through tribunals and so on? Is not that an unseen part of the need for proper assessment of the cost of the legislation, before we adopt it?

Mr. Cotter: Indeed. The hon. Lady makes a worthwhile point. As a company director, I am well aware that while I am working in Parliament, I could be held responsible for events that were taking place elsewhere. I was encouraged by a statutory instrument the other day that will result in ACAS—the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service—being brought in more frequently to deal with issues arising from regulation, which can lead to tribunals being established and further burdens for business.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I want to be clear about what he is proposing. He and I served on the Standing Committee that considered the National Minimum Wage Bill, for which, he will recall, the regulatory impact assessments were exceedingly poor. It would have been far better if they had been more accurate in the initial stages, so that they would have illustrated many of the administrative problems to which the Opposition drew attention in Committee. We were subsequently shown to be right, and the Government had to change tack on many of those issues.

Is the hon. Gentleman proposing that regulatory impact assessments should be attached to the Bill itself, or that a regulatory impact assessment should be attached to each order made under the Bill?

Mr. Cotter: Certainly, each order should have a regulatory impact assessment. As I understand it, there is also an issue concerning the impact of the Bill itself. I await the Minister's comments on that.

The better regulation taskforce was established by the Government. The aspects that it examines are determined ad hoc, but it has nevertheless been a worthwhile venture. Hon. Members in all parts of the House will join me in commending the chairman of the better regulation taskforce, Chris Haskins, for his general approach. I hope that we can adopt such a no-nonsense approach in Parliament. For example, clause 3(1) states that the Minister making the order must be of the opinion that it does not remove any necessary protection. Too often, what is seen as necessary protection is not necessary at all.

Chris Haskins has promoted the idea of cutting through the cackle and getting to the basics. The hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) referred to the approach of not adopting policies that do not suit small businesses. Such an approach is promoted by Chris Haskins.

We need an imaginative approach that balances necessary health and safety requirements and what is practical and sensible. For example, there is an organisation dedicated to rolling back red tape for pubs. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) spoke about the number of inspectors coming into businesses. Our party believes that the number of inspections should be cut.

In the case of pubs, there is a dichotomy between inspectors coming in for health and safety or security reasons, and heritage officials coming in if the public house is of historic interest. Recently, the owners of an old pub were asked by their insurance company to install security or safety devices, such as smoke alarms—I do not remember the details—yet the next week, the heritage people said that because the pub was hundreds of years old such work could not be carried out. We must bring common sense into regulation, in Parliament and elsewhere.

I am happy to say that while I have been in Parliament, and perhaps during the time of hon. Members who have been in this place longer than I have, the ridiculous tea bag tax has not been introduced.

Mrs. Gorman: The tea bag tax?

Mr. Cotter: Yes. I shall outline the rough details. If we give tea to our employees, as we all tend to do in life, on a regular basis over a period of years, the tax people can suddenly arrive and ask, "Have you been giving Jack, who works on the lathe, tea for the past 15 or 20 years?" They scribble away and work out what it amounts to. Multiplied by another 20, 30 or 40 employees, that can make quite a bill. Were the tax people to go back 20 years and demand that the resulting bill be paid, that could bankrupt the employer. We want to avoid such nonsense.

Mrs. Gorman: I thank the hon. Gentleman once more. Does he recall the days when VAT was introduced? VAT inspectors went into Chinese restaurants and counted the grains of rice in a portion, to discover whether the restaurant owners were putting in enough tax returns to cover the amount of VAT that they should have charged on portions of rice?

Mr. Cotter: That sounds ridiculous. I suppose that counting grains of rice is slightly better than counting grains of sand, as the former are slightly bigger and easier to identify, but both activities seem ridiculous. It is difficult to believe that that happened, but the hon. Lady told us about it and I accept her remarks.

Mr. Steen: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the circumstances that affected a small businesses man in my constituency who ran a successful oyster farm? Every so often, he changed the water in which he kept his oysters, but he did not do so too frequently, as it was recirculated. However, the local enforcement officer said, "Look here. We cannot possibly have you circulating the water. You must go to Paignton, pick up sea water, bring it back and keep the oysters in it." That was the requirement, even though the sea water was dirtier than the recirculated water that had previously been used. As a result, the oyster business was closed down. The business man made it clear that he took that decision because he had to use dirtier water. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such craziness arises because of the introduction and enforcement of too many regulations?

Mr. Cotter: I certainly agree. The hon. Gentleman gives an example of such craziness. If the oysters could speak for themselves, they would say "We are happy with this water." Unfortunately, they cannot do that, so we must try to argue their case, although we are rather too late in respect of the oysters in question, which have been drowned or destroyed in inappropriate water. If I had an oyster farm in my constituency, I, too, would follow up such concerns. I shall keep a beady eye on the matter and I am grateful to him for raising it.

I shall now draw my remarks to a close, probably to groans of delight. I have tried to make some key points, the most important of which is that Parliament should try not to introduce regulation and should seek to reduce it when it has done so. I urge the House and the Government to do all that they can to achieve those aims.

8.30 pm

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter), who is a nice man and has a calm manner, although his statements are not always completely sensible.

As a member of the Select Committee on Deregulation, I appreciate that the current processes for introducing regulation can appear cumbersome, but I agree with the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White). I support the Deregulation Committee's report and the broad thrust of the Bill. I appreciate that it will have a particular impact on small businesses, which are an important engine of economic development nationwide, as well as in Eccles.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) said that the Bill would enable regulatory regimes to be reformed using tried and tested parliamentary procedure. He said that it would result in clearer and better-targeted legislation, and foster a climate that encourages thriving business but provides proper protection for people at work, consumers and the environment. I agree with that view. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley implied that more pressure should be exerted on Ministers to survey the work of their Departments and actively seek areas that could be deregulated. I believe that a more proactive approach would be welcome.

However, I am perhaps a bit more radical than some of my colleagues. I argue that the parliamentary system has a weakness that should be addressed with regard to regulation. I believe that there is a stronger argument for a better regulation committee than for the need to deregulate, important though that is. I would like the Government to consider establishing an inspectorate with responsibility not only for encouraging and overseeing regulation, but for identifying the need for deregulation when companies and organisations face unnecessary burdens.

Mr. White: Does my hon. Friend accept that although there are good reasons for regulations when they are introduced, they often cease to have effect over time and should therefore be reviewed regularly?

Mr. Stewart: I am a strong advocate of regulation and its continuing review. My hon. Friend is correct.

[Mr. Stewart]

When I intervened on the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) earlier, he said that there was a need for balance. I shall therefore present some other information in the interests of balance.

I want to comment on what is sometimes contemptuously dismissed as red tape. I am proud of the Government because they have introduced the minimum wage and extended employment rights. Hon. Members know my background and would expect me to be interested in such matters. I am worried about some Conservative Members' comments because they display a lack of balance. It is proper to look to employers' interests to ensure that we maximise productivity. However, striking a balance means that we also have to consider employees' interests, especially their health and safety. In this modern age, we must also surely consider family-friendly policies.

We have given equal rights to part-time workers, most of whom are women, and an entitlement to four weeks' paid holiday a year. There was no such entitlement in this country until this Government introduced it earlier in the Parliament. That is significant, but some would say that it was modest.

My first Adjournment debate was on occupational health and safety. I argued for the introduction of roving health and safety representatives so that all companies could benefit from the acknowledged expertise of trade union health and safety representatives. Some people argue that there is constant disagreement between employers, workers and their trade unions. That is a fallacy. There is a healthy recognition among most progressive employers of the fact that the trade union movement has developed strong expertise in health and safety in recent years.

I understand that the Health and Safety Executive is to pilot a scheme such as the one that I suggested. That will spread good practice and improve workplace safety. I get angry when people speak of health and safety as a burden on industry. Safety must always be a priority; safety regulation is an example of good regulation, which is good for business.

Improved employment rights are not red tape but the embodiment of our commitment to social justice and to ensuring that workers have rights that are appropriate to the workplace in the 21st century. We have some way to go in the United Kingdom before our employees enjoy the same protection as other European workers. A 1999 survey found that we had the longest working hours in Europe. In Belgium, the average working week was 38.4 hours; in Germany, it was 40.1 hours, which was less than the European Union average of 40.4 hours. In the UK, the average working week was 43.6 hours.

For many years, we have had a worsening problem of long hours. In 1984, 2.8 million people worked a week of more than 48 hours; in 1998, that figure had risen to 4 million—a 40 per cent. increase. The UK is the only European Union country to allow an opt-out from the 48-hour limit. Consequently, in spring 2000, 3 million employees were working more than 48 hours. However, that figure is 25 per cent. lower than that for 1998.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give the House any productivity comparisons with other European countries?

Mr. Stewart: I shall mention productivity later in my speech.

We have heard reports recently about growing levels of stress at work, and the effect that that has on what we now know as the work-home balance. A TUC survey of trade union safety representatives found that 66 per cent. cited stress as the main hazard at work, and said it affects all types of workers. Some workers feel badly managed; some managers are too overworked to manage properly. Regulation of working hours and conditions has a role to play: it can be beneficial and, at the same time, aid production and development.

In support of my argument I draw attention to the remarks of someone who is neither a known suspect nor a renowned proponent of trade union rights—Mr. Adair Turner, the former general secretary of the CBI. In *The Times* on 16 March 2001, he said:

"Britain's economic performance is only adequate: increased investment, not deregulation, is the key to improvement . . . Arguments that Britain is being held back by the burden of labour market regulation are based on confused economic theory and contradicted by the facts. If labour market regulation is harming our performance, the impact must be measurable in unemployment figures. But there is no evidence that the minimum wage has destroyed more than a trivial number of jobs and the mild re-regulation of Britain's labour market over the past three years has been accompanied by continually falling unemployment."

As we know, the latest figures show that unemployment has dropped below 1 million for the first time since December 1975. In my region, the north-west, the number of people in employment has grown by 29,000 over the past year. Since the spring of 1997, employment growth has been 106,000. Last month alone, 28,600 new vacancies were notified to jobcentres in the region.

We must remind ourselves that we are discussing appropriate and relevant regulation. Labour Members are strongly against burdensome and unnecessary regulation, but one person's red tape is another person's protection. We need appropriate and relevant regulation. I support this important Bill and I shall vote against the amendment.

8.43 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart). My only anxiety on his behalf is that I have not the foggiest idea what he will do when he finally loses his charisma.

This is a good opportunity to contribute to the debate on an important Bill, and I should like to advance a number of points. The background to the debate is simple. It is an incontrovertible fact—no Labour Member has been able to deny or gainsay it—that the sea of regulation is now deeper and more hazardous than any with which British companies have previously had to contend.

The lacuna in the position of Labour Members was starkly revealed when several of them were challenged not on the number of regulations on the statute book but on the cost of those regulations. Reading from their prepared texts, they spewed forth various figures relating to what happened in the latter days of the Conservative Government. I have not sought to deny those figures.

If Labour Members were aware of previous debates on the subject, they would know that during a debate on regulations on small businesses on 8 March 2000, the hon.

Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham)—a charming contributor to our proceedings and, like me, a parliamentary virgin, if I can put it like that—asked me about the total cost of the regulations that had taken effect in the last three years of the previous Government. I said that, off the top of my head, I did not have the square root of an idea but I would be happy to engage in correspondence with her, if she would find that an enjoyable experience. I am not interested in looking back, and I recognise that the record was not perfect. Nevertheless, the burden of regulation is now greater, more expensive and more difficult to bear for companies the length and breadth of the land.

On that point, I am happy to take my cue not from Conservative Members but from the authentic representatives of industry and commerce themselves. We learn something significant when we read what they have to say, and listen to their public pronouncements. We all know that the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Forum of Private Business, the British Chambers of Commerce and, indeed, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales will typically disagree on a number of matters pertaining to British business. They will have differing views on the merits or demerits of British entry into the European single currency; they will have differing views on the merits or demerits of legislation to counteract the phenomenon of late payment of commercial debt. Of one thing we can be certain, however: they all agree that the burden of regulation is high, that it continues to rise, and that the ratchet needs to be arrested and, wherever possible, reversed.

Mr. White: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Not now. Because the hon. Gentleman is my near neighbour, if he behaves himself I will consider giving way to him later when I have developed my argument; but it is important that we do not spare Government Back Benchers the pain of revelation, in public debate, of the enormity of the burdens they have inflicted, through their voice and votes, on companies in this country.

Those burdens fall principally into four categories. First, there are Brussels directives. I am thinking of, for example, the working time directive, the part-time workers directive—which was transposed into British law via the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000—and the parental leave directive, which was specifically the consequence of the Government's boneheaded decision to sign up voluntarily to the European social chapter, rightly eschewed by the last Conservative Government.

The second category comprises payroll burdens, about which we have heard very little from Labour Members despite their importance. I refer to, for instance, the working families tax credit, 52 per cent. of whose administrative cost falls on small companies. Let none in this Chamber forget that 99.6 per cent. of British businesses employ fewer than 100 people, that they account for approximately 57 per cent. of the private sector work force, or that they generate two fifths of national output. The fact that those companies are burdened by the working families tax credit is therefore important. Moreover, they are encumbered by—for example—the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 1999, and by the regulations that apply to stakeholder pensions.

These are significant matters. The point that I seek to make—in my characteristically shy, reticent and understated fashion with which Members on both sides of the House are familiar—is that whatever the merits or demerits of the measures we are discussing in and of themselves, they have one thing in common: they shuffle off responsibility from central Government to beleaguered businesses, forcing the latter to become unpaid tax collectors and benefit distributors. That is wrong, that is pernicious, that is damaging, and it is a phenomenon that can continue unchecked only because—with the insouciance that this Government typically display—no DTI Minister serving in the House of Commons has ever run or worked in a business.

Mr. Pike: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Yes, very briefly.

Mr. Pike: Who transferred the burden of statutory sick pay to employers, and away from the old sick pay scheme?

Mr. Bercow: I am intrigued by that question. The hon. Gentleman is falling into precisely the trap against which I should have thought one of my earlier paragraphs would warn him.

The point is—the hon. Gentleman may find it difficult to grasp, but I invite him seriously to treat with it—that I was not in the House of Commons before the last election, I was not a member of the last Conservative Government; I was frequently critical of that Administration. I am simply not interested in playing ping-pong about what happened in the past. The point that I am making to him is that it is possible to do much better. He may believe that the regulatory burden was too great before Labour Members took office, but that is no justification whatsoever for adding to the totality of the burdens with which businesses are encumbered.

I am therefore sorry to say that, although the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) may think he has a decent point, it is simply not on my radar screen so far as today's proceedings are concerned. I shall not be in any way deterred or diverted by periodic interventions by Labour Members from continuing to ram home the point about the scale of burdens and the number of different categories into which, under this Government, those burdens fall.

The third example of burdens under this Government is what might be called the alleged domestic "fairness at work" arrangements. Here of course we are talking about statutory trade union recognition—which militates against labour market efficiency, is largely resented by British companies, does not seem to be necessary and cannot contribute to productive potential.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Not at the moment. The hon. Gentleman has just had his speech, and I am going to make mine. However, if he behaves himself, I shall happily consider giving way to him later.

I happen to think that that is an undesirable regulation.

Mr. Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Bercow: Generosity always gets the better of me, despite my best endeavours to the contrary. I shall give way.

Mr. Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman. It is a bit rich to be arguing about the need for deregulation and fewer regulations. Under the previous, Conservative Government, one of the biggest burdens placed on employers was precisely the type of regulation that he is talking about. It was the outrageous burden of having regularly and persistently to conduct ballots on check-off, which is the deduction of union subscriptions at source. The outrageous nature of the hon. Gentleman's comments shows that the charisma stuff that he is taking is a bit too powerful for him.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but it was tedious, long-winded and unfocused in equal measure. I have not received a single representation from a business in my constituency—large numbers of which I regularly visit—saying that they strongly approve of the Government's position on statutory trade union recognition and how terribly irksome it was previously to have to conduct regular ballots. I am not entirely clear which planet, or stratosphere, the hon. Gentleman inhabits, but it is not in any way the same as that on which my worthy and industrious constituents of Buckingham live.

I warn the hon. Gentleman, because I am well disposed to him, that the quality threshold will have to be satisfied if he thinks that he will have another intervention. His performance so far is not very auspicious. Of course, however, he will not divert me from the fourth category of regulation by which companies in Britain are encumbered to a greater extent now than ever before—environmental taxes and regulations.

Company after company has justifiably complained about the burden that is threatened by the climate change levy and by the extremely detailed, complex and rigorous integrated pollution prevention controls. Many sectors will be badly hit. Those regulations are extremely zealously drafted. The expectation is that they will, as usual in the United Kingdom, be gold-plated. Those who will lose out are companies. Ministers themselves will not have to pay, as they themselves do not run businesses. They themselves are not familiar with enterprise. They themselves will not suffer. However, those businesses will suffer. It is on their behalf and in their interests that I am proud, with my right. hon. and hon. Friends, to speak in this debate.

The effect of all that regulation can be measured in various ways. However, I thought that the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales made a very interesting assessment. In its study, it concluded that, under this Government, companies with between 51 and 200 employees face annually an extra regulatory burden of about £10,500. For companies with between 11 and 50 employees, the amount is £4,700, and for the smallest micro-businesses it is £1,700.

The significant fact, which is another serious challenge to Labour Members, is that the most recent survey that that organisation undertook revealed that the burden for the average company was about £3,600 a year—a burden that had more than doubled since the previous year. Not only is the burden high, but it continues to rise. The Government do not even acknowledge that fact, let alone propose to do anything about it.

We know, not only from those small business organisations but from others, how corrosive the impact of that regulation is. Accountancy firms, business analysts and policy institutes consistently speak with one voice: they say that the Government are getting it wrong, and that it is time they had the decency to acknowledge the fact and propose remedial action without delay.

The Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 was passed by the previous Government. I will not dilate on that subject at length, because many hon. Members have, rightly, already touched upon it. Suffice it to say that it was generally agreed, not least during the debate in another place, that the Act had achieved something worth while.

Mr. White *indicated assent.*

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), signals his assent to that proposition.

I believe that about 46 deregulation orders have been passed, of which 37 took effect under the previous Government. I salute and compliment Lord Falconer of Thoroton, who, in the Second Reading debate on the Bill in the other place on 21 December, was good enough to admit that the peak year for deregulation orders was 1996. He did not—for he could not—dispute the observation of the better regulation taskforce, set up by the Government for the purposes of giving advice to the Government, that in recent years the number of such orders had dwindled.

Yet when the hon. Member for Burnley, the Chairman of the Deregulation Committee, was challenged about some of the Government's recent proposals and suggestions for future action, and was asked whether he knew of any obstacle to prevent the passage of those measures under existing legislation, the hon. Gentleman, who is an assiduous and committed parliamentarian, almost took my breath away—*[Interruption.]* I say "almost" advisedly, Madam Deputy Speaker, because that would be a remarkable accomplishment, as I think the House would acknowledge.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Why did he not finish the job?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman did not succeed in taking my breath away, but I was very surprised when he owned up to the fact that he had made no study of the subject at all. That was unfortunate.

Worthwhile policy objectives have been accomplished by the 1994 Act—for example, electronic receipt of cheques, and the increase in the number of fundraising events at which charities can sell alcohol. Finally, there is the worthwhile development whereby couples about to get married can book the registry office 12 months in advance of the happy day, whereas before they could only book three months in advance.

The Act was a good piece of legislation, and the Government have pitifully failed to take advantage of it. They are wringing their hands, displaying their impotence and trying to blame it all on the previous Administration,

who had done something constructive. Now, at the last minute, and in full recognition of the fact that the Bill will not become law, the Government propose a new measure instead.

As my noble Friend Baroness Buscombe said on Second Reading in the other place on 21 December, the merit of the 1994 Act was, among other things, that it was a one-way street designed to facilitate deregulation. There was no mixed message; the Act had a clear objective, and demonstrated intent. What is more, it had a track record of achieving something worth while for businesses and customers.

What we see before us now is a forked-tongued Bill. Its proponents give the impression of not knowing exactly what they want. They want to provide a facility for deregulation, although the track record does not suggest that they are likely to do very much in that regard, but they also want the power to re-regulate, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) observed earlier, in a potent contribution.

The power to re-regulate is worrying, but so, too, is the provision for subordinate provisions orders in clause 4, for it was originally intended that such orders would be subject to the negative assent procedure. There was widespread objection, not least in the other place. As a result of an amendment tabled by the former Director General of the Office of Fair Trading, Lord Borrie, the position was changed. As I understand it, such measures can be introduced either by the negative or by the affirmative procedure. That still does not offer much encouragement or succour to those who, in the four years of this Parliament, have regularly watched the Government ram through obnoxious, burdensome and damaging measures on the nod without the facility of a parliamentary debate. That is something to which the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office should turn his mind.

In a parliamentary answer on 27 November to the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), the Minister listed no fewer than 51 items for future deregulation. The Minister for the Cabinet Office mentioned no fewer than five in this debate, spanning three or four Departments. The interesting point about those 51 items is that only five of them relate to the Department of Trade and Industry. Nine are the business of the Home Office, eight are the business of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, five are the business of the Department of Health, five are the business of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, four are the business of the Lord Chancellor's Department and four are the business of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. We are talking about a large area of regulation that does not relate to the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mr. White: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that most of the regulations proposed for deregulation in the Select Committee on Deregulation came from Departments other than the Department of Trade and Industry, particularly the Home Office. The hon. Gentleman is developing a point about deregulation. Will he address the issue of how to deal with inappropriate, out-of-date and anomalous regulations?

Mr. Bercow: If my proposal were adopted, there would be a system of sunset regulation. A regulation would automatically lapse or expire on a given date and it would be for Parliament to decide to renew it. That is a specific and concrete response to the hon. Gentleman's point.

I am concerned about the scope for deregulation and the number of Departments that it involves. I make this point to illustrate the need for a joined-up, properly targeted, suitably co-ordinated Government programme. That is what leads me to the position of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The right hon. Gentleman simply does not seem to grasp the significance of the problem that he faces. In an apparently important speech to the British Chambers of Commerce in Glasgow on 3 June 1999, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that the Government had to rethink—the word is his, not mine—their approach to deregulation if they were to "make a difference". That was why he had asked his Department to conduct "a systematic review" of the regulations for which, he said, he had responsibility.

It is precisely the narrow, inward-looking, complacent and, if I may say so, navel-gazing approach exhibited by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which shows us why the Government have made such a mess of this area of public policy.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire indicated earlier, the Opposition are simply not content with such a piecemeal, half-hearted and superficial approach to deregulation. On the contrary, my right hon. and hon. Friends propose the establishment of a deregulation commission for which the regulatory impact unit of the Cabinet Office would work. We insist that there should be a total audit of the cost of all Government regulation. When I had the privilege to introduce the Regulations on Small Businesses (Reduction) Bill under the ten-minute rule on 27 April 1999, I was astonished when, in advance of my presentation, I received a written answer from the then Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), which indicated that the Government did not publish, and moreover that they had no intention of publishing, a statement of the annual costs of regulation.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire made the point clearly—as the shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), has regularly done—that we intend in government to conduct a total audit of the cost of regulation. Once that cost has been established, each Department under the next Conservative Administration will then be given a target for reducing the cost of regulation and will be obliged annually to report on the measures that it has taken and the progress that it has achieved in pursuit of that objective.

Where regulations are essential, and I accept that sometimes they are, we propose longer lead times for consultation. A minimum of three months should be regarded as the norm. There is no reference to that in the Bill. There should be a minimum period of three months for the requirement to implement regulations. That is not referred to in the Bill, and when the Parliamentary Secretary winds up the debate, I should like to know why.

We believe that there should be exemptions for small firms from some of the most damaging regulations. We often hear it said, in Labour Members' criticism of such a proposal, that that might allow small companies to gain an unfair advantage over large companies by

[Mr. Bercow]

circumventing, for example, health and safety legislation. Obviously, no such opportunity should exist, but is it not illustrative of the anti-enterprise mindset of Labour Members and their unhealthy post-election but continuing dalliance with representatives of big business that they always see things from the point of view of big companies, corporations and institutes?

What about the rather more commonplace fact that large companies have an advantage over small because they are able, more readily and without pain, to absorb the costs of regulations? They have in-house lawyers, personnel departments and accountants. None of these matters is as problematic for them as it is for a struggling small firm that is trying to recruit staff, to expand its market, to sell products, to satisfy its customers and thereby, perhaps, to become a little larger. The point about exemptions is important, as indeed is the point about sunset regulations.

In future, we want regulations to work on the basis so successfully practised in large parts of the United States. A regulation would automatically lapse or expire on a given date. If Parliament, in its wisdom and on the strength of a practical assessment, judged that the regulation had been worth while, there would be nothing to stop it renewing it. If it did not think that the regulation had been efficacious, it would decline to do so. Those are sensible, practical and thought-through measures from a party that is not only committed to, but immersed in, British enterprise. They are wholly alien to Labour Members, who are just not familiar with the thinking of companies, and particularly that of small companies.

Before I conclude, I want to say something about the European context. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson)—he who should be silent—chunters from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of what I am saying. He was not present for much of the debate. He did not hear the very long speeches—which, on the whole, were not very illuminating—that Labour Members delivered. We have the opportunity to comment on the Bill. His party has a large majority. I do not begrudge it that majority, but scrutiny is important and I will have my say. He will not stop me having my say, and the sooner he realises that, so much the better.

I always listen to the Minister for the Cabinet Office with interest. I do not wish to embarrass her unduly, but I have long had considerable respect for her. However, in preparing for the debate, I was a little taken aback by one or two points on Europe that I encountered. I am sure that she recalls that on 21 July 1999 the Cabinet Office published what was called a guide to better European regulation, for the benefit of people devising, negotiating, implementing or, for that matter, communicating the content of new European regulation. It was a toolkit for how they might more effectively go about that. That was followed, on 18 October, by her visit to Brussels.

I do not know whether the right hon. Lady remembers what she said on that occasion, but I do. In talking to her colleagues, she said that she was pleased that the new Commission attached such importance to the pursuit of a better regulatory framework. She added that better regulation was a key area for the success of the European Union. These people never talk about deregulation, my hon. and right hon. Friends will readily understand, and I am bound to tell her that I was astonished to hear that that was what she said.

The right hon. Lady is an experienced parliamentarian and public servant, but is she unaware of the extent to which this country is already ground down by excessive European regulation? Of course we often make the mistake of gold-plating such regulation ourselves—we add to it and make it more burdensome; it becomes increasingly expensive—but the origin of much of that which belabours us is the European Union.

Marjorie Mowlam: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that this country has one of the lowest levels of regulation in Europe. During my visit to Brussels, I worked to achieve a clear level playing field on regulation—that is what is important in Europe—and I have done so since. Our businesses suffer because others treat regulation differently.

Mr. Bercow: I am not unsympathetic to the principle of a level playing field, although my main concern is that our regulatory burden should be as low as is consistent with safety, decency and propriety.

The right hon. Lady makes the point, as did a number of Labour Members, that the regulatory burden in this country is lower than that in most EU member states. A degree of speculation is involved because the empirical evidence is by no means clear, but in so far as that is true, it is not least because, for many years, deregulatory Thatcherite policies were applied in this country when burdensome regulatory and socialistic policies were being implemented in those member states. I am prepared to concede, though I do not know for certain, that the burden might be lower here than in those countries.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No, because I intend to respond to the right hon. Lady. The hon. Gentleman will have to hear me out.

Many European Union member states might face more statutory regulation than we do. They tend more readily to sign up to high-falutin' declarations and statutory commitments, but the right hon. Lady must concede, because she effectively did so in her intervention, that there is frequently a chasm between what the European Union says in statute and what it does in practice. She really must note that central point. We sign up to a proposition and zealously enforce it; our European partners frequently sign up to what would be burdensome impositions—

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No. *[Interruption.]* No, I shall not give way.

Our European partners frequently sign up to burdensome propositions without having the slightest intention to give them effect in practice.

I want to conclude—

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I have said before and I say again to the hon. Gentleman—who has had many opportunities to

intervene and we have all enjoyed listening to his dilations—that I am not giving way. I do not need to repeat the point. The hon. Gentleman can resume his seat and absorb the remainder of what I have to say, on which I should be grateful if the Minister for the Cabinet Office would reflect.

In two treaties, there is an over-arching power from which this country stands to suffer. I refer first to article 3b of the treaty of Maastricht, so I am making a non-partisan point—*[Interruption.]* I emphasise to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East that I am making a non-party-partisan point. Article 3b of the treaty was about subsidiarity. It was designed to reassure those of us who were concerned that the overweening power of the European Union was stifling and circumscribing this country's capacity for national self-government. Article 3b states—

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No, I have already told the hon. Gentleman that I shall not give way. I intend to make my point. In the circumstances, it is not unreasonable to expect him to let me do so.

Article 3b states:

"In areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Community shall take action, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved by the Community."

Supporters of the incorporation of article 3b would have us believe that it is a great protection of the rights of nation states. I argue that in fact it is the very language of a centralised federal state from which crumbs from the top table can periodically be cast down. In effect, that power enables the institutions of the EU to initiate legislation on a panoply of fronts and we are almost powerless to resist.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No, I have already made it clear that I am not giving way to the hon. Gentleman. I intend to develop my point.

In the circumstances that I outlined, it is not credible for the Minister for the Cabinet Office to pretend that we are protected from the burden of regulation and from the increasingly omnipotent power of the European Union.

Finally, the position was worsened at the time of the treaty of Amsterdam, the protocol to which—on subsidiarity and proportionality—stated:

"The application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality shall respect the general provisions and the objectives of the Treaty, particularly as regards the maintaining in full of the acquis communautaire and the institutional balance; it shall not affect the principles developed by the Court of Justice regarding the relationship between national and Community law, and it should take into account Article F(4) of the Treaty on European Union, according to which the Union shall provide itself with the means necessary to attain its objectives and carry through its policies."

To a distinguished intellectual such as the Minister, that ought to be clear. It means that the power relationship has not changed: the Court is supreme; the existing acquis is sacrosanct and there is no prospect of a rolling back of the frontiers of European supranational socialism. In those circumstances, it is not reasonable for the right hon. Lady to pretend that the whole tidal wave of European supranationalism can be stopped or reversed. That is how serious the situation is—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. The matter under debate is regulation and deregulation.

Mr. Bercow: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to you for that reminder.

Notwithstanding the arcane and circumlocutory language of article 3b of the treaty of Maastricht and of the protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in the treaty of Amsterdam, they are potentially and directly relevant to whether we can deregulate, and if so, how and to what extent. The answer is, "Not enough."

The burden of regulation is greater. The Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 was a good measure from which real benefits flowed. The Government have contrived a feeble excuse—at the last knockings of this Parliament—to introduce an alternative measure, having wholly failed to make proper use of that which was already on the statute book.

My right hon. and hon. Friends propose an altogether better course—an ambitious, robust and deregulatory course that will commend itself to business. We intend to persist with that course, and I commend that proposition to the House.

9.20 pm

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): After that tour de force from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), what more is there to say? He said it all in a marvellous speech. I very nearly could not stand up because I was so spellbound by the content and force of his delivery and contribution. In the 10 minutes available to me in this debate, I want to say that it is not fair to those in the Public Gallery to hear such esoteric debates. I feel that one of my jobs as a modest and senior Back Bencher is to help those in the Public Gallery, and those hon. Members who have not the intelligence to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham, to understand what the debate is all about.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member, but perhaps he has forgotten that we do not refer to the Gallery.

Mr. Steen: I had forgotten that, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am glad to be reminded of that archaic approach.

I want to make one or two comments for the benefit of those hon. Members who have not had the advantage of listening to all the debate. I have been involved in deregulation for many years. I served on the Standing Committee that considered the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, and spoke in the debate on Second Reading. I used to be chairman of the Conservative party's deregulation committee.

I want to make this simple. As I understand it, the Bill has two aspects, the first of which really tells us that the Select Committee on Deregulation, of which I am a member, has run out of material to deal with. We have

[Mr. Steen]

dealt with one matter this year, and we dealt with one last year. Unless we broaden the scope of the Deregulation Committee, we shall have to close it down. As the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) wants a job—he has done it very well—the Government have decided that they should widen the scope of the deregulatory initiative, but that is a curious concept.

Instead of deregulating, the Deregulation Committee will be given an increased portfolio of existing rules and regulations that it can amplify. That interesting concept will involve not getting rid of regulations, but gold-plating existing ones and adding to them. That is what the new Select Committee on Deregulation will deal with, but because of the danger of doing so without some controls, the Government have included the so-called five tests—it is like the 10 plagues in the Old Testament. The five tests are extraordinary, and I do not know how they will work. First, there is the necessary protection test; then the reasonable expectations test; then the proportionality test; then the fair balance test; and, finally, the desirability test.

Given how long such matters take, how will the Select Committee work out the balance involved in, for example, the reasonable expectations test, which was recommended by the Deregulation Committee? The test demands that the Minister making the order must be of the opinion that it will not prevent an individual from continuing to exercise any right or freedom that he might reasonably expect to continue to exercise.

Under the proportionality test, the imposition of any new or increased burden must be proportionate to the benefit that is expected to result. Under the fair balance test, in the case of the imposition of new or increased burdens, the Minister must be of the opinion that the provisions of an order, taken as a whole, strike a fair balance between the public interest and the rights of the individual.

Mr. White: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Steen: No, I shall not give way.

The desirability test—a new test—was inserted into the Bill as a result of an amendment in the Lords. In the case of the imposition of a new or increased burden, the Minister must be of the opinion that it is desirable to make the order, because it either removes or reduces a burden elsewhere, or has other benefits for those currently affected by the burden. Those five tests must be instilled into the minds of every member of the Committee, and they must work out whether they should allow the amendment regulation measure to go forward.

Conservatives Members would like to make it clear to Departments that new measures should be extended or introduced only if old measures are repealed. There would be a balance, so that each time a new or extended measure is introduced, we would get rid of another one. That is an interesting approach to regulation.

The problem is that, if one uses any one of three words, one can get away with any rule or regulation. If one puts up one's hand and says "hygiene", people immediately say, "Let's have a new regulation." However, things have got so clean in Britain that, if one goes abroad, one gets ill. The immune system of many people in this country has been affected by the paranoid obsession with keeping everything so clean. When our constituents go to mainland Europe, many of them become ill.

Let us take the example of water. Water in the south-west is so pure that people going to other parts of Europe get ill because the water there is not as pure. We have gone completely haywire about hygiene. People in shops now wear plastic or cellophane gloves, but I am told that there are more germs on those gloves after half an hour than there are on the human hand.

The hygiene laws have caused more and more people extra expense, but one would have thought that there would be fewer incidents of food poisoning as a result. In fact, there are more incidents—the cleaner we become, the more ill the majority of people get. It does not follow that introducing more hygiene rules and regulations leads to a healthier and happier society.

Another buzzword is "security". As soon as one uses the word "security", one can pass any new rule or regulation. In addition to "hygiene" and "security", there is the term "safety". Everyone will say that we must introduce a new regulation to make something safe. Therefore, the Bill will extend and not reduce rules and regulations. They may be better, but a raft of extensions to existing rules will be introduced.

A second aspect of the Bill worries me even more. It is about a European style civil service approach to appeal. I tabled an amendment to the Deregulation and Contracting Out Bill with my colleague who was the Member for Scarborough at that time. When there is a disagreement between local officials and a local business, my amendment would have meant that the matter could have gone to a local magistrates court by way of appeal. The court would have been able to decide at a local level who was right or wrong and assess whether the correct interpretation had been made.

As I understand it, the new power in the Bill relates to the concordat that no one has mentioned even though we have been debating the issue for six hours. However, the second aspect of the Bill is all about the concordat. No one knows what it is, but what was a voluntary concordat has now become enshrined in the Bill. That means that if a local business man is not happy with the rules and regulations that have been applied by a local authority to his business, he will be able to appeal to the Minister.

When the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office winds up, it would be useful if he could tell us how a local business that is unhappy with a local authority's enforcement could contact the Minister. Will the Minister now become judge and jury, and is that against the provisions of the European Court of Human Rights? Under the Bill, a local person can appeal to the Minister for an interpretation of an Act of Parliament that has been passed through this Chamber. That is a curious new development. No one quite understands the concordat. It was a voluntary agreement, but it is now a statutory requirement. The Minister should deal with that important issue.

Although I have not spoken for 35 minutes like some hon. Members—good though those contributions were—I hope that I have encapsulated the essential, pithy parts of the Bill in 10 minutes. I hope that the House will find that a help.

9.30 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I apologise to the House, in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), for not being here throughout his contribution. I had to go to a meeting of the Committee of Selection in Committee Room 12 to deal with one of the 15 or so statutory instruments that were introduced today. I can see 14 or 15 more on the Table waiting to find their way on to the statute book and to burden our businesses.

The Bill reflects the Government's schizophrenia. The Minister for the Cabinet Office said how marvellously well the small business sector was doing, how well everything was running and what a fantastic job the better regulation taskforce was doing. She gradually slipped into arguing that the Bill was needed because the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 was not strong enough, completely forgetting why the Labour party voted against it. When the roles were reversed and I was Minister with responsibility for small business, I faced the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), who was the shadow Minister. She was a powerful advocate and berated us about regulations. She hammered into us and said, "Under a new Labour Government, when we sweep to power, it will be different." She was right on both counts. I was foolish enough to think that she was going to do something about regulation. I was wrong.

There has been much talk about regulations. All I can say is that their number has risen remorselessly under this Government. I hope that the House will accept Library figures. When the Conservatives departed from office in 1997, there were 3,114 regulations. In 1999, there was a record figure of 3,694—up 15 per cent. Provisional figures for 2000 show that the Government have broken the record with 3,863 regulations. That is a huge increase, yet the Government lecture us on what should be done.

In the past four years, regulations have swamped small businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) explained that under the previous Government, the 1994 Act dealt with 37 measures in a couple of years. Only 11 or so have been tackled in the past four years. There is a delicious irony. The most recent deregulatory measure—the Deregulation (Sunday Dancing) Order 2000—was produced at the same time as the Bill was introduced in the other place. The Government's major achievement in four years is the deregulation of Sunday dancing. I do not know whether you are a closet Sunday dancer, Mr. Speaker, and go to tea dances, but you can now do so without fear of the long arm of the law feeling your collar and taking you away for committing a crime. That is the Government's triumph, and it reflects their conviction.

Mr. Pike: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that at least we dealt with Sunday dancing? The Conservative Government tried to deal with that issue but got their solution wrong and had it rejected.

Mr. Page: I bow to the hon. Gentleman's acknowledged expertise on Sunday dancing and I do not challenge his ability to deregulate it. When he leaves the Chamber tonight, he may do so surrounded by the warm glow of knowing that that has been his contribution to the House of Commons in the past four years.

If the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 was not strong enough despite containing the necessary powers, what was there to stop the Government working in tandem with the Deregulation Committee to ensure that if the Committee wanted to remove one regulation or more, the Whitehall sausage machine—the red tape production factory—could not produce another regulation to replace it? About 100,000 regulations have been laid on our businesses in the past 50 years.

The Bill represents only one half of the solution to the problem. The system is a job-creation project: one part of a Department churns out and gold-plates regulations; then, two years later, after everyone has forgotten who produced the regulations and who was responsible for then, the officials use the Bill's powers to reform, repeal or recast a new set of regulations. The truth is that the Bill does nothing to stop the sausage machine of Whitehall. Even if it works—I have my doubts about whether it will—no one in Whitehall will tackle the red tape tangle. There is nothing to stop Departments from pushing out record numbers of regulations every year.

I endorse the recommendation made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire. We need an independent commission to examine all new regulations, independently assess their cost and, if necessary, say no. Then, the statutory instrument concerned could be debated by Parliament with full knowledge of the commission's serious doubts about it. That is what the Conservative party wants and the policy will appear in its manifesto.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office gave the game away when she mentioned nil compliance costs—a balance. Surely, the purpose of the Bill is to reduce burdens on business, not merely to hold the overall burden at the same level. She is supported by the explanatory notes to the Bill issued by the Cabinet Office, which set out the balance between reducing and removing burdens far more fairly than I can. Paragraph 51, which refers to clause 1(3), states:

"the power cannot be used to re-enact burdens, impose or increase burdens, or remove inconsistencies or anomalies, without also removing or reducing burdens."

That is fine, but it continues:

"However, the subsection does not make any numerical linkage between the burdens removed and those imposed, so the former need not necessarily outweigh the latter."

After all the magnificent words up front, the truth is that the Bill offers no guarantee that there will definitely be a reduction in burdens on business.

In plain English, rather than the language of Sir Humphrey, the main order-making power in the Bill permits an increase in the regulatory burden; unlike the 1994 Act, it does not require a reduction. All Ministers' rhetoric about new Labour's commitment to reduce the impact of regulations on activities of all sorts in the UK is at wide variance with that permissive power. It will come as no surprise to Labour Members to learn that the Conservatives will seek to amend that extraordinary latitude allowed to Ministers when the Bill is in Standing Committee. I am well aware that clause 1(1) insists on the test of proportionality—on which my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) waxed lyrical—if an existing provision is re-enacted,

"where the burden is proportionate to the benefit which is expected to result from the re-enactment"

[Mr. Page]

or if a new provision is made by order which

"is proportionate to the benefit which is expected to result from its creation".

I see from the debate in another place that the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, Lord Falconer, flushed with his success at the dome, tried to argue that only a small number of people might face increased burdens if Ministers sought to

"rebalance"—

what a lovely, imprecise word—

"an entire regulatory regime".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 December 2000; Vol. 620, c. 853.]

I fear that Lord Falconer's advocacy was met with considerable scepticism. No one can be sure that changes to entire regulatory regimes will affect only relatively small numbers of people.

The fact is that the Bill was improved in the other place by the Opposition coming together and drafting amendments. In its original form, it could have meant added burdens, without the dropping of old ones. The amendments altered that and, fortunately, the Government have taken them on board. The amended clause 1(1)(c) means that a new regulation cannot come into force without an old one going.

Again, I can see the stealthy hand of officialdom at work in the estimation of costs. There has been some improvement to the original Bill, but the announcement of cost estimation comes too late in the process; it is in the remit of officials, rather than of people in the real world as it is in our manifesto commitment. We would ask a commission, made up of independent business men and women and staffed by non-officials, to judge the costs of a Bill.

However, it seems that, after public consultation, estimates of costs will appear. That is far too late in the process. The estimates should be up front and part of the consultation process. How can one consult with the public and say, "By the way, we will let you know the cost later"? I am afraid that the Bill has been introduced without consideration; it does not take our Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 and make it work. The Act was not supported, and we must ask ourselves whether the Bill will be.

In a powerful and penetrating speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said forcefully that the Bill was a cynical measure that was being introduced just before a general election to head off the howls of complaint from business men and women who have had to deal with burdens imposed by the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire referred to all those burdens and their effect on our business men. In government, I was berated by the Labour spokesman, who said that the Labour party would do something about regulation; it would cut it and make things better. However, in four years, the Government have dealt with 11 deregulations and, at the same time, rammed though a 15 per cent. increase on the previous highest level of regulation. I am afraid that it is a case of once bitten, twice shy. I shall ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote for the Conservative amendment.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): We have had a full and interesting debate on an important, powerful and perfectly formed Bill. Some contributions were longer than expected, and in my reply I shall probably not be able to deal with every point that was made. During the debate, I prepared an hour-long speech, but thanks to the major contributions from the Opposition, I am down to a 15-minute speech.

Two aspects of the debate surprised me. The first was that the Opposition have not accepted the principle behind the Bill. When their Conservative colleagues in the other place accepted the principle, I naively expected the Conservative party in Parliament to speak with one voice. The second point has been reiterated by several Members and is due, I believe, at best to a misunderstanding, and possibly to hon. Members being disingenuous. The Opposition have praised to the hilt the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, and we agree that it has done some useful work, but they have described as trifling and trivial a Bill that builds on it but which has a wider power.

Yes, the 1994 Act could deal with single items of regulation that were burdensome, but do the Opposition not want to use a parliamentary process that has proved satisfactory to deal with matters such as fire regulations and weights and measures that need reforming? Those regulations are in various pieces of primary and secondary legislation, and business could benefit from that legislation being reformed. Do the Opposition want the burdens created by different regulations under different Acts to be dealt with? We certainly want the regulations to be dealt with.

The debate has gone all over the place. Regulations cover all walks of life, and we have been taken for a walk around Europe by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). We have discussed fish, oysters, transport, gambling, dancing, lambing, pigs, building directions and telecommunications. There is almost nothing that we have not debated, so clearly I cannot respond to all the points raised.

In general terms, to make sense of the red tape debate, policy costs must be distinguished from administration costs. That distinction has not always been apparent in the debate today. The Government make no apology for and are proud to have introduced the minimum wage, protecting workers from having to work excessively long hours and making it easier for parents to maintain a balance between their work and family duties.

It is extremely misleading to argue that entitlements and benefits that individuals receive constitute bureaucracy or red tape. The real cost of administering Government policies are a fraction of what has been suggested. The hon. Member for Buckingham asked for facts. Here are some facts: the annual cost of all employment legislation introduced by the Department of Trade and Industry since 1997 is approximately 1 per cent. of the annual wages and salaries bill for the economy as a whole. That is just under £4 per employee per week, and almost all of that is due to providing extra benefits for workers.

Although the debate has been comprehensive, it is notable that the ferocious debate that took place during the introduction of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Bill, as it then was, has not been replicated. Hon.

Members have accepted the super-affirmative process that is part of that Bill. The broad order-making power, which has the effect of removing burdens, has evolved directly from the power in the 1994 Act. The reason that that has happened is relatively easy to understand. It is because of the diligence and effectiveness of the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in the other place and the Deregulation Committee in this House. They have proved that the worries expressed by Labour Members when the 1994 Act was introduced were unfounded. The Deregulation Committee has reported five times in respect of the Bill. It did so twice as a result of initial consultation on the order-making power and three times following the Bill's publication in April 2000. Its most recent report was published last Friday. Its views have shaped the Government's thinking on aspects of the Bill such as the reform of common law. As has been repeatedly stated, the procedures set out in the Bill are based on consensus, which has largely been achieved through the Committee system.

The Deregulation Committee's work has been truly invaluable. It made a number of recommendations, the most immediately relevant of which is that subordinate provisions orders should be made by affirmative resolution. The Government have responded by agreeing to an amendment tabled in another place by Lord Borrie to ensure that orders can stipulate whether the negative or affirmative procedure should be used. In its latest report, the Committee welcomes the commitments made by Ministers in the Lords. I am delighted to repeat those commitments, which the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) asked me to reiterate. First, I am happy to confirm that the order-making power will not be used for large and controversial measures. Secondly, the Government would not proceed with an order against the Committee's wishes. Thirdly, the Government will report in three years' time on the procedural workings and constitutional implications of the power.

The Bill's second power is a new reserve power to set out a code of good enforcement practice. One or two of the comments that were made showed that some hon. Members did not understand that simple point. The reserve power has not received much comment, but bad enforcement can be the most burdensome part of regulation. The light-touch nature of the power was developed with input from a consultative exercise involving enforcers and those subject to enforcement. The power is intended to counter unjustifiably inflexible or over-zealous enforcement. It allows the Government to exert pressure on enforcers who fail to apply best practice along the lines of the concordat.

Mr. Redwood: When will the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food provide clear, consistent, transparent and fair regulations for farmers? It is currently all over the place and is offering all sorts of different rules about the movement of animals that need to be moved.

Mr. Stringer: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, as it gives me the chance to explain the basic misunderstanding that he demonstrated in his speech. The Bill allows a new code of practice to be introduced when it is shown over time that enforcers are not behaving reasonably and proportionately. Clearly, such provision does not apply to the emergency situation in which agriculture and farmers currently find themselves.

My hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), for Burnley (Mr. Pike), for Eccles (Mr. Stewart), for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) and for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White)—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is only fair to allow the Parliamentary Secretary a hearing. Conversations may occur outside the Chamber.

Mr. Stringer: My hon. Friends' contributions demonstrated the considerable understanding of the deregulatory process and of the nature of the Bill that they have gained from their participation in the proceedings of the Deregulation Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East spoke about the need for objectives in the process of policy making and regulation. That is an explicit part of the regulatory impact assessment. At the start of the process, the objective of Government policy must be properly considered. Before we think about regulation, we must decide whether our aims can be achieved by self-regulation, co-regulation, codes of practice or other means.

I think that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) got to the heart of many points. Unfortunately, he was wrong. He went through the regulations, quoted from an article that I had written for *The Times*, and said that the number of regulations had remained constant. In the article, I cited the number of overall regulations. Of the statutory instruments agreed in the past year, only 4 per cent. of regulations apply to business. In the last full year of the Conservative Government, the figure was 7 per cent. That means 230 regulations that put a burden on business compared with 126.

Mr. Lansley: Let us get to the heart of the matter. Do the Government intend the measure to be used to introduce orders that have a net deregulatory effect—yes or no? If the answer is yes, will that provision be included in the Bill?

Mr. Stringer: The Bill makes it clear that each regulatory reform order must contain a deregulatory element.

Most Conservative Members' comments have not been about the Bill, but about regulation in general. I concede that the Government, like every other Government in the world, are not perfect at regulation. We introduced the Bill because we want to improve our performance. Clearly, Conservative Members do not want to improve or to understand the international and historical comparisons.

Independent reports confirm that our performance on regulation compares favourably with that of other countries. According to the economic outlook of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which was published in December 1999, the UK has the lowest product-market regulation of any OECD country. The intelligence unit of *The Economist* found that the UK was ranked second in the 60 largest economies in the world for places in which it was good to do business. They were rated against 70 factors, including flexibility of the labour market and openness to foreign investment. We are currently the subject of an OECD study on regulatory performance. It will establish in greater detail the effectiveness of our measures to combat over-regulation.

[Mr. Stringer]

It is instructive to consider our performance not only internationally but historically. Comparisons with the performance and aspirations of the Conservative party are telling. The rhetoric that we have heard today matches that of Conservative Members in the past. The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) said that the 1994 Act would be used hundreds of times to repeal burdensome regulations. From 1994 to 1997, it was used 37 times. In 1995, the right hon. Gentleman pledged that he would reduce the number of different business licences from more than 250. By 1997, it had increased to 365.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page), who was Minister with responsibility for small businesses, admitted in 1997 that, since the beginning of the deregulation initiative in 1994, the Department of Trade and Industry had repealed 93 regulations but had introduced 315. Between the beginning of the deregulation initiative in 1994 and the 1997 election, 13 times as many regulations were introduced as were scrapped.

With such a record, Conservative Members should quietly and thankfully support the Bill. However, they have used it as an opportunity to break their trappist silence on the economy. Conservative Members' target has been not the complicated matter of improving the Government's regulatory performance, but improvement in workers' rights and the protection of the environment.

The Opposition failed to light their bonfire of red tape because it was based on a simplistic analysis of the impact of regulation on business. The Bill is one part of the Government's programme to improve regulatory performance without reversing necessary protection. I urge hon. Members to support Second Reading and to reject the amendment.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 151, Noes 284.

Division No. 158] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Liley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. James Gray.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor

Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle
(B'ham Yardley)
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John
(Aberavon)
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John
(Glasgow Anniesland)
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan
(Swansea W)
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on second or third reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]* (Programme)

10.18 pm

Mr. Stringer: I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Regulatory Reform Bill [Lords]:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 29th March.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The motion proposes that the Committee stage of the Bill should be completed by Thursday 29 March. It also provides for the Committee to sit twice on the first day. It further provides for the standard procedure for the Third Reading debate—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hon. Members leaving the Chamber must do so quietly.

Mr. Stringer: We believe that the motion provides adequate time for the Committee to scrutinise what is, after all, a short 15-clause Bill, which has undergone extensive pre-legislative scrutiny. Let me remind the House of that scrutiny, which consisted not only of public consultation but of scrutiny by the Deregulation Committee in this House and the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in another place. As in previous debates, those Committees' reports have proved invaluable.

Mr. Leigh: Does the Minister consider that arguments adduced on Second Reading should affect the amount of time given for the Committee stage?

Mr. Stringer: That is a matter for the Programming Sub-Committee—but, having listened to the Second Reading debate, I am confident that the time allocated will be adequate to deal with all the points that have been raised, especially given the length of the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The Minister has already expressed the opinion that we—I assume that he included himself in that plural—believed that the scrutiny time was sufficient. That being so, he is in a position to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). Will he please tell us now whether he thinks that arguments raised on Second Reading affect his judgment in any way?

Mr. Stringer: I obviously did not answer that point to the satisfaction of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), but I answered it as clearly as I am going to. It might have been helpful to the debate—or perhaps not—if the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) had turned up and listened to the arguments. He was noticeable by his absence throughout the entire debate.

The Bill has also undergone rigorous debate in another place, concentrating on its parliamentary and constitutional aspects. As a result, the Bill has been amended and now contains even stricter safeguards than before. As a result of amendments made in another place, every order must now be based on deregulatory measures, which I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will welcome.

This is not some skeleton Bill, to be fleshed out during the parliamentary process. It is a fully thought-through product, and the Government see no need to make any further amendments to it. Therefore, the time in Committee can be spent on debating the issues in the Bill, not on considering Government amendments. We have no intention of producing any amendments in Committee at this stage.

One of the most important features of the Programming Sub-Committee is that it gives Opposition Members the opportunity to decide on priorities. It will be for them to stipulate the amount of time that the Standing Committee will take in examining particular aspects of the Bill.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): The Minister has stipulated that he is not at all affected by the Second Reading debate and has guaranteed that the Government have no intention of proposing amendments in Committee, so what is the point of having a Committee stage?

Mr. Stringer: The hon. Gentleman—I am sure inadvertently—misquotes me. I said that I was sure that sufficient time had been allocated by the programme motion to take care of all the points that had been made on Second Reading. As I said in response to a previous intervention, it would probably have been more useful if the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) had been present during Second Reading—his contribution might have been more apposite.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I believe that the Minister is being quite helpful. I am interested in the procedures of this House, as he knows. Will he confirm that if the Programming Sub-Committee would like to have more sittings within the timetable—that is, by the time the Bill leaves Committee—the Government would be happy to agree to that to allow the Opposition parties to ensure that all their concerns were dealt with properly in Committee?

Mr. Stringer: That is clearly a matter for the Programming Sub-Committee and its Chairman, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

The Government will not stipulate the amount of time to be spent on, say, the first four clauses; that will be for Opposition Members to decide. I hope that the House will recognise that it is not the Government who win from the programme motion. The Opposition gain from being able to set out how they want the debate to be held, and the whole House wins from added certainty about the timetabling of Bills.

I ask the House to support the programme motion.

10.23 pm

Mr. Lansley: I am astonished by the Minister's assertions. In introducing his programme motion, he seemed to combine arrogance with regard to the Bill's proper scrutiny by the House with incompetence.

The Minister of State in the other place also seemed to suggest when the Bill arrived there that it had been the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny and examination by deregulation committees. Yet in the course of its examination in the House of Lords, amendments were made to the Bill concerning parliamentary control of subordinate provisions orders, the imposition of burdens and the extent to which they needed to be removed or reduced, and the extent to which cost savings were illustrated in clause 6. A Bill that the Minister described as "perfectly formed" was certainly not so when it was introduced in another place, and it was the subject of amendments there.

The Minister is saying that the Second Reading debate has had no impact on him. It is possible that he paid no attention to it, but in my hearing of it, a number of matters were raised—and not only by Conservative Members, which is interesting. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), who is no longer with us, and the hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) said that they believed that the Bill did not go far enough on simplification and comprehensibility. Yet the Minister seems to be discounting not only points made by Conservative Members but those made by his colleagues.

Mr. Stringer: When my noble Friend Lord Falconer introduced the Bill in the other place, he made it clear that the Government were open to particular amendments because of the recommendations of the Deregulation Committee in this House, as hon. Members will see if they read Lords *Hansard*. I said—I want the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and others to be clear about this point—that the Government have no intention of tabling amendments in Committee. We will, of course, listen as carefully as possible to the arguments put forward by Conservative and, indeed, Labour Members.

Mr. Lansley: The mention of the Minister of State in the Lords reminds us that incompetence and arrogance seem to go together in this Government. The Minister says that the Government do not intend to table amendments, but that does not absolve them of the necessity to have regard to the extent of amendments that might be tabled in Committee by Conservative Members, Liberal Democrats or even, heaven forfend, Labour Back Benchers. Yet the Government seem to have assumed that the Committee stage can be completed by 29 March, regardless of the number of amendments that are tabled.

That is all of a piece with the way in which this Government behave. They are not interested in what others have to say; they are interested only in passing their Bill according to their timetable. As the Second Reading debate demonstrated, they want their fig leaf of deregulation to cover the nakedness of their regulatory activity over the past four years.

Mr. Stringer: It says here.

Mr. Lansley: It does not say that here—I just made it up.

A number of issues were addressed in the Second Reading debate and, more importantly, as the Minister will have observed, Conservative Members moved a reasoned amendment objecting to the principle of the Bill, which is objectionable in that it is capable of being a regulatory Bill—one which imposes burdens rather than using an exceptional, important power for a specific deregulatory purpose.

The Minister was right to say that there is now a degree of acceptance, which extends to his party as well as to ours, about the use of what the Minister described as a super-affirmative procedure for secondary legislation to amend regulatory effects of primary legislation, but Conservative Members have not reconciled themselves to that in circumstances where it could be used to impose new burdens and to free the public sector to impose additional costs or to reduce its own burdens at the expense of the private sector. We are not reconciled to the idea that that exceptional procedure should be used other than for the specific purpose of removing the burden that the state imposes on the private citizen, yet the Government plan to pursue that point.

Having lost the vote on our reasoned amendment, we find that the Minister has no regard to the additional safeguards that we might want to propose in Committee. It is incumbent on me to give the Minister an indication of some of the measures that we would like to suggest in amendments.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: Before I launch into the precise detail, I happily give way to my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend makes the point that the Bill may be used to impose further regulations. He might add that the order-making procedure that the House is being asked to approve will not give us the opportunity to amend any further obligations that we may be asked to agree to. The order-making procedure is all or nothing.

Mr. Lansley: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. On Second Reading of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) opposed the measure from the Labour Benches principally on the ground that it contained a power to amend or even repeal Acts of Parliament. Substantial but unamendable changes could be made to primary legislation even though, in certain circumstances, formal scrutiny by the House would be limited to a 90-minute debate under the affirmative resolution procedure.

Such changes were subject to prior scrutiny by the deregulation Committees, but scrutiny by the Members of the House was limited. I was not a Member at that time, but my right hon. and learned Friend will recall that the

[Mr. Lansley]

Conservative Government thought that the procedure was justified because of the wider benefit to be derived for the business community and private citizens from the ability to reduce the overall burden of regulation. That power is to be used by the Government to take wholly new directions, although there are no safeguards in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) referred to the tests that have to be applied—those of proportionality, fair balance and the desirability of such measures—and the language used leads one to the question whether a Minister is of the opinion that a particular regulatory reform order is desirable. There is no constraint in the Bill that provides that a Minister can proceed only on the basis that there is a net deregulatory—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The debate is about the time allocated for proceedings in Committee. The hon. Gentleman should restrict his comments to that.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) tempted me.

I emphasise that the amendments that we want to table in Committee and the question of safeguards both warrant a significant allocation of time and neither should be prejudiced by the Government's decision that consideration must be completed by 29 March. Let me give an example of what we want to scrutinise.

On the test of proportionality, when burdens are to be imposed through the making or re-enactment of provisions, there should be a proportional benefit. However, as Baroness Buscombe said in the other place, the Bill does not deal with whether such additional burdens are necessary, and the necessity of such measures must be considered. We must also be sure that their effect will be genuinely deregulatory.

One of the Bill's serious and principal deficiencies relates to Ministers in the other place. At the end of the debate on Second Reading, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office was prepared to use the weasel words that every regulatory reform order would be deregulatory in effect. However, he would not answer the question whether they would have a net deregulatory effect in practice.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is falling into the same trap. He must direct his remarks to the time that will be spent in Committee.

Mr. Lansley: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I shall indeed address myself to the time. There are a number of amendments relating directly to the point that I was making; I shall certainly want to test it during the Standing Committee's discussions.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will my hon. Friend respond to the same question that I put to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office? If in the light of amendments tabled in Standing Committee, it is clear that the number of sittings agreed to in the sittings motion is inadequate, does my hon. Friend believe that the Government will permit additional sittings to ensure that all the amendments considered important by Opposition parties are properly debated?

Mr. Lansley: I entirely take my hon. Friend's point—I hope. That should be the case—that is what the Government should do. However, the experience of the Opposition is that, on some occasions, the Government—far from making available additional sittings within the time constraints of the programme motion—have actually curtailed the number of sittings previously promised. Having listened to a debate on that subject last week, I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends realise that the Government are not to be trusted on such matters.

Although the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office says that the Bill is small, the significance of the provisions that we have to discuss is not small. The need for simplification of legislation in general was raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House on Second Reading. Such simplification is not present in the Bill, although language on modernisation might intrude if members of the Deregulation Committee had their way. The consideration of simplification is one of the safeguards that must be built into the legislation. That will need further time for discussion.

We also need to ensure that there are safeguards on powers introduced both as regards the extension of criminal sanctions and as regards the extent to which Ministers are able to incur expenditure under the legislation. Both are curious matters for contemplation under a deregulatory measure. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to table amendments to ensure that there are safeguards on changes to primary legislation that would have the effect of changing criminal sanctions; such measures should be appropriately circumscribed.

The Committee may want to consider not only amendments to existing clauses—the length of the Bill in terms of the number of clauses is not an absolute constraint—but one or more new clauses. For example, the review of regulatory reform orders and of the legislation itself has been the subject of some undertakings from Ministers, but it has not been built into the Bill. The Committee should certainly examine those matters in the form of new clauses. My colleagues—and, I suspect, business organisations—attach considerable importance to setting up some form of review of regulatory reform orders after a period, so as to determine whether they give rise to the cost and savings benefits and disbenefits that will be anticipated in the documents to be laid before the House under clause 6.

The whole scope of consultation, as well as internal parliamentary scrutiny, continues to give us serious cause for concern. The active involvement of external organisations in securing scrutiny of the legislation and of regulatory reform orders before they are even considered by the Select Committees is integral to the success of the whole deregulation process. In that respect, it is significant that clause 6 gives quite detailed provisions as to what should be presented in the document laid before Parliament, although there is more to say on regulatory impact assessments. Clause 5 provides for consultation

external to Parliament. Business organisations should have much of the same information; we hope to table amendments to that effect.

Mr. Pike: Does the hon. Gentleman think that he might not have had a problem with time if Conservative members of the Deregulation Committee had taken part in the consideration of the draft Bill, rather than boycotting the proceedings?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman simply repeats remarks that he made on Second Reading. The simple fact of the matter is that Minister did not take on board some of the Deregulation Committee's proposals. For example, the hon. Gentleman could have told us about the reasons why the Government did not choose to include a provision on modernisation and simplification, which the Deregulation Committee wanted to come within the scope of regulatory reform orders. So there are many issues to be discussed.

Although the Bill is short, it is highly significant. It not only has wide constitutional implications but could seriously affect a lot of legislation, so it is important that we get it right. The House has given it a Second Reading and, in due course, it should become an Act that is as near as possible to the objective, contained in the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, of providing an exceptional power to deliver a specific deregulatory purpose. We intend to use all the time available in Committee to table amendments to improve the Bill, in so far as the Government will give us the opportunity to do so.

10.41 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The very fact that the Conservative spokesman has run into difficulty in trying to avoid rehearsing the arguments on the substance of the Bill shows how ridiculous programme motion debates have become. That, I fear, is largely because of the way in which the Government have handled the business of the House, rather than being the responsibility of the Opposition parties which, obviously, can have only a limited impact on such motions.

I shall stick to the subject of the programme motion itself. Clearly, the way in which the Parliamentary Secretary introduced it was itself rather peculiar. First he said—I cannot precisely repeat his words, but I think that I paraphrase accurately—that he could not envisage circumstances in which the Government would introduce amendments. However, he slipped in the phrase, "at present". I am sure that we shall see that qualification when we read *Hansard* tomorrow morning. When he was challenged on that point, he made another statement, which was slightly different.

What is so intrinsically absurd about programme motions like this is that, before the Committee of Selection has even appointed the Standing Committee's members or its Chairman and before the Programming Sub-Committee has had an opportunity to analyse the issues raised on Second Reading—let alone to look at any representation made from outside the House since the Bill's consideration in the other place—the Government see fit to put an end date on the Bill's consideration in Committee. That is patently, intrinsically absurd, and it is unnecessary.

This week, I hope to put some proposals to the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons to discover whether we cannot break the ludicrous logjam of programme motions. I appeal to those on both Front Benches carefully to consider ways in which programme motions can proceed consensually, to give them the real impact that they were intended to have when they were first proposed by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) in his capacity as Chairman of the Select Committee on Procedure in the previous Parliament, and by the Modernisation Committee in this Parliament.

I very much hope that Back Benchers on both sides of the House, who must recognise what a silly farce programme motions have become, will exert pressure on those on their Front Benches to discover whether we cannot make progress. Some Members think that we can make no progress on anything until we are the other side of the general election, but I remind them it is possible that, instead of Dissolution taking place in 13 days' time, it could still be 13 months away.

We simply cannot go on for another 13 months with the current absurdities that have been put before us tonight, and night after night, with programme motions. I hope therefore that in considering the proposals, all members of the Modernisation Committee, on both sides of the House, will be prepared to discover whether we cannot find some way through.

There is an additional reason: we cannot wait until the other side of polling day to establish what Sessional Orders may be appropriate to the new Parliament. So it is important to try to achieve a consensus on both sides of the House on how to improve the situation. Certainly, the present arrangement brings no credit on the House. These 45-minute debates have become increasingly sterile—a genuine dialogue of the deaf—and they have not prepared the House for better management of its business.

Effective scrutiny depends on the Opposition parties having an opportunity to say how the detailed issues should be addressed and how much time should be given to the particular parts of a Bill. I accept that the Government have a right to seek to get their business out of Committee by an end date. However, it is totally unnecessary to table the type of motion that is before the House tonight. I very much hope that, in the next few days, we might seek to make progress so that at least in the new Parliament—be that in a month or two or 14 months or so—we can bring credit to the way in which the House does its business.

10.45 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I rise once again to oppose the principle of a programme motion. Those on the Government Front Bench need to understand that there is no consent to the process on which they are embarking. They also need to understand that the lack of consent is perfectly genuine. I have been in this place a long time, so I recognise that Members of Parliament often express views that are, on the whole, superficial. One is entitled to ask, "Do they really mean it?" However, we really do mean it when we say that the current process of timetabling is deeply unacceptable to us.

The process is unacceptable for a variety of reasons that I shall outline shortly. However, the consequence is critically important. If a sizeable portion of the House does not accept

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

a process, that process has no legitimacy. The House can proceed only if we have what might be broadly defined as genuine acquiesence. There is no genuine acquiesence in the process of timetabling; and the consequences of such a lack of acquiesence are actions, such as those effected by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), that demonstrate the House's collective disquiet at the process on which the Government are embarking.

This is an important Bill. I shall not discuss it because you would call me to order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it will give the Government a wide discretionary power to change or to disapply primary legislation. That is a constitutional innovation. I, for one, find it passing strange that Third Reading should permit but one hour of debate on a measure of such constitutional importance.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) made the point that we need to consider whether it might be possible to reach a consensus on timetabling. The answer is that we might be able to do so, but that has to be on the basis that there is genuine time for discussion. I have been in this place a long time and, like others, I know that from time to time Members abuse the processes of the House. When there is a genuine feeling that the House's processes are being abused, the Government will find that they have tacit support for intervention by way of timetabling or closure even though hon. Members may go through the motions of opposition. Members, however, will not accept timetabling in advance before there is abuse. Government Members must accept that we will never, ever accept artificial timetabling, although we will accept timetabling when there is abuse. However, it will always be a matter of judgment as to when there is or is not abuse.

The Government must also understand that the Committee and Report stages are important. It is all very well to say that this is a small Bill, so the House should just accept it. However, the process of scrutinising legislation contains certain distinct elements. First, we have to consider whether the principle is right. I do not think that it is in this case, because of the constitutional implication—but let us assume that I am wrong. We then have to consider the language in which the legislation is couched. One of our functions as Members of Parliament is to try to ensure that we do not pass legislation that is inherently nonsensical or which gives rise to unforeseen problems. We can only understand that by scrutinising it extensively in Committee.

There is an additional matter to consider which arises from such a debate. The Bill is supposed to enable us to remove, by order, the burdens of regulation. Hon. Members will want to identify cases in Committee or on Report of regulations that are biting on their constituents. They will do that by tabling amendments that draw specific attention to a class of abuse or regulation.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is not merely the number of clauses that counts, but their scope, reach and potential cost? Notwithstanding what the Parliamentary Secretary says about not intending to table amendments, is it not the case that many other people may want to? Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that the subordinate provisions order in clause 4—on which the Parliamentary Secretary was notably silent—is highly controversial and should be submitted to extensive debate?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend identifies three major considerations, the second of which is the most important. He draws attention to the fact that the Government have no intention of tabling amendments—as if that were a conclusive argument. I bet they will table amendments. I have been in the House and in government for much longer than the Parliamentary Secretary and the chance of his not tabling amendments is very small. However, I do not care what he does. What concerns me is that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) may want to table an amendment.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that the Minister for the Cabinet Office has been trying, from a sedentary position, to get him to stop speaking even though she has spoken a great deal herself and we have only 45 minutes in which to discuss the motion?

Mr. Hogg: The right hon. Lady has prattled throughout her time in the House. I heard background noises, but fortunately I am rather deaf. I tried to see who was making the funny little noise and I am glad to learn that it was the Minister, because that means I do not have to worry about what was going on.

My right hon. Friend is right. We are not concerned primarily with whether the Government want to table amendments. What interests us is whether Back Benchers or Front Benchers of different parties want to do that and articulate their constituents' concerns. The Parliamentary Secretary's attitude is: if the Government do not want to table amendments, does it matter that others might want to? Yes, it does. That is why there is no consent in the House.

I have said before that there is an implied bargain in a democracy between Parliament—the legislature—and the electorate. If the electorate are to accept policy and legislation that imposes burdens on them, they do so on the basis that their representatives in Parliament have been given an opportunity, which they have taken up, to scrutinise legislation. If the Government deprive Parliament of that opportunity, they will destroy the bargain and undermine the basis on which the country accepts the burdens that they impose.

Mr. Leigh: On the electorate, does my right hon. and learned Friend think that if we continue to muzzle Parliament, the public will become less interested in it and know less about it? It was instructive tonight that when a contestant on the popular programme "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" was asked to name the Speaker of the House of Commons, neither he nor the audience had any idea. They were given four choices—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not expect the right hon. and learned Gentleman to respond to that intervention.

Mr. Hogg: I understand that the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) is somewhat embarrassing to the Chair, but he is right: if the House is deprived of an opportunity either to scrutinise

legislation or to articulate the concerns of its constituency, no one should be surprised if that constituency—the electorate—does not give a damn about us.

That is what is happening. The Government are, by deliberate policy, muzzling the House. That is a scandal. Let me tell the Minister for the Cabinet Office that I shall be here long after she has gone, and I shall make it my business consistently and persistently to oppose timetable motions, which I believe are a denial of democracy.

10.56 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am not, in principle, against programming. I want it to work. I share the view expressed tonight by the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler): the House was right to seek to use its time better. Unlike my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), I do not believe that people abuse the House. I think that they use the current procedures of the House as they think fit, which is wholly legitimate.

To the Minister I put the question that I raised in an intervention: will he give an assurance that if the Opposition parties believe that, within the programme motion, more sittings of the Standing Committee are necessary, in no circumstances will the Government use their majority on the Committee to deny it the opportunity to have additional sittings? I hope that the Leader of the House and the Government accept the unique position of the Chairman of a Standing Committee who seeks to represent the interests of all members of that Committee, including members of the governing party whose views put them in a minority in that party, so as to ensure that all aspects of the Bill are properly considered by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham says, to do otherwise is to deny the true scrutiny role of the House of Commons.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 43.

Division No. 159] **[10.57 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, Da[illegible]
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, Davi[illegible]
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg

Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]*:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 29th March.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion

to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

REGULATORY REFORM BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenses incurred by a Minister of the Crown or government department in consequence of orders under the Act, and

(b) any increase attributable to orders under the Act in the sums which under any other Act are payable out of money so provided.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

European Security and Defence Policy

11.10 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 27th November 2000 relating to the Presidency Report to the Nice European Council on the Common European Security and Defence Policy (document 14056/3/00) and the three unnumbered Explanatory Memoranda submitted by the FCO on 22nd and 23rd January relating to the establishment of permanent CESDP bodies; welcomes the Government's approach to a Common European Security and Defence Policy; and supports the Government's intention to pursue this initiative in the EU and in close co-operation with NATO.

The motion stands in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position on this important issue. I shall explain why the agreements reached at the Nice European Council—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Hon. Members must not—*[Interruption.]* Order. Hon. Members cannot wave papers and bob up and down in their seats while the Minister is addressing the House.

Mr. Vaz: I am delighted that I have such a large following that Opposition Members have turned out for this debate.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister introduced the motion by saying that it stood in his name and those of his hon. Friends, but none of his hon. Friends appear on the Order Paper.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr. Vaz: I shall explain why the agreements reached at the Nice European Council and the subsequent decisions of the January General Affairs Council represent a good outcome for Britain, Europe and NATO.

The House will recall that the European Union's security and defence policy results from an initiative launched by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in 1998. The goals of that initiative have not changed and are fully reflected in the agreements reached at Nice. We want to create a Europe where nations invest in better military capabilities. We want to strengthen Europe's contribution to NATO and to enable Europeans to act where NATO as a whole is not involved.

Nice represented a major step towards securing those goals. The Council agreed on permanent structures for EU political and military bodies, and on inclusive arrangements to involve non-member states in European security and defence policy. It proposed comprehensive consultation and co-operation agreements between the EU and NATO.

The results of Nice have been widely welcomed. The new United States Administration support the emphasis on capabilities and the relationship with NATO. On 23 February at Camp David, President Bush said:

"The United States welcomes the European Union's European Security and Defence Policy, intended to make Europe a stronger and more capable partner in deterring and managing crises affecting the security of the Transatlantic community."

[Mr. Vaz]

Although the ESDP has been welcomed by the United States, its domestic reception here has, at times, been mixed. I fear that a great deal of that is down to misunderstandings created by the Conservative party, so I welcome this opportunity to put the record straight.

The Nice report spells out what the ESDP is and, just as importantly in the light of some British reactions, what it is not. The second paragraph of the report could not be clearer. It states that EU nations will act

"where NATO as a whole is not engaged".

EU nations will carry out the Petersberg tasks,

"humanitarian and rescue tasks, peace-keeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making".

In other words, the EU will not be involved in war-fighting or collective defence; those remain with NATO alone.

Hon. Members might like to recall that the Petersberg tasks were agreed by the previous Government as the scope of activity for the Western European Union, so it is somewhat hypocritical to criticise the European Union for being ready to take on the same roles. Moreover, it is worth recalling that the Maastricht treaty signed up EU member states not only to the prospect of a common EU defence policy, but to "a common defence". It is worth reminding the House that one of the Members who signed the Maastricht treaty was the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who is now shadow Foreign Secretary. Those who sound completely false alarm bells about the threat to NATO were happy to sign up to the prospect of the EU replacing NATO.

The Government have changed the perspective by taking the lead in European defence rather than taking fright. We have shaped the debate and designed the policy in a way that ensures that NATO's pre-eminent role remains unchanged. To make that clear, the report states:

"NATO remains the basis of the collective defence of its members and will continue to play an important role in crisis management".

We have only to look to Bosnia and Kosovo for confirmation of the latter point.

The report also makes it clear that there is no such thing as a European army. It states:

"This does not involve the establishment of a European army. The commitment of national resources by Member States to such operations will be based on their sovereign decisions."

Thus the Nice treaty, agreed under the Government, establishes European defence as NATO-friendly and intergovernmental. The House will agree that that is a significant improvement on the open door to a common EU defence that was accepted at Maastricht by the self-proclaimed guardians of NATO and UK sovereignty.

I have clarified what the ESDP is not; I shall now explain what it is

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: I am delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman, who, as well as being shadow Secretary of State for Defence, has taken over the role of shadow Foreign Secretary from the right hon. Member for Horsham. The hon. Gentleman went to Washington to pour poison into the ears of the Administration. That caused our difficulties.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Minister claims much credit for moves away from Maastricht and other treaties. Why, in 1997, did the Prime Minister describe the proposals to which the Minister signed up at St. Malo and Nice as "ill-judged transplant" operations, which he voted out?

Mr. Vaz: Let us begin by paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Horsham, who signed the Maastricht treaty in 1992, and to Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who agreed the Petersberg tasks the next year. That is where European defence originated. The continuation of that policy at St. Malo began under the previous Government.

Mr. Duncan Smith *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Vaz: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not want to take credit for it, but he must. He must also give due credit to the right hon. Member for Horsham.

First and foremost, European defence is about more effective European armed forces. It is about enhancing Europe's contribution to NATO, strengthening our ability to support United Nations or Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe operations, and making it possible for EU nations to respond to crises.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: I give way to another member of the previous Government, who began the process of European defence.

Mr. Howard: As the Minister is unable to call upon his solicitor's services this evening, will he answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) asked?

Mr. Vaz: Why should I need a solicitor when an eminent barrister such as the right hon. and learned Gentleman is present? He is probably even more expensive than any solicitor that I could have.

The first annexe to the Nice report includes the conclusions of the capabilities commitment conference of 20 to 21 November 2000. At that conference, which was a UK-French initiative, EU nations set out the contributions that they proposed to offer the EU's headline goal.

The headline goal of the European defence initiative is a step change in Europe's military performance. By 2003, EU nations operating together should be able to deploy up to 60,000 troops in 60 days, and maintain a deployment of that size for at least a year. The capabilities conference showed that EU nations had enough troops to meet that target. The total contributions offered were more than 100,000. The quantity target was met. However, the conference agreed that further efforts were needed to improve the quality of the European performance in the availability, deployability, sustainability and use of those forces; in the ability to transport troops rapidly to the field of operations; and in better missiles, precision weapons and logistic support.

Britain welcomed that honest appraisal of the shortfalls and the commitment to filling those gaps. These high-readiness crisis management troops are precisely what NATO needs in the Balkans. This is, therefore, a practical example of how improving the performance of European nations also strengthens NATO.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): The capabilities conference also called for the availability of 400 combat aircraft and 100 naval vessels. Why would the European Union rapid reaction force need all those troops, aircraft and ships just to perform Petersberg tasks?

Mr. Vaz: Because it is important to show that there is the capability to achieve that. The hon. Gentleman should know that because he has a deeper knowledge of the subject than the right hon. Member for Horsham, and has thought carefully about it. Certainly, when I appeared before the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, he probed me on that point. It is important that those capabilities exist.

The capabilities conference was not just about EU nations. We deliberately made the headline goal a target that applied only to EU nations to ensure that the pressure was kept up to deliver real improvements without relying on others. However, the ESDP should involve all European nations, so the non-EU European members of NATO and other accession candidates offered contributions that would be available for EU-led operations.

Nice also proposed a mechanism to ensure that EU nations' progress towards the headline goal was kept under review. That will involve close co-ordination between the EU and NATO, to ensure that commitments made in NATO defence planning and the ESDP are fully compatible.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that it is profoundly shocking that the Opposition appear willing to allow our ground troops to be exposed to risk without the support of the naval and air forces that they might need? Does he accept that 60,000 troops constitute one reinforced division, and that, on their own, they could be vulnerable?

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend makes a good point. However, nothing that the Opposition do these days shocks me.

The ESDP will work only as part of a transparent and effective relationship between the EU and NATO. A lot of nonsense has been talked about the EU establishing itself as a rival to NATO, and that nonsense comes from the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, who goes like a weasel to Washington to continue to poison the Administration there. That is emphatically not the case. The EU and NATO are not two anonymous, institutional monoliths. Eleven European countries are members of both. Both take defence decisions by consensus.

I saw that consensus today when I attended the General Affairs Council meeting in Brussels. The Secretary-General of NATO and the Foreign Minister of Macedonia met the Foreign Ministers of the EU countries to discuss the situation in Macedonia. This is not a question of the EU and NATO acting separately. The way to deal with European defence is for those organisations and institutions to work together. This is the only way that it can be achieved.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) *rose—*

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Vaz: I give way to one of the pro-Europeans on the other side of the House: the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer).

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman help the House further on this matter? He has made a number of comments but has not been able to answer the question that was in my mind and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith). The Minister prays in aid the Maastricht treaty—which I voted for—yet his leader voted against it and made it clear that the very things that the Minister now says are good about it were not good. What has changed in the meantime?

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman clearly has not been listening to what I have been saying. If he had been listening, he would know that the important part of the European defence framework that was established at Maastricht enabled us to continue this defence policy.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman supported the Maastricht treaty, and I know that it was signed by the right hon. Member for Horsham; but other Conservative Members, such as the hon. Members for Stone (Mr. Cash) and for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), would not have signed the treaty, and do not support it. At least their position remains one of integrity, and not one to be changed whenever certain situations arise.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The Minister made some carping remarks about my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) and his visit to Washington. Has the Minister read the House of Commons research department's note regarding the question of what President Bush has understood from the Prime Minister? It states:

> "Mr. Bush's seemingly relaxed view of ESDP may be somewhat misplaced. His reference to assurances from the Prime Minister that NATO and ESDP would have a joint command, and that the planning would take place within NATO, would appear to overstate the level of EU-NATO co-operation as laid down in the Presidency report from Nice."

Mr. Vaz: I would rather hear the words used by President Bush himself than the comments contained in the document from which the hon. Gentleman has quoted. *[Interruption.]* What Opposition Members cannot stomach is the fact that the Prime Minister could go to Camp David and secure agreement with President Bush on this matter. That is what they cannot stomach, but that is exactly what happened. Support for the European defence policy from President Bush was the most important thing that came out of Camp David, and the hon. Gentleman knows it.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The Minister will recall that France threw NATO out of Paris because it did not want command and control of its forces to be organised under

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

NATO. What does this agreement on European armed forces mean? Does it mean that France is returning its troops to the command and control of NATO, or does it mean that all our troops are being taken out of that command and control?

Mr. Vaz: France is completely supportive of these proposals. It signed up to the Nice agreement, which followed a conference and a council convened by the French. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not know that Nice is in France: that is where it was all agreed.

The ESDP will work only as part of a transparent and effective relationship between the European Union and NATO. The Nice presidency report includes a comprehensive set of proposals for EU-NATO relations, which are listed in annexe VII of the report and its appendix. The EU makes three proposals. It proposes that co-operation should cover all questions of common interest relating to security, defence and crisis management; that there should be joint ministerial, senior official and military committee meetings during each EU presidency; that EU representatives attend NATO meetings, and vice versa; and that all those contacts should be intensified in a crisis.

The arrangements do not seem to have satisfied some Opposition Members, but they were welcomed by NATO Foreign Ministers when they met during the week after Nice. The EU welcomed NATO's positive reaction. In an exchange of letters, the EU presidency and NATO's Secretary-General noted that there was now agreement on the elements of the permanent NATO-EU relationship. Copies of the exchange were placed in the Vote Office in advance of tonight's debate. I am sure that the hon. Member for Stone, a frequent visitor to the Vote Office, has already collected his copy.

The other crucial aspect of NATO-EU relations is represented by arrangements for the EU to have access to the assets and expertise of the alliance. There is no intention to duplicate unnecessarily in the EU what exists already in NATO or in European nations. For any EU operation using NATO assets, the operational planning and command structures will come from NATO.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): In that case, can the Minister explain why the EU force—I think that it is an army—needs a military committee, a political committee to direct it, beefed-up strategic intelligence and extra transport? Is it not, in practice, a scheme for a comprehensive military force that does things that NATO does not want to do—not under NATO command and not in co-operation, but separate and deliberately so? Have not the Government lost to the French on that very issue?

Mr. Vaz: I am really sorry that, after I have opened this debate and all the discussions that have taken place, the right hon. Gentleman simply does not understand what we have been talking about. As he heard me say right at the beginning, NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence policy. As he also heard me say, of course any operation of that type will have to draw on NATO assets and NATO command structures. That is precisely what I have just said.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Vaz: I shall give way in a moment. Let me make a little progress first.

The EU military staff will not do operational level planning, nor will it provide command and control structures. It will be a small secretariat with officers on secondment from national Ministries of Defence. It will support the EU military committee and maintain close contact with NATO headquarters. There will be about 140 officers in the EU military staff. It is fanciful to think that that could rival or duplicate the work of the 2,000 or so officers at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, and nor would we want it to.

For small EU-led operations, the alternative exists of planning done by national headquarters, such as the United Kingdom's permanent joint headquarters or the French equivalent. That might be appropriate, for example, for an evacuation of EU nationals or a straightforward humanitarian mission. Regardless, EU nations would decide on an operation only after consultation with NATO and once it was clear that NATO was not going to act. Does the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) understand that, or does he want me to repeat the sentence?

Dr. Lewis: The Minister has rightly said that there will be no duplication of assets, which is absolutely true. If the EU rapid reaction force is operating, it will have to use assets previously allocated to NATO. Is it not correct that the EU rapid reaction force will be operating only on occasions when NATO does not wish to be involved? Therefore, is not the consequence that, when the EU rapid reaction force is operating on such occasions, it will be taking away forces from NATO, thus leaving NATO with fewer forces for those operations in which it does wish to be involved?

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman almost got it right. He was fine up to the last sentence, when he really lost it. Of course the force will draw on NATO assets, but it will do so because NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence policy. There will not be any operations other than those in which NATO has said that it will not act. The hon. Gentleman was fine until the last sentence.

EU nations will determine the objectives for an EU operation and will be responsible for its strategic control and political direction. Some hon. Members seem surprised that a NATO command structure used for an EU-led operation should come under the EU's control for the duration of the operation. However, that would seem to me to be a statement of the obvious. If the United Kingdom mounts a national operation, it is the United Kingdom that will decide. If NATO operates, NATO nations together take the decisions. If the EU undertakes a military operation, who should decide its strategy and direction but the EU nations themselves?

The Nice report sets out, at annexe VI, how the EU will ensure the closest possible involvement of non-member states in the ESDP. That applies from

consultations in the routine phase, to their rights and obligations in the EU-led operation. During every presidency, there will be meetings with the non-EU European members of NATO and, separately, with those countries plus the other candidates for accession to the EU. That consultation will be intensified as a crisis emerges. At that point—indeed, at any point—non-member states can call for additional meetings with EU countries.

In recognition of the importance of NATO's place in the ESDP, European members of NATO outside the EU will have the right to take part in any EU operation using NATO assets. Other non-member states can be invited to do so. When non-member states are making a significant contribution to an EU-led operation, they will take part in its day-to-day management on the same basis as participating member states. That is precisely the kind of dialogue that we had today in Brussels when the NATO Secretary-General and the Macedonian Foreign Minister met EU Ministers to discuss the serious situation in Macedonia.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is guilty of playing games with words. The reality, as he knows very well, no matter how much sophistry he applies to it, is that the key phrases in annexe VII mean that what happens between the EU and NATO

"must take place in full respect of the autonomy of EU decision-making"

and that

"the entire chain of command must remain under the political control and strategic direction of the EU throughout the operation".

The Minister knows well that when those words were written, they did not intend, as the Prime Minister said to President Bush, that everything would be under the command of NATO, as he had promised.

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman just cannot bear the thought that the United States of America and ourselves—President Bush and Prime Minister Blair—were able to agree on European defence on 23 February, because he has spent so much of his time trying to undermine the relationship between the two countries, with his weasel words in Washington. That is a disgraceful way to treat such matters. I realise that he is preparing for the inevitable leadership election after the general election; I am sure that the telephone banks are already set up. None the less, I assure him that we are very comfortable with the words of President Bush and the Prime Minister at Camp David. That is what the hon. Gentleman cannot get over.

At Nice, there was agreement on the roles and composition of the permanent political and military structures within the EU for crisis management. For the convenience of Conservative Members, I can tell them that those are set out in annexes III to V. The General Affairs Council on 22 January decided how they would be established.

The Political and Security Committee has replaced the EU Political Committee. It is responsible for day-to-day management of all CFSP issues. It will be the main interlocutor of the North Atlantic Council. The PSC and NAC met for the first time on 5 February. As well as taking forward the ESDP, they are concentrating on the practical issues of NATO-EU co-operation in the Balkans.

The military committee brings together national Chiefs of Defence Staff or their representatives. It will be the interlocutor of the NATO military committee. Most nations, including the United Kingdom, appoint the same military representatives to NATO and the EU, to ensure a coherent approach.

The discipline and coherence of the EU and NATO military committees will be a useful preparation for the new responsibilities of the current UK military representative, Sir Michael Willcocks; as hon. Members may be aware, he has just been appointed to succeed Black Rod.

The military committee will be formally established once its first permanent chairman is appointed, later this spring. The military staff will also be formally established later this spring, following a decision by Javier Solana, the High Representative.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Vaz: I have given way several times in this debate, and I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman now. He can take part in the debate. I am well aware that only an hour and a half has been allocated for it, and I shall not therefore cover the provisions in the Nice report for taking forward the civilian aspects of crisis management and work on conflict prevention. Both of those are important, as the Balkans crises show, and the EU work on them under the Swedish presidency is proceeding well.

Let me, in closing, re-state the fundamental points for the benefit of the right hon. Member for Wokingham. The ESDP is good news for Britain, Europe and NATO. That is why the Government developed it, why Europe supports it and why the United States and NATO have welcomed it in the statement made by President Bush and the Prime Minister on 23 February. This Government, the United States Government, our EU partners and NATO allies are engaged in making a success of the ESDP. Nice was an important step towards realising the goals of a NATO-friendly ESDP. It was a good result for NATO and a good result for Britain.

11.40 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): It sets a new record for brazenness in this place for the Minister of State, in the circumstances in which he finds himself, to talk about integrity and hypocrisy. No wonder not a single member of the Cabinet had the face to come here tonight to support him, including his boss.

This is a very important matter. We all congratulate the Select Committee on European Scrutiny for having brought it to the attention of the House. I hope that, at least for the rest of the evening, it will get the attention that it deserves.

Let me start by saying clearly and unambiguously, so that there can be no doubt at all, that Conservative Members are completely in favour of enhancing the defence capability of the European members of the Atlantic alliance. We are completely in favour of enhancing the European pillar of that alliance, so long as that is done in such a way as to reinforce the alliance as a whole. That means taking with us all the members of the alliance in Europe, EU and non-EU, and, of course, Canada and the United States.

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

It is perfectly true that the previous Conservative Administration played a very positive and proud role in the 1994 Washington—I mean NATO—summit, which agreed on the concept of a European strategic defence identity within NATO and on deploying a joint taskforce. However, we did that in such a way as to reinforce NATO, to ensure that all the allies were behind the decision and to enhance the links between us and the United States.

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman seeks to claim credit for the Washington summit. Of course, the Washington summit took place in 1999, when this Government were in power.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman has not been paying attention. I was talking about the decision at the 1994 NATO summit to create a European strategic defence identity within NATO. [HON. MEMBERS: "It is not in the brief."] As it is not in the brief, perhaps he does not know about it.

The hon. Gentleman has quoted at length the communiqué that resulted from the Camp David meeting between the United Kingdom and President Bush. I have the transcript before me. It raises a number of questions to which the House is entitled to straightforward answers—a good deal more straightforward than the hon. Gentleman is accustomed to giving in other contexts. He certainly will not have the opportunity, as he had with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, simply to say that he would not answer—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are here to discuss the motion before the House. I remind hon. Members that that is all we are here to debate.

Mr. Davies: Let me quote what President Bush said after the meeting at Camp David. He said of the Prime Minister:

"he also assured me that the European defense would no way undermine NATO. He also assured me that there would be a joint command, that planning would take place within NATO . . . And finally, I was very hopeful when we discussed the Prime Minister's vision that such a vision would encourage our NATO allies and friends to bolster their defense budgets".

So the Prime Minister evidently gave three assurances to President Bush, and he was sitting next to him when President Bush used the words that I have just quoted. He gave an assurance on joint command, an assurance that planning would take place within NATO and an assurance about increases in the budget.

So far as bolstering the defence budget is concerned, there has clearly been no response at all to the Camp David meeting. The Government allowed the defence budget to fall steadily in real terms during their first three years, and the present Budget provides for a 0.1 per cent. increase in real terms in defence spending. The continentals mostly have defence budgets that are stable or falling, and our German allies are in the middle of a steady four-year reduction in nominal terms, which is even bigger in real terms.

I turn now to the key questions of the joint command. Again, I quote President Bush. He said that

"there would be a joint command."

How does that square with the text of the Nice treaty? How does it square with the explanatory memorandum that the Minister of State sent to the European Scrutiny Committee? Annexe 7 to the Nice treaty does not refer to joint commands. It clearly says that the European Council

"will appoint the operation commander and, through the intermediary of the PSC"—

that is the EU Political and Security Committee—

"instruct him to activate the chain of command."

The treaty goes on to say that

"the entire chain of command must remain under the political control and strategic direction of the EU throughout the operation . . . In that framework the operation commander will report on the conduct of the operation to EU bodies only."

How can that possibly describe a joint command? There is absolutely no reference to a joint command and no description of how it might even come about or what it would look like. It would indeed be a rather unusual animal.

Among other things, the treaty says that there will be

"full respect of the autonomy of EU decision-making",

which also seems to be inconsistent with any idea of a joint command. I will give way to the Minister of State if he wants to explain that to the House. How does the assurance given to President Bush at Camp David—which he accepted in good faith, as is clear from the text of his statement to the press afterwards—square with the text that I have just read out? The hon. Gentleman's silence is eloquent.

I turn now to planning. You will recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that President Bush said that he had received assurances

"that planning would take place within NATO".

There is no reference to any other possibility in his statement or, presumably, in the understanding that he was given of the matter. Annexe 6 to the Nice treaty sets out two possibilities on planning which I shall deal with in turn. It says:

"For operations requiring recourse to NATO assets and capabilities, operational planning will be carried out by the Alliance's planning bodies, and for an autonomous EU operation it will be carried out within one of the European strategic level headquarters."

There is no reference to that whatsoever in the Camp David communiqué or the statements made to the press by the Prime Minister and the President after that meeting. Was that matter raised? Was that possibility discussed with the President? Did the Minister of State and his colleagues think that President Bush or his advisers somehow would not get round to reading annexe 6? Does the hon. Gentleman, in the course of his duties in the Foreign Office, regularly underestimate the intelligence of the foreigners with whom he is dealing?

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I want fully to understand the hon. Gentleman's position. Is he saying that President Bush and his advisers did not read the Nice treaty, were not properly briefed on it and were therefore duped and misled by the Prime Minister? Is not that a strange attitude for the Conservative party to strike against a Republican President?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is sadly all too right, which is why the matter is so serious. He should know

that for some generations this country's Prime Minister, from whichever political party he comes, has enjoyed a great deal of credibility in Washington. When the Prime Minister went to Camp David, there is no doubt at all that President Bush would not have taken account of the possibility that the Prime Minister would conduct their conversations on the basis of concealing material facts. It is hardly surprising that President Bush's advisers have been extremely concerned since the Camp David meeting that they may indeed have been misled. My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, has often drawn attention to that.

Let us examine the discrepancy between the text of the treaty of Nice and what was said to President Bush. I shall take the two possibilities in the treaty in turn: one is that planning for an EU operation would lie with one of the European strategic level headquarters; the other is that the operational planning structure of the alliance would be involved if NATO assets were involved.

Mr. Vaz *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I shall give way. Perhaps the Minister will answer one of my questions.

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman should calm himself a little. He needs to know that he is insulting the intelligence of the Government of America, which is one of our strongest allies. He ought to know that, before the Nice Council, the draft of the treaty and the annexes were sent to the Americans, who read them very clearly. After the Nice Council, NATO Foreign Ministers—that includes the United States of America—welcomed the Nice conclusions. He is insulting the intelligence of the American Administration and he should apologise for doing so.

Mr. Davies: It is quite apparent that the Prime Minister gave assurances to President Bush at Camp David because those assurances are in President Bush's statement, which I have already quoted. It is quite clear that the understanding given to President Bush is that which President Bush himself expressed. I have just quoted it.

Mr. Vaz: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: In a moment. I must tell the Minister something else. He said that the Conservative party had somehow succeeded in poisoning the mind of the American Administration, but he again underestimates the intelligence of the people he is dealing with. It would be quite impossible to poison the mind of the American Administration with disinformation, but it is possible to make it clear to them that the Government speak with forked tongue. Indeed, individuals members of the Government may speak with forked tongue.

For all that the Minister does not want me to, I shall examine in detail the two possibilities for operational planning. Let us take the example of operational planning in one of the European strategic level headquarters. Here is a question that he may answer: what will happen to the permanent joint headquarters? Will it be turned into an EU headquarters for operational planning purposes? Will all the various sections of PJHQ such as J1, administration; J2, intelligence; J3, operations; and J5, planning, be full of staff officers from 14 other EU countries? Does he envisage PJHQ being turned into a combined EU headquarters? Does he seriously think that that is feasible? Does he seriously think that in those circumstances PJHQ could continue to carry out its task of managing our national operations in the Falklands and Cyprus, our deployments in Kosovo and Bosnia and major exercises? The hon. Gentleman shakes his head; he realises that it is not a viable possibility. What exactly does he mean by the words

"within one of the European strategic level headquarters"?

Does he want me to give way to him? I will do so. Will he tell us what that phrase means? Should I count up to 10 to see whether he will respond?

Mr. Vaz: I do not want to be rude to a fellow former ex-Caian, but I should be very surprised if the hon. Gentleman could count up to 10, bearing in mind that he has understood nothing that has been said this evening. He knows that the operation and planning of all these matters starts with NATO. As he knows—it is a pity that his speech does not reflect it—we are talking about a limited set of tasks: the Petersberg tasks. They were agreed at the Petersberg hotel by Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Lord Hurd and they deal with those issues. That is what we are talking about. For all the substantial issues on European defence, we will have to draw on the assets and planning capabilities of NATO. That is why President Bush is so comfortable with the arrangements and supports them. That is why the hon. Gentleman cannot believe that the policy has the support of the Americans.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes my point. I ask him to elucidate, for the benefit of the House, an important phrase in the document:

"within one of the European strategic level headquarters".

I offer to give way to him; I force him—more or less—to stand up but he does not answer the question at all. He does not deal with my question; he simply comes out with a childish insult against me, and then a lot of irrelevant obfuscations in the best new Labour mode.

The Minister makes my point. It is clearly established that the Government either do not know what the phrase means or that they are certainly not going to tell anyone else what it means. On such important matters of national security, it is extremely worrying that we should be dealing with our major ally—the United States—on that basis. If the Minister who is responsible—who signs the memorandum that we are discussing—does not know the answer to my question, how can he possibly deal with operational planning?

Mr. Redwood: Is my hon. Friend aware that, after the meeting between the President and the Prime Minister, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and an Under-Secretary who is about to join the State Department made interesting statements? Those statements make it clear that the American Administration have studied the annexes and texts and are worried on exactly the grounds set out by my hon. Friend and by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith). The American Administration are pleased that I, my hon.

[Mr. Redwood]

Friends and others are going to the United States to tell them the truth about these matters because they are clearly not getting it from the Government.

Mr. Davies: Anybody who was mildly worried before this evening would be absolutely terrified after the Minister's performance, because he does not even know—or will not say—what is meant by those words.

Let us consider the other side of operational planning. That requires recourse to NATO operational assets because such assets would be used in the potential operation. The treaty makes it clear that the alliance planning bodies would be involved. That raises yet again an issue that the Government have systematically attempted to conceal from Parliament and from the public. The Minister did not even refer to it in his remarks. I will give way to him if he is willing to answer my question. Is it not true that the Turks have exercised a veto? Is it not true that the Turks have said that they do not accept the concept of guaranteed permanent access by the EU to NATO assets—either physical assets or operational planning assets? Is that not the case? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to answer the question. Again, I will give way to him.

Mr. Vaz: That is not the case. Turkey, as a NATO ally and a friend of the United Kingdom, has raised concerns in the same way that everyone else involved in the issue wishes to have a dialogue to ensure that we get it right. That is the right approach. We can work with allies, such as Turkey and other countries, so that, in the end, we have a joined-up policy on European defence, working with the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and NATO. That is the way in which such things are done, and it is the right approach when dealing with such crisis management situations.

Mr. Davies: All of us who are concerned about the diplomacy of our country must be shaking in our boots having heard that extraordinary response.

The Minister says that Turkey has expressed concerns. That is another piece of disingenuous new Labour drivel. The Turks have actually said no. They have said that they will not agree to the proposal for permanent guaranteed access; they want to have a veto on each occasion. The treaty defines permanent guaranteed access as not requiring the approval of other NATO members on each occasion; nor, indeed, could the arrangements work if it were possible for a member of NATO, not a member of the EU, to exercise a veto on any occasion when NATO assets were required, or when the EU wanted access to NATO operational planning assets. So the second half of the arrangements for operational planning do not work either.

The Minister did not know what the first half of the arrangements involved; he could not describe or explain them. He has now had to concede that the second half cannot work because the Turks have vetoed it, and the Turks are fully entitled to do so. It is extraordinary that the major issue—that involving the Turks—has been systematically concealed from the public debate by the Government.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Davies: I shall give way once again, but then I shall make progress because I want other hon. Members to have a chance to speak.

Mr. Wilkinson: It is not just the Turks who are deeply worried, but the American military as well. Is not that the most significant point of all? If the EU were to draw down American NATO assets—for example, if transport aircraft were required to fly to a war zone under EU command—the United States Congress and the American people would not stand for it.

Mr. Davies: Of course the Americans are worried about that. Naturally, they are also worried about an EU force getting into trouble and requiring the Americans to come to its aid. The Americans are troubled about many things, but we should all be troubled not only by the issues that have been raised, but by the fact that the major dimension to the matter—the Turkish veto—has not been mentioned by the Government. I have had to drag it out of the Government this evening from the Dispatch Box.

Once again, all those issues raise a dual problem: are the Government utterly incompetent, or are they duplicitous—or are they a rather nasty mixture of both? Let us consider the Turks. Did the Government know that the Turks would not agree to the arrangement? If they did not, did they speak to the Turks? How many times has the Minister gone to Ankara to discuss the matter with the Turks? He stopped answering questions from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards at the beginning of December, so he has had plenty of time since to go to Ankara if he had wanted to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman of the limits of this debate.

Mr. Davies: I was simply explaining the possible chronological constraints, which might have disbarred the Minister from performing his functions, that existed until recently.

This matter simply will not go away. I have to tell the Minister that he and the rest of the Government have been steadily stonewalling. If they had come clean at the beginning, they might have had greater credibility in the House, in the alliance and in the United States. The fact is that many of us knew that a Labour Government could never really be trusted with defence. Many of us knew that their commitment to our alliances was so superficial, so recent and so opportunistic that it could not be trusted. A lot of us suspected that, when allied to the irresponsible, cynical, spin-doctoring culture, of which this particular Minister, with his reputation for shiftiness, is such a poor example—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Gentleman please withdraw that remark?

Mr. Davies: I withdraw that remark, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would it be possible to say prevarication or

circumvention? Would they be acceptable parliamentary terms? They describe the nature of the leadership that we have had on this question. That is why the document does not stand up, why we have promises about operational planning that do not make sense and why we have promises about NATO command that are contradicted in the text of the document. That is why there is a crisis of confidence between the United States, the new Labour Government and the European allies.

If the Government continue in office for more than a few moments more, if they continue to believe that they can speak with two voices, say one thing in Europe and another in Washington and conceal from the House of Commons and the British public the truth of what is going on, they will have another think rapidly coming.

12.6 am

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): This has been a lively debate, but I shall keep my remarks brief so that other hon. Members might have a chance to speak. *[Interruption.]* I note, however, that Conservatives Members are eagerly leaving the Chamber, so it is clear that they have no further contribution to make to this important debate.

Liberal Democrats believe that NATO is and will remain the bedrock of the United Kingdom's defence. It is Britain's ultimate insurance policy. It ensured British security through the cold war and encouraged defence co-operation and planning after the fall of the Berlin wall.

We have also understood and believed in the need for an improved European dimension. When Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, told NATO members on 27 February:

"The United States supports and welcomes the creation of a European Defence facility",

the loudest sound in London was the gnashing of teeth at Conservative central office. Despite the myths that we have heard from Tory central office and the myths that we have heard tonight, the United States supports totally the approach that the Government have taken.

Let us make no bones about it. The European Union's initiative allows for the autonomous political direction of operations by EU member states in the Council—not the Commission or the European Parliament—but for operational and strategic planning to remain entrenched in NATO. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and I have said on previous occasions, we believe that there should be a NATO first refusal. In an article in *The House Magazine* on 8 January, I wrote:

"Liberal Democrats have argued that NATO should always have the right of first refusal before any action is taken . . . It is understood that this will be normal operating practice but if that requirement were inserted in the arrangements, it could never be said that NATO had been sidelined or undermined."

The draft presidency report on European security and defence policy makes it clear that the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe will be the "strategic coordinator" and that

"operational planning will be carried out by the Alliance planning bodies".

The NATO Washington summit supported that and all alliance partners agreed. They said:

"We stand ready to define and adopt the necessary arrangements for ready access by the European Union to the collective assets and capabilities where the Alliance as a whole is not engaged."

EU member states have made proposals and

"hope for a favourable response from NATO",

but there is some confusion about when and in what circumstances the EU will be asked to act.

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Gentleman help the House by telling us whether the Joint Committee of the Liberal Democrats and the Government is still going, or has it been betrayed by the Government's double-speak in the way that the Americans and the Europeans have been by the Prime Minister?

Mr. Keetch: That question has nothing to do with the debate, so I shall continue with what I was saying.

There is some confusion. It is clear that only the most minor of missions will be able to be undertaken without NATO assets and that activities are to be confined to the Petersberg tasks of peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention and crisis management. In all cases, the decision to deploy will remain a matter for sovereign Parliaments. As with NATO, Government and Parliament will ultimately make the decisions, but the phraseology

"where NATO as a whole is not engaged"

is open to interpretation. The new Bush Administration made it clear that they support the CESDP.

Mr. Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Keetch: No. The right hon. Gentleman has spent too long on his feet tonight.

The Bush Administration also made it clear that Britain's assurances on the primacy of NATO need to be made more formal. Condoleezza Rice, the United States national security adviser, said that the US has been assured that European Union nations

"consider NATO to be the principal security instrument in Europe, that there is in fact a kind of NATO right of first refusal for missions."

The Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, pointed out that the devil will be in the detail. We agree. Liberal Democrats have always believed that NATO should have the right of first refusal.

It has been claimed that the European rapid reaction force constitutes an alternative to NATO. That is nonsense. Collective defence in which an attack on one is an attack on all remains the primary responsibility of NATO. The ERRF is a capability at the disposal of either NATO when it chooses to act or the EU when NATO chooses not to engage. In either case, NATO planning and command structures should remain in place without any wasteful duplication.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Keetch: No, I will not give way.

Liberal Democrats have argued that NATO should have the right of first refusal. It is understood that that will be normal operating practice, but if that requirement is inserted in the arrangements, as we believe it should be, NATO could not be sidelined or undermined.

The ERRF is not conceived as a standing European army. At no time will national security be suspended or national control over the use of armed forces be removed. It is, and will remain, up to the nation state to decide if and when our troops are deployed.

[Mr. Keetch]

We believe that a successful ERRF will be a success for Britain in Europe. If the force is modelled on the image that Britain desires and its embryonic mechanisms complement NATO instead of competing with it, that will be impressive and it should receive our support. By maintaining a firm commitment to European defence, we can ensure that the ERRF lives up to expectations and that the European contribution to peace and security in the 21st century is enhanced.

12.12 am

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): My hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) rightly draws attention to the declining defence budgets of EU Governments in recent years, which is the first issue at the root of the problem. I am sorry to introduce a note of sombre common sense into what has been a fairly jolly party—indignant though we are about some of the issues that have emerged—but western Europe has not been pulling its weight in defence, which has created significant worries about the commitment of the United States to NATO.

The second fundamental issue must not be swept away in a wave of anti-Europeanism. We must not have the Pavlovian reaction that everything that comes out of Europe is wrong or inimical to British interests. We must consider the issues calmly and carefully because nothing is more important than defence. The essential requirement that western Europe strengthens its defence capability must be common ground to every right hon. and hon. Member.

As Donald Rumsfeld, the American Defence Secretary, said to our former hon. Friend and colleague Winston Churchill in an interview in *The Sunday Telegraph* yesterday, the outcome of the CESDP must add to NATO capabilities, not detract from them. That is another given in this complex and important issue.

The third fundamental is that we must be clear about the French agenda, which, to put it at its mildest, might not be the same as the British agenda; moreover, it is not the same as that of most European members of NATO. We arrogate to ourselves the defence of NATO, as though no other member of NATO cares a tuppeny damn for it, but we know that that is wrong—try telling the Germans that only we, the British, know the value of NATO: my goodness, living under the threat of Russia, and formerly the Soviet Union, the Germans have every military, strategic and geographical reason to know the value of NATO.

It is important that in constructing the ESDP nothing is done that threatens the viability and effectiveness of NATO and the American commitment to it. That is a difficult line to follow—a difficult case to make. However, the interview with Donald Rumsfeld, whom I had the privilege of knowing many years ago, shows that he and, I believe, the entire American Administration are fully aware of the dangers. They have not rejected the ESDP outright, because they know that good things might come from it, but they also know that care must be taken.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Does not the hon. Gentleman think it strange that Front Benchers of his own party trumpet a possible Turkish veto of any such arrangement when, despite Mr. Rumsfeld's comments, they cannot find sufficient evidence for an American veto of such operations?

Sir Raymond Whitney: It is important to examine Mr. Rumsfeld's comments and I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Conservative Front Bench are doing precisely that.

When challenged by Mr. Winston Churchill—whose approach to these issues is, I imagine, not dissimilar to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith); I might be doing one or both of them an injustice, but I doubt it—Mr. Rumsfeld said that President Bush's attitude was "relaxed" and that he was aware of the details agreed at Nice. I do not necessarily accept statements made by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but I certainly accept the statement of my friend Donald Rumsfeld.

I believe that we must consider Mr. Rumsfeld's statements. We should carefully examine the details that worry him—they should worry us as well, but they might not present insoluble problems. Now is not the time to go into the chains of command and logistics—

Mr. Cash: Why not?

Sir Raymond Whitney: Because we do not have time. They are important matters, but they cannot be debated at half-past midnight with 10 minutes to go until the debate ends.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I take my hon. Friend's point about the hour being late and our not being able to go into much detail, but Donald Rumsfeld said

"the devil is in the detail".

That is precisely what causes the Americans' concern—their fear that they have been deceived by the Government.

Sir Raymond Whitney: My hon. Friend leaps a pace too far. I am the first to concede that the devil is in the detail, and when Rumsfeld says that, he is right, but to suggest that poor old Rumsfeld and poor old President Bush do not know what is going on is wholly unjustified.

I hope that we can all calm down and pretend that, just occasionally, some good things can come out of Europe. If we can make the ESDP work, it will be better for everyone, including the United Kingdom.

12.19 am

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): In his first intervention during the Minister's rather disgraceful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) was entirely right to point to the Prime Minister's statement after the Amsterdam European Council in June 1997. The Prime Minister told the House:

"getting Europe's voice heard more clearly in the world will not be achieved through merging the European Union and the Western European Union or developing an unrealistic common defence policy. We therefore resisted unacceptable proposals from others."—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 317.]

In the many exchanges across the Floor of the House since the St. Malo agreement in 1998, there has never been even the semblance of an explanation from the Government of why they have performed such a complete volte-face and U-turn on the position that they rightly took up, with Conservative support, after the Amsterdam Council.

We cling to what the Prime Minister said; he was right then. The Government, the Minister and, indeed, the Prime Minister himself now think that he was wrong, but they have never explained why. My hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) hit the nail on the head and got to the essence of the matter that we are discussing when he said that the Prime Minister spoke with a forked tongue when he went to Washington. The Prime Minister signed up to an agreement with our European partners at Nice, and then went to Washington and told the President of the United States that he had done something quite different. I do not think that the President was deceived for one moment; he knew exactly what was happening and set out for the world what he had been told by the Prime Minister. It was then for the world to make a comparison. The President knew exactly what would happen; he knew that the world could compare what the Prime Minister told him with the language of the Nice treaty and its appendices—*[Interruption.]* What the Prime Minister told the President is therefore important; those assurances are significant.

The President said of the Prime Minister:

"He also assured me that there would be a joint command, that planning would take place within NATO, and that should all NATO not wish to go on a mission, that they would then serve as a catalyst for the defence forces moving on their own."

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) referred to the deliciously ironic language of the note provided by the Library on the President's words. It states:

"Mr Bush's seemingly relaxed view of ESDP may be somewhat misplaced. His reference to assurances from the Prime Minister that NATO and the ESDP would have a joint command and that planning would take place within NATO, would appear to overstate the level of EU-NATO co-operation as laid down in the Presidency Report from Nice."

The note goes on to quote annexe VII to the presidency report. I do not know which document the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was waving around a moment ago; I hope that it was annexe VII. It states that

"the entire chain of command must remain under the political control and strategic direction of the EU throughout the operation, after consultation between the two organisations. In that framework the operation commander will report on the conduct of the operation to EU bodies only. NATO will be informed of developments in the situation by the appropriate bodies, in particular the PSC and the Chairman of the Military Committee."

The Prime Minister was very fond of using the language—he used it when he came back from Nice. He said that these things will arise only when NATO chooses not to be involved. However, one will search the documents in vain for any reference to NATO's choice. It is not NATO that has the choice; under these arrangements, it is the European Union that has the choice.

We heard from the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), who said that it would be a jolly good idea if NATO had the choice, and that it should be written into the agreement that NATO had the choice. I do not know what happened in the negotiations at Nice, but it is fair to assume that the Prime Minister tried extremely hard to get language written into the agreement to make sure that NATO had the choice. If he did, he failed. That is not what the French wanted, or what the other Europeans wanted. The Prime Minister lost out in that negotiation, so the treaty says absolutely nothing about NATO's choice. It is the European Union that has the choice.

Mr. Hendrick: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the fact that the EU may consult NATO effectively gives NATO the choice of being involved or not?

Mr. Howard: I have a good deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman, and I cannot believe that he means what he has just said. That is a ludicrous proposition. The European Union has the choice. It then consults NATO, but the EU can refuse to agree with what NATO says. It can consult NATO and reject what NATO says.

If, indeed, there is to be a joint command, and if the planning structure, as the Prime Minister assured the President, is to be within NATO, why on earth is a Political and Security Committee needed? Why is a military committee needed? Why is a military staff needed outside NATO, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) pointed out? Why are all those bodies needed outside NATO?

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney)—European defence co-operation needs to be strengthened. That is right, but it could and should be strengthened within NATO. All the command structures could be established within NATO, and none of the problems would arise.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend. Did he notice in the Minister's statement and elsewhere in briefings by representatives of the Government that they have conceded the point and moved on? They accept that the words of the treaty and the annexe set out an entirely new and distinct EU structure, but they are now telling the American allies and others not to worry, because significant sums will not be spent on strategic and intelligence command and control, so that will never amount to much. That is a different and rather lame kind of defence.

Mr. Howard: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, with which I entirely agree.

The arrangements can be tested in another way. The House of Commons Select Committee on Defence reported on these matters. The Committee suggested that it was important that DSACEUR, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, should have the right—the right—to attend all meetings of the European military committee. Comparing that report with what appears in the arrangements set out in the treaty of Nice, the House of Commons Library points out that the level of involvement of DSACEUR with EU bodies appears to fall short of the recommendation made by the Defence Committee in its report.

That is absolutely right. DSACEUR's level of involvement certainly does fall short. The treaty provides that DSACEUR may be invited to meetings of the military committee when that committee considers it appropriate, but he has no such right to attend, as was recommended by the Select Committee.

[Mr. Howard]

The United States Defence Secretary was right when he said that the arrangements put at risk something special. It is something that the Government should have held special. By putting it at risk, they have rendered one of the greatest of all the many disservices that they have rendered to this country.

12.29 am

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill): The appropriate response to the first point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) is that the proposals simply do not transfer the whole of the Western European Union into the European Union. The WEU has a range of responsibilities, including the Petersberg tasks, which are being transferred to the EU. However, it has other responsibilities—I refer especially to article 5 of the Brussels treaty—which are rightly not being transferred. I do not think that any party wants collective defence to be undertaken by the EU. Thus, the right hon. and learned Gentleman's first point, on which he built the rest of his speech, is frankly bogus.

I was delighted to hear the speech made by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney), who introduced a more sober tone into the Opposition's approach to the debate. He was absolutely correct to say that this country is not alone in defending NATO. There are other EU countries that also attach greater importance to NATO than to the EU. As I said, it is not collective defence that is being transferred to the EU, but the Petersberg tasks, which relate to humanitarian missions, of which there have been several; indeed, there have been far too many in the recent history of Europe. In future, that responsibility is to be undertaken by the EU.

Dr. Julian Lewis: If a Petersberg task is being undertaken, forces will be siphoned off from those previously allocated to NATO in order to discharge it. How can NATO discharge the tasks that remain within its remit if it has depleted forces? Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting instead that European countries will spend more money and use larger defence budgets to add to the strength of their armed forces? If so, will he tell us which countries will do so?

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I recognise the importance of his comments and accept that forces cannot be used twice in two separate theatres. To pretend otherwise would be ridiculous and deceitful, so I entirely accept his point. However, the new arrangements do not change that situation. NATO can have more than one crisis to deal with. *[Interruption.]* I should like to finish my point; the hon. Gentleman asked a fair question and I am trying to provide a direct answer. The arrangements do not change the reality. Previously, if two crises occurred at the same time, NATO would have had to choose which one to prioritise. If two crises occur at the same time under the new arrangements, NATO will still have to decide whether to give priority to a crisis that is not being dealt with by the EU or whether to allow some forces to continue to be used by the EU.

Let me give the hon. Gentleman a case in point, as such circumstances are not unprecedented. Four years ago, the need arose for Operation Alba. The United Kingdom did not participate in the operation, but several of our NATO allies and some non-NATO European countries did so. If a bigger crisis had arisen that required those forces, the Italians, French and others taking part would have given priority to NATO. *[Interruption.]* I shall deal with the hon. Gentleman's second point in a moment. I have tried to answer his first question, as he did not receive a reply the first time he asked it.

The hon. Gentleman's second question was about which countries would increase defence expenditure. That is another fair question, of which I am not afraid. Let me give him one good example. I have no doubt that Italy needs to increase its defence expenditure considerably. Currently, it does not define such expenditure in the same way as other NATO members. By NATO's assessment, it does not make a reasonable contribution to the collective defence of Europe and to NATO. There are other examples, but that is one of the most glaring. It does not help the debate to refuse to deal with such points.

I should like now to continue with my main remarks, as I wish to put an important point to the Minister. Many of my hon. Friends and I support the Government's actions to enable the EU to make decisions to deal with the Petersberg tasks and to have the capacity and means of implementing the policy. However, many of us are worried about a defect that the documents do not mention. For several other defence organisations, not least NATO, we have had to create an assembly of parliamentarians to scrutinise common policies, assets, activities and purpose. Members of national Parliaments meet for that purpose, as they do in the Western European Union Assembly. A defect in the arrangements that we are considering is the lack of provision for scrutiny of common activities that are undertaken by the European Union on defence. I am talking not about accountability but about scrutiny.

I regret that our Government have not succeeded in persuading our partners in the EU to implement some of the ideas that the Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Minister have proposed for establishing an assembly, which will bring national parliamentarians together to scrutinise, exchange information and liaise. I appreciate that our Ministers cannot create such an assembly on their own, but I hope that they will continue to insist that a democratic organisation should have a democratic assembly that brings together the parliamentarians of all the countries involved. I hope that all hon. Members will support that.

12.36 am

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The European security and defence policy is a sort of satire, reminiscent of "Gulliver's Travels" and the tales of Baron von Münchhausen. It is a myth; a voyage in time and space, which is completely at variance with judgment, experience and reality. It is doomed to failure, and is yet another example of lions—in this case, the United States and the United Kingdom—being led by donkeys. As Wellington said of his allies in the Peninsular war:

> "I do not know what effect these men will have upon the enemy, but, by God, they frighten me."

As Churchill and the British discovered with the Maginot line, such arrangements are all spin and no delivery.

The fault lies with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. I have raised the point with the Prime Minister over Feira, and with the Foreign Secretary and the

Secretary of State for Defence whenever they have returned from summits. I have challenged them on every proposition about the autonomy of a European defence policy, its structure and the arrangement that assumes that they will be in the driving seat. On no occasion have they been able to reply with confidence.

The Minister has been parachuted into the job with no prospect of reaching the ground without an unpleasant jolt.

Dr. Julian Lewis: That is because they packed his parachute.

Mr. Cash: Indeed. The Prime Minister, in his Euro-enthusiasm—I would say Euro-fanaticism—traded his failure to convince the British people about the single currency for something else that he wanted to pull out of the bag. He knew that we did not have an opt-out on defence, and he thought that he would be able to take the initiative on defence policy and claim that he was leading Britain in Europe. That is what St. Malo, Cologne, Feira and Nice were all about. However, the right hon. Gentleman has got into an appalling quagmire, as has already been revealed.

I beg to differ with my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney). His view is similar to that of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who said of the Maastricht treaty that he had not read it.

Sir Raymond Whitney: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cash: In a minute. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps tomorrow! We have to consider the control and command to understand the basis on which such treaties are constructed. Without doing that, we do not know what is going on—

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents).*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 21 March, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) [Queen's recommendation having been signified],

DATA PROTECTION AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

That the following provision shall be made with respect to the salary of the Information Commissioner—

(1) In respect of service from 30th January 2001 to 31st March 2001, the salary of the Information Commissioner shall be at a yearly rate of £85,000.

(2) For each year starting with 1st April, from 2001 onwards, the yearly rate shall be increased by the average percentage by which the mid-points of the Senior Civil Service pay bands having effect from 1st April of that year have increased compared with the previous 1st April.

(3) The mid-point of a Senior Civil Service pay band is the point half way between the maximum and the minimum.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): With permission, I shall put together the remaining motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Inherited SERPS) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

HIGHWAYS

That the draft Street Works (Charges for Unreasonably Prolonged Occupation of the Highways) (England) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION

That the draft Criminal Defence Service (Choice in Very High Cost Cases) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Criminal Defence Service (Representation Order Appeals) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

CLIMATE CHANGE LEVY

That the draft Climate Change Levy (Use as Fuel) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Climate Change Levy (Combined Heat and Power Stations) Prescribed Conditions and Efficiency Percentages Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Climate Change Agreements (Energy-intensive Installations) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Climate Change Levy (Electricity and Gas) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Climate Change Levy (Solid Fuel) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

That the draft Part-Time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations 1999 (Amendment) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

CRIMINAL INJURIES COMPENSATION

That the Draft of Alterations to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme, which was laid before this House on 5th March, be approved.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

That the Code of Conduct for Employees of the Legal Services Commission who provide services as part of the Criminal Defence Service, which was laid before this House on 6th February, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001 (S.I., 2001, No. 544) dated 26th February 2001, a copy of which was laid before this House on 27th February, be approved.

That the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Carrying on Regulated Activities by Way of Business) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 27th February, be approved.

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Exemption) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 27th February, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITION

Winter Fuel Payment

12.41 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I present the petition on behalf of my constituent Mrs. Margaret Lees of Kilmaurs and more than 2,000 other signatories from my constituency and other parts of the United Kingdom. It supports the extension of the annual winter fuel payment to physically disabled people under the age of 60.

To the House of Commons

The Petition of the Kilmarnock Forum on Disability and others,

Declares that younger physically disabled people (ie. those under retirement age) are not eligible to receive the annual Winter Fuel Payment made by the Department of Social Security.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Social Security to review the eligibility to receive the Winter Fuel Payment for younger physically disabled currently receiving medium or high levels of Disability Living Allowance and/or Income Support.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Glass Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

12.42 am

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am very pleased to have the opportunity of this Adjournment debate to represent the interests and real concerns of my constituents who work at United Glass in Harlow. United Glass employs more than 300 people in Harlow, and theirs are the kinds of skilled and semi-skilled manufacturing jobs that used to be the bedrock of the local economy. However, they are also the kind of jobs of which we have lost so many over the past 20-odd years.

To put that in context, as recently as 1979 more than 50 per cent. of the jobs in Harlow were in manufacturing, whereas today the figure is barely above 20 per cent. Those are important jobs, because they provide ordinary working people with a career, stable employment and good remuneration—in short, the kind of job security to which many people aspire.

Those good, high-quality jobs would be at risk if the Government were to grant regional selective assistance—which has been applied for through the Department of Trade and Industry—to Quinn Glass to build a new glass manufacturing plant on the site of the old Ince B power station that straddles the border between Chester and Ellesmere Port. That application is the nub of the case that I wish to make this evening.

In making that case, let me make it clear that I am not asking for special favours, or for preferential treatment for United Glass and my constituents. I am simply asking for a fair deal and a level playing field. Open and fair competition in the marketplace is a spur to increased competitiveness. However, United Glass—along with other glass manufacturers—is not given taxpayers' money to support its enterprise, and I do not see why Quinn Glass should be given taxpayers' money to start an operation in a market in which there is already significant overcapacity, when the granting of regional selective assistance would—a great deal of evidence suggests—lead to the provision of jobs in the north-west of England at the expense of jobs in my constituency and elsewhere in Britain.

I am speaking not just on behalf of United Glass and my constituents; every other glass manufacturer in Britain is concerned about the Quinn application. The Minister will know that my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe) and for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), among others, have enunciated significant concerns, and that many of us accompanied representatives of the glass manufacturing industry to see a DTI Minister before Christmas to express our anxieties. We are united in our view that taxpayers' money should not be used to support Quinn Glass at the expense of jobs in our areas.

Part of my reason for initiating the debate is that our fears are based on historical precedent. In April 1997, the Northern Ireland Office granted Quinn Glass a £13 million grant from the Northern Ireland Industrial Development Board to develop a plant at Derrylin, in County Fermanagh. As there was already overcapacity in the industry, that has led—perhaps unsurprisingly—to a loss of nearly 1,000 jobs over the past few years, and a fall in profitability of nearly 50 per cent.

The development in Northern Ireland was undoubtedly a factor in the closure of the United Glass plant in St. Helens. I have to say, however, that just as bad as the actual decision and its impact was the way in which the decision was made by the last Conservative Government. It was, by any reckoning, a hugely controversial decision, made on 17 April 1997. The contract was signed on 1 May 1997, the day of a general election that everyone—including, I believe, the Conservative party and Conservative Ministers—knew would bring a change of Government. Yet despite the knowledge that there would be a new Government with a new outlook, a new set of priorities and a new set of policies, the Conservative Government had the arrogance to press ahead with the decision, and by the time this Government came to power it was too late to reverse it.

On the basis of that precedent, my constituents have a real fear that what happened in Northern Ireland can happen again. I hope and believe that under this Labour Government things can and will be different.

Let me say something about the background to the current economic situation in the glass manufacturing industry, against which I think this application should be judged. There is undoubtedly overcapacity in the industry, and there are real problems in regard to profitability and sustainability. The UK glass manufacturing and container industries unquestionably face real problems, and have done for some time. Demand has been falling, owing to increased competition from alternative packaging materials, while supply has been increasing, owing to the industry's heavy investment in new technologies that have produced substantial productivity advances.

Across the European Union, that has led to overcapacity, currently estimated at about 10 per cent. In Britain, the results have been stark: since 1997 glass manufacturing sales have declined by 7 per cent., and there has been a dramatic decline of 48 per cent. in earnings. That loss of profitability has been translated directly into a loss of jobs: the number of people employed in the industry has fallen from 5,400 to 4,400, a drop of nearly 20 per cent. I know of no other industry in which there has been such a significant decline in such a short time.

Moreover, important elements of production have moved outside the United Kingdom because of the continuing high value of the pound outside the euro, which makes it more economical to produce goods outside the UK. That has applied to Heinz, Cadbury and Ovaltine. Let me say as an aside that the situation is a powerful antidote to the views of the Conservatives and other anti-Europeans—from whom we have just been hearing—who argue that we should never join the single currency, regardless of the consequences for British manufacturing industry.

The situation is undoubtedly full of real difficulties. That is why the Quinn Glass application concerns us so much. We are concerned that Government funds could be used to increase capacity that will cause the loss of jobs elsewhere in the industry. The Quinn Glass proposal, to put it into context, is to establish capacity in the north-west of England to produce 1.1 billion bottles a

[Mr. Bill Rammell]

year. Based on year 2000 sales figures, such capacity equates to about 16.4 per cent. of total industry sales. On any analysis, that is a very substantial development.

ECOTEC Research and Consulting has been commissioned by both United Glass and Wrexham Glass to quantify the likely impact of the establishment of such additional production on three areas of Great Britain—on Harlow, in my constituency; on the central belt of Scotland; and on south Yorkshire. There is already significant glass production in all three areas.

ECOTEC's research and analysis is very clear that, overall, the best we can hope for is that the new facility will result in a zero-sum gain, with output from the new facility likely to displace a roughly equivalent amount of output from other United Kingdom-based producers. On a more pessimistic analysis, which is offered in the research, there is a view that for every new job that might be created at the proposed site, two existing jobs in the industry and in supporting businesses elsewhere could be lost. If Quinn Glass wants to wreak such havoc on the United Kingdom glass industry, so be it. However, I do not know why it should be aided and abetted by taxpayers' money in so doing.

I should like, finally, to deal with two red herrings that are being offered to justify and support the Quinn application. First, it is suggested that the plant will not hit production elsewhere in Britain because Quinn wants to focus on exploiting the current importation of glass from elsewhere in the European Union. Last week's *Packaging Magazine* had clearly bought the spin from Quinn Glass which argued that import substitution would be its main target. I believe that that reassurance is false. I say that for various reasons.

There is no evidence from Quinn Glass in Northern Ireland that it has a strategy in place to substitute for imports. We also have to understand the nature of the increase in imports—from 7 to 13 per cent. of containers—in recent years. The major driver of that increase has been the high value of sterling. The situation for any of the companies is unlikely to change until the value of sterling decreases appreciably. Moreover, when sterling's value does depreciate, not only Quinn Glass but all United Kingdom glass manufacturers are likely to benefit.

It is also very important to understand that more than two thirds of imports into Britain are substitute production—for example, to replace production lost when furnaces are being refurbished—or are more specialised glass containers, such as toiletries and cosmetics and pharmaceutical containers. The specialised containers require specialised machines and, in some cases, different glass composition. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Quinn Glass intends to invest in such equipment at the proposed mainland site. Indeed, the reverse is true, with a suggestion that the site will produce high-volume beverage containers.

As for the scale of available imports that Quinn could target, those 330 million containers are dwarfed by Quinn Glass's proposed 1.1 billion production capacity in the north-west of England. The figures just do not add up. The argument that everything will be all right and that the new plant will simply target imports lacks credibility and should be taken with a pinch of salt.

The second red herring that has to be exposed is the notion that if Quinn Glass does not go to the north-west of England, the jobs that would have been provided there will be lost to northern France, where the application will receive French Government support. There is a link between the situation in France and that in Germany. In Germany, there have been moves to plastic in the soft drinks and water sectors, coupled with implementation of a deposit system that will soon be applied to currently non-returnable glass. Consequently, German glass demand is expected to decrease in the next two years by a staggering 1 million tonnes. That is such a dramatic change for the German glass industry that it has engaged consultants to work on securing German Government grants to close down glassworks.

As 40 per cent. of the German glass industry is owned by French companies, and as there is already overcapacity in both France and the Benelux countries, it is inconceivable that, in current circumstances, the French Government would consider grant aid for extra capacity.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central, who has informed me that the Barnsley development agency, which has established a good line of communication to the French authorities because of the sensitivity of the issue, has been unable to trace any line of inquiry from a British company. The argument that the jobs would go to France is unsustainable.

I believe that the arguments against the granting of regional selective assistance are very strong. As the Minister knows, in many senses the most important criterion in deciding whether to grant such assistance is the displacement impact on jobs. If it is concluded that grant aid would simply displace jobs elsewhere, the grant should be refused—and it is clear to me and to many others within the industry that grant aid in the circumstances that I have described would lead to a displacement of jobs. I hope that that will weigh heavily in the making of the final decision, and ultimately lead to a refusal.

There are also strong grounds for believing that granting assistance would be deemed to be unfair state aid under European Union competition rules. Indeed, several glass manufacturers are considering approaching the European Commission over the issue if the Government grant aid.

This is an issue of real significance and importance to my constituents in Harlow. More than 395 people are employed in the glass and associated sectors locally—320 directly by United Glass and the remainder indirectly supported by the sector. It is not only the people who are directly employed who would be affected; there is also the knock-on benefit to the local economy. ECOTEC has estimated the associated supplier expenditure at £1.64 million a year, and employee expenditure in the Harlow economy at £3.6 million a year.

This is an enormously important issue in Harlow, both for its economy and for the people whose employment depends on the plant. My constituents simply would not understand if Government money, provided by the taxpayer, were used to undermine their jobs and their local economy. I therefore strongly urge the Government to listen to our concerns. I hope and believe that they will act to protect my constituents' interests. All we are asking for is a level playing field, and I hope that we shall get it.

12.57 am

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) on securing the debate and on drawing attention so eloquently to what I know is an enormously important issue for him and for other right hon. and hon. Members who have glass packaging plants in their constituencies.

My hon. Friend has certainly been a strong and assiduous supporter of those of his constituents who work at the United Glass factory in Harlow. He has set out admirably their concerns and the issues at stake in the regional selective assistance application. I must also acknowledge, as he has done, the close interest taken by other right hon. and hon. Members in the future of other existing glass packaging plants in South Yorkshire, Scotland and elsewhere, and the reaction of others who also see threats from potential investment in new plant.

I know that my hon. Friend and several other hon. Members expressed those serious concerns on behalf of their constituents when they came with employee and management representatives from some of the major firms to see my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade just before Christmas.

We do not often debate the subject of glass in the House. I suspect that we have all tended to take glass packaging for granted, whether it was the humble milk bottle on the doorstep, the traditional bottle of beer, or the bottle of headache pills. Glass bottles have been with us for centuries. However, we have now come to accept that milk can also come in cartons, beer in cans and pills in foil wrapping in boxes.

The fact that we still have a sizeable glass packaging industry in Britain is a reflection of the flexibility and adaptability of the manufacturers who have innovated, designed new products and sought out new markets. At the same time, there have been very strong competitive pressures on the glass industry generally which have, unfortunately, led to real difficulties, such as at Ravenhead Glass at St. Helens. The glass packaging sector, in particular, has had to respond to its own competitive threats, not least from alternative packaging materials.

Before I turn to the specific issue raised by my hon. Friend, perhaps I could refer to the support that has been given to the British glass industry since the Government came to office—not, of course, including the previous grant to Quinn Glass. Since 1 May 1997, offers of regional selective assistance totalling some £18 million have been accepted by the United Kingdom glass industry overall, of which £1 million has gone towards the manufacture of hollow glass. In addition, my Department has been working with British Glass and Glass Technology Services Ltd. in a number of areas, including financial support for an innovation project to design safer screw threads on glass bottles and assistance with the establishment of a glass manufacturing improvement club.

We held discussions last year with British Glass, the trade association for the sector, about other projects, including a competitiveness analysis. I regret that those discussions have not progressed as we had hoped. However, I stress that if the glass industry wishes to take these or other issues forward, the door remains open. I strongly urge them to consider working with the Department on a competitiveness analysis. I hope that my hon. Friend will make that point to his constituents and to British Glass. A competitiveness analysis can lead to the identification of further areas in which the Department and the sector could work to best advantage.

On my hon. Friend's central concern, Quinn Glass has confirmed publicly that it is seeking UK Government support towards the establishment of a new manufacturing facility in the north-west region. I can therefore also confirm that the Department is currently considering and appraising an application for regional selective assistance from the company. However, as with any RSA application, all the information contained in it is commercially confidential. I know that my hon. Friend understands that, and I hope that he will also understand when I say that I am not able to discuss the company's application in detail.

In potentially sensitive cases such as this, I have heard it suggested that the Government should not even consider an application for regional selective assistance. However, I stress that providing an application meets the qualifying criteria for regional selective assistance; we cannot refuse to consider it. Each application is rigorously assessed against a number of detailed criteria which are published. The application is then considered by the Industrial Development Advisory Board—an external adviser—which makes a recommendation to Ministers on each case.

I am afraid, for the reasons that I have given, that I am not able to discuss progress on the Quinn Glass application for RSA, nor can I say when the case might reach the final stages of consideration. However, I can assure my hon. Friend and his constituents that the specific issue of job displacement is one of the key criteria that has to be considered on any RSA application and will therefore be considered on this application.

I have one final point on Quinn Glass; my hon. Friend has also referred to it. The Government would be powerless to prevent any investment by Quinn Glass if the plant were to be constructed without support—assuming, of course, that it met planning and other appropriate requirements. Nor could we stop imports to this country if that plant were to be constructed on an alternative site elsewhere. I am sure that my hon. Friend and his constituents understand that.

I referred earlier to the meeting with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade in December, when he indicated that he was reviewing the glass packaging sector. That work has progressed on two fronts. First, as part of the appraisal for this application, against the published criteria, we are considering a number of economic areas, including job displacement. That work of appraisal is in hand but, like the Quinn Glass RSA application, the information will have to remain commercially confidential.

We have also commissioned Key Note Ltd. to update an earlier market research report on the glass packaging sector published in 1999. That earlier report has been extensively quoted in other papers on the glass packaging sector which I have seen. The new report from Key Note Ltd. has just been received by the Department. It will form part of the information used in appraising the Quinn Glass RSA application. I am therefore pleased to announce that the Department can now make copies of the new Key Note market research available to the glass packaging industry.

We are also maintaining close contact with the sector, and officials are scheduled to meet representatives from a number of manufacturers, including United Glass, next

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week. I am sure that my hon. Friend will appreciate that in all our dealings with the glass packaging sector, Ministers and officials have tried to provide as much information as possible while respecting the requirements of commercial confidentiality.

I must also mention letters from right hon. and hon. Members and information about the glass packaging industry which we have received from other parties in recent months. We have received a report commissioned by Barnsley development agency from ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd., which considered the economic impact of the Quinn Glass proposal on Barnsley, South Yorkshire and the wider regional economy. We have had a briefing paper on the UK glass packaging industry structure dated November 2000 and a paper from British Glass entitled "The UK Glass Container Industry Review", dated spring 2001. All those reports are being considered during the appraisal of the Quinn Glass RSA application.

My hon. Friend mentioned overcapacity, which is an important issue in the sector. I was interested to read in the latest paper from British Glass that the estimate of overcapacity in the glass packaging sector is now only 5 per cent. compared with the figure of up to 20 per cent. which was quoted at the meeting in December. I also noted that imports into the United Kingdom in 1999 took some 19 per cent. of the market, although of course part of that total may have come from UK firms importing from their associate plants on the continent.

I end by saying how much I appreciate the enormous anxiety that will be felt during this period of uncertainty by the constituents whom my hon. Friend represents. Once again, I assure him and his constituents that we fully understand the importance of the issue and that we will take all the relevant factors, including job displacement, into account when the decision is made on the basis of the published criteria.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes past One o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 20 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

COLCHESTER BOROUGH COUNCIL BILL *[Lords]*

Read the Third time, and passed, without amendment.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Business Rates

1. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What recent representations he has received from industry and business concerning business rates. [152907]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): We have received many responses from business to the proposals for business rates set out in the Green Paper "Modernising Local Government Finance". A summary of the responses has been published on the Department's website. We will publish our conclusions in a White Paper later this year.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Will she confirm that the Government's plan for a supplementary business rate, which could increase the business rate by up to 5 per cent. for hard-working enterprises, is to be scrapped, as reported in this morning's *Financial Times*? Will she now endorse the Opposition's call for a rates holiday for tourism and other businesses cruelly hit by the foot and mouth outbreak? Finally, will she endorse the Conservative policy of cutting business rates for vulnerable rural shops, post offices, pubs and garages by an average of £1,000 a year over and above existing rate relief?

Ms Armstrong: On the first question, the supplementary rate was an issue for consultation. As I told the hon. Gentleman, we shall publish our conclusions in the White Paper; he will simply have to wait for that. In response to the problems that businesses in rural areas are suffering from because of the foot and mouth outbreak, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will make a statement later, and the hon. Gentleman will have to wait for that. The Conservative party's proposals are interesting, but I suggest that he looks at the Rating (Former Agricultural Premises and Rural Shops) Bill, which the Government have published and presented to the House, as it will give additional rate relief to all food shops and to certain garages and pubs in small villages. Given his interest in the motor trade and the Leader of the Opposition's interest in the pub trade, I am sure that they will support our proposals.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): There was a consultation meeting in Tarleton on the rural White Paper, and the proposals to give 50 per cent. rate relief to small rural businesses were widely welcomed by many of the people at that meeting. I urge my right hon. Friend to move swiftly to a conclusion on the consultation process. How quickly does she think that the Government will be able to implement those urgently needed reforms?

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend has shown a very great and knowledgeable interest in this matter. As he says, the proposals on rate relief for small businesses are out for consultation, and we hope to bring them to a conclusion quickly. I am sure that he discovered at the meeting that he mentioned that, more than ever, people in the business world want a stable economy and no more boom and bust, and they know that they will get that from the Labour party.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): From what the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said, it would be hard to believe that he supported the Government who introduced the uniform business rate. It was iniquitous then, and it is iniquitous now. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it penalises smaller retailers to the benefit of the larger out-of-town stores, so ably represented by the Conservative party? Is not it time that it was radically reformed and replaced with something fairer, which would also support traders in our town centres, not just those in villages?

Ms Armstrong: I expect that, on that basis, the hon. Gentleman will fully support our proposals for rate relief for small businesses.

New Roads (Pollution)

2. **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): What plans he has to review the provision of new motorways and bypasses against pollution and other environmental criteria; and if he will make a statement. [152908]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): The environmental impact of every new motorway and bypass proposal is assessed in accordance with the relevant European directives as implemented in the UK. We use the new approach to appraisal technique—NATA, as it is called—to assess all road proposals in our targeted programme of improvements. NATA takes account of sustainable development principles: environmental, economic and social factors are all properly examined and evaluated in a clear and consistent way.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response, but will he take into consideration what happened in my constituency with the diversion of the A1 through Ferry Bridge? A public inquiry was held in the mid-1990s, but the evidence submitted on the

environmental situation under planning regulation 10 was at least five or six years old at that time. The road will be built at some time in the next four or five years, so we are considering evidence that was submitted at least 15 years before it will be built.

As significant changes have been made in the control of the environment on motorways, will the issue be reviewed when the Government consider the construction of new motorways and diversions?

Mr. Meacher: I am aware that my hon. Friend has been assiduous in his criticism of the A1M Ferry Bridge to Hook Moor road. As he knows, an environmental impact statement was carried out originally and the project was then appraised in the 1998 roads review, using the NATA technique. Of course, when there are significant changes in the local environment, the appraisal has to be updated. I accept that that is not the reply that my hon. Friend has received in the past, but I repeat that, if changes can be assessed as significant in their environmental impact, I would expect a further application of the new approach to appraisal technique to be used.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): How does the Secretary of State square the policy of completing a network of motorway service areas at 30-mile intervals, as reflected in the decision to allow the building of a service station in the Meriden gap green belt, with the Prime Minister's assertions that we need to put business, technology and environmental protection together?

Mr. Meacher: That is exactly what lies behind a single appraisal summary table, which looks at issues of environment, economy, safety, accessibility and integration. They are very different in their applications and an attempt has to be made in every case to weigh them and to decide where the balance lies on which the decision should be made. I cannot speak about the case that the hon. Lady has mentioned. However, I am sure that that exercise was thoroughly undertaken and that the decision reflected not the fact that there may be environmental disbenefits, but that, on balance, the decision should be in favour of proceeding.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in finding a balance, it is important to take into account the relief of an urban environment as well as protecting the rural environment? Consequently, when Ministers consider the proposals for access to Hastings and integrated transport, including the bypass, will that be a consideration in their minds?

Mr. Meacher: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend, who has been diligent in his pursuit of this issue, that we shall consider that case extremely carefully. All that I can say is that, at this point, due process is being undertaken and it is not for Ministers to intervene in any way. We shall await the result of that process.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Minister will be aware that a restoration project is going ahead for the Lichfield-Hatherton canal. However, is he aware that his colleague, the Deputy Prime Minister, overruled the Government inspector and said that the new Birmingham northern relief road should cut the canal in half? Will the Minister intervene with his right hon. Friend, overturn his decision, and try to restore the Labour party's promise that there should be an integrated and green transport policy?

Mr. Meacher: The Birmingham nortnern relief road was planned under the previous Administration and the decision to go ahead was taken under the previous Administration. We inherited that decision and, on the balance of considerations, we have decided to proceed. The hon. Gentleman will know that the construction of the road has not yet begun, but it is designed to relieve congestion on the M6 north of Birmingham. As I and many others have experienced, that congestion is intense. Of course we accept that the road is controversial in that there are environmental impacts, but I repeat that, on the balance of considerations, relieving congestion in a major way must be weighed against the environmental effects. I believe that we have found the best solution.

Leasehold Reform

3. **Maria Eagle** (Liverpool, Garston): When he plans to bring forward legislation on leasehold reform. [152909]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): The Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, which was introduced in another place on 20 December last year, is currently making good progress through its Committee stage.

Maria Eagle: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the feudalism that underlies land law in this country is an inappropriate basis on which to deal with the law of property in the 21st century? Given that his Bill is languishing in the other place, which has a more recent affinity with feudalism than this democratic House, will he confirm that his Department will prioritise it when considering whether there is time to debate it here?

Mr. Raynsford: I have to tell my hon. Friend that it is not for me to determine the allocation of time when the Bill comes to this place. However, I am pleased to tell her that that important measure, which gives effect to the Government's commitments to achieve fundamental reforms in the antiquated and unsatisfactory leasehold tenure, is making good progress in Committee in the other place. I hope that, with a fair wind, it will complete that stage in the near future.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman remembers saying in 1996:

"Labour in Government will have no hesitation in introducing a comprehensive leasehold reform package including commonhold legislation"?

Does he agree with the Campaign for the Abolition of Residential Leasehold that his Bill fails in at least 10 areas to address the needs of the 2 million leaseholders in this country? Why has he introduced a Bill so late in this Parliament that it cannot possibly receive proper parliamentary scrutiny before the forthcoming general

election? Why has he failed so comprehensively to redeem that clearest of pre-election pledges, and why should he be trusted on the issue at the next election?

Mr. Raynsford: That is pretty rich coming from a party that spectacularly failed to honour its pledge to introduce commonhold in the previous Parliament. We will take no lessons from the Conservative party on leasehold reform and commonhold. The Bill is the most comprehensive measure for several years on the subject. It gives new rights to leaseholders to take over the management of their homes if that is unsatisfactory, extends their opportunities to buy the freehold of their homes and introduces a new commonhold tenure to enable current leaseholders in flats to own the property collectively. It is an important reforming measure that shows the Government's commitment to leasehold reform, in contrast to the abject failure of the Conservatives.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned an organisation that has been campaigning on this matter. Many of its alleged facts are inaccurate. I do not accept its criticisms; nor do the vast majority of leaseholders, who recognise the enormous progress that the Government are making.

Public Transport (Disabled Access)

4. **Joan Ruddock** (Lewisham, Deptford): What plans he has to increase access to public transport for people with disabilities. [152911]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): We have made significant progress since 1997. Regulations requiring disabled access to new trains, buses and coaches have been introduced and similar regulations for taxis are planned. In addition, the 10-year transport plan introduced a new commitment to ensure that access for disabled people is a condition of all new public investment in transport.

Joan Ruddock: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Government's progress, in contrast to the Tories who failed to introduce the regulations necessary to provide increased access for people with disabilities. Although those improvements are welcome, does she agree that many railway stations, such as those operated by Connex in my constituency, present huge problems not only for people with severe disabilities, but for elderly travellers and parents with baby buggies? Does she have any proposals to deal with existing inaccessible infrastructure?

Ms Hughes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Vehicles are only part of the equation, and enabling disabled people to negotiate stations and transport premises is obviously equally important. In 1997, we established the disability rights taskforce, which led to the formation of the Disability Rights Commission. Those bodies, along with transport industry representatives, are working to produce the guidance that is necessary to ensure that providers can meet the requirement that the Act laid on them, which is that by 2004 they will have taken all reasonable steps to remove, alter or avoid physical features that make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to use the service. Certainly the commission and the Government want to ensure that the guidance will bite.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Does the hon. Lady realise that it is almost impossible for disabled people to get on to the platform at most underground stations, and even if they were able to do so, they would need the strength of a British Lions rugby forward to get on the trains in the rush hour? Why, after four years, have the Government not fulfilled their commitment to initiate the public-private partnership for the tube, to modernise the system and to give proper access to disabled people?

Ms Hughes: I must point out to the hon. Gentleman that although the Disability Discrimination Act was passed in 1995, the previous Government did absolutely nothing in their remaining two years to introduce any of the necessary regulations to implement its proposals. This Government have systematically worked since 1997 not only to make vehicles accessible but, as I have just explained, to make the transport infrastructure accessible.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I applaud what my hon. Friend said about disabled access to public transport. May I draw to her attention Tilbury Town station in my constituency, where all the residences are on the down side towards Southend? If my disabled constituents want to board a train to London, they have to travel an additional mile.

When the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), makes his journey to visit my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) to look at the parlous railway line c2c—which, in my parlance stands for cancellation to cancellation—will she ensure that he has all the relevant documents and is fully briefed about that appalling station? Will she get her officials to consider that matter in advance of his visit?

Ms Hughes: I assure my hon. Friend that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is equally concerned about disabled access, and he will ensure that he has all the necessary information before he makes that visit.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I congratulate the Government on the steps that they have taken, and applaud those steps taken by the industry, such as bus manufacturers that have been equipping buses to take disabled people. Is this not also a question of changing thought patterns, particularly in the aviation industry, where people with disabilities can travel on some planes but certain companies can refuse to take them? Surely the Act should cover them all.

Ms Hughes: In principle, I agree. The hon. Gentleman will know that while we have taken many steps to improve the situation and to introduce regulations for national transport systems, it is more difficult to deal with methods of transport with an international dimension, such as aeroplanes and ships from other countries that come here. We need to work with countries in Europe and more widely to make sure that we can set standards with

which a number of countries will comply. That is the only way to make sure that these issues are tackled across the board.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): My hon. Friend will be aware of the several reports from the Employment Sub-Committee pointing out how crucial public transport is in getting people to work and, indeed, in getting them to participate in the new deal. Obviously, that is especially true of disabled people and those in rural and semi-rural areas such as Bishop Auckland and Teesdale. Despite the Government's best efforts, will she now say what further measures they will introduce to enable disabled people to get to work and to participate in the new deal?

Ms Hughes: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out how crucial the question of transport is to issues of social inclusion, in terms of ensuring that when jobs become available everyone, including disabled people, can access them. I think that he would acknowledge the additional resources that have gone into providing transport in rural areas. As I pointed out earlier, the transport plan includes a commitment to make access for disabled people a condition of future public investment. That initiative has been welcomed by the disabled persons transport advisory committee, which will monitor our performance on it.

Congestion Tax (London)

5. **Mr. Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South): If he will make a statement on the introduction of the congestion tax in London. [152912]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Parliament has given the Mayor, Transport for London and the other London local authorities powers in the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to introduce congestion charging. The Mayor has chosen to use those powers and he is now consulting on proposals for a scheme in central London.

Mr. Ottaway: The Minister is correct in saying that this is a matter for the Greater London Authority. With that in mind, may I draw his attention to the front page of the Labour party's London manifesto for the elections that took place last May? Will he explain what exactly was meant by the words "no congestion charges"?

Mr. Hill: That is perfectly simple. It was the position of the Labour candidate in those elections that he would oppose not the principle of congestion charging, but its introduction in the first four years of mayoral tenure. In practice, the legislation is absolutely simple and straightforward. The Mayor is entitled to introduce congestion charging proposals and the evidence is that they are widely supported in London—*[Interruption.]* I hear cries of scepticism. Let me point out that the London boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea, of Westminster and of Wandsworth, all Conservative boroughs—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is absolutely no point in shouting at the Minister.

Mr. Hill: Those three Tory boroughs in London have opposed the introduction of the scheme and poured money into fighting it. However, when the borough of Kensington and Chelsea conducted a consultation exercise, the result was a majority in favour of charging. Further evidence emerged in a MORI survey of senior city executives published in February 2001—it revealed that 59 per cent. agreed that a system of congestion charging would benefit London. The Government are broadly supportive of the Mayor's proposals and so, it appears, is much of London opinion.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The hon. Gentleman failed to explain the sheer hypocrisy of the Labour party's position in its London election manifesto. After four wasted years on the tube, during which the Government have failed to raise a single penny of the private investment that was promised, will the Minister tell the House what exactly the Government have done for public transport in London since they were elected?

The Conservatives built the docklands light railway, the docklands light railway extension, the Jubilee line extension, the Croydon tramlink and the Heathrow express. Those were Conservative projects. What has the Labour party done? It promised that things would only get better, but they have got worse. The Labour party has failed Londoners, failed the London tube and delivered London to a standstill.

Mr. Hill: That was a pretty good rant from the hon. Gentleman. However, in addition to seeing through the completion of the Jubilee line extension, the docklands light railway, and the introduction of the Croydon tramlink, the Government have introduced the £60 million London bus initiative. Additionally, we have pumped no less than £1.5 billion into London's underground system. There is no need to look into the crystal ball to find out about Labour's achievement—hon. Members can read it in the book.

Neighbourhood Renewal

6. **Ms Bridget Prentice** (Lewisham, East): If he will make a statement on public service targets for neighbourhood renewal. [152913]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): The Government have set targets to improve outcomes on employment, education, health, crime and housing in our most deprived areas. For the first time, public services will be judged on how well they are narrowing the gap between those areas and the rest, rather than on national averages.

Ms Prentice: Is my right hon. Friend aware that Downham ward in my constituency is among the 10 per cent. most deprived wards in the country? The money that is going into neighbourhood renewal is being used effectively by all concerned: the council, the community and the local police. If the local police achieve the targets

set by the public service agreement—and I am sure that they will—will they be rewarded for that achievement, not penalised?

Ms Armstrong: The money that is going to Lewisham is in recognition of the number of people living in wards in the borough that are among the 10 per cent. most deprived in the country. I assure my hon. Friend that the targets that we set are minimum targets. Indeed, last week Lewisham council signed its local public service agreement, which extends those minimum targets and sets even higher targets. When people achieve those higher targets, they will be rewarded.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Does the Minister remember the wise words of her right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)? He said of urban regeneration schemes:

"There is a proliferation of programmes with insufficient collaboration between the different agencies involved at national, local and area level. As a result we are spending vast sums of money, often over and over again on the same people through different programmes".

What is different about the Minister's neighbourhood renewal scheme? Specifically, what will the new neighbourhood managers do, how many have been appointed and to whom will they be accountable? Will the Minister give a guarantee that the neighbourhood wardens in the scheme will not be used as a substitute for the 2,500 police officers who have been lost under this Government?

Ms Armstrong: There were about six questions in the hon. Gentleman's remarks. I can reassure him that it is precisely to overcome different initiatives undertaken by different Departments that we have instituted the neighbourhood renewal programme, which brings all Departments together, nationally and locally, to make sure that they deliver effectively better outcomes for local people.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Given that my constituency lies at the heart of what the centre for the analysis of social exclusion deems the biggest poverty cluster in the United Kingdom, and given that the local Liberal Democrat council is unable or unwilling to access programmes for neighbourhoods in my constituency such as Anfield, Kirkdale and Walton, can my right hon. Friend suggest to my constituents ways in which they can gain rightful and proper access to the excellent programmes introduced by the Government?

Ms Armstrong: It is precisely because we recognise those levels of deprivation in Liverpool that the neighbourhood renewal fund will provide the city with an additional £45 million over the next three years. That must be spent in such a way as to ensure that at least the floor targets are delivered. People in my hon. Friend's constituency can be assured that they will have a voice in the local strategic partnership. Their voice will be heard, which will ensure that their anxieties and aspirations are properly addressed.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

7. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): If he will make a statement about Government plans to give greater protection to areas of outstanding natural beauty.

[152914]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 introduced provisions for the better management and protection of areas of outstanding natural beauty, including requiring a management plan for every AONB and providing an option for the creation of conservation boards. Planning protection for AONBs has been confirmed as being at the highest level, alongside that for national parks.

Mr. Edwards: I thank my right hon. Friend for all his efforts while piloting the legislation through the House, and assure him that it is greatly appreciated by all those in my constituency who live and work in the Wye valley area of outstanding natural beauty, and by people from all over the world who visit the Wye valley. Can he give some indication of the timetable for introducing the measures that he outlined?

Mr. Meacher: Yes. The main requirement relates to the introduction of the regulations that will govern the mapping process. I have already said that the mapping process must be concluded by 2005, although it is my intention that it should be concluded significantly earlier than that. It depends on the initial mapping exercise that the Countryside Agency is to carry out in the north-west and south-east of the country this summer. In the light of that, we will decide whether to proceed to open up areas of the country on a regional basis or by land type.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I welcome the Minister's reply to his hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards). Will he agree to give the same planning protection to sites of special scientific interest, including that which is identified along the line of the proposed pylons for which his Government have given approval and which go right through a SSSI? Will he agree to give SSSIs the same planning protection as areas of outstanding natural beauty?

Mr. Meacher: The CROW Act, as it is called—the Countryside and Rights of Way Act—provides greatly strengthened protection for SSSIs, not just for AONBs. The degree of protection compares with that given to grade listed housing. In other words, if damage is done, the person responsible for it can be taken to court, prosecuted and forced to return the site to a pristine condition at his or her expense. That is a clear protection, which has never existed before and now applies to all SSSIs.

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan): I welcome the speech that my right hon. Friend made earlier this month, particularly the creation of the pathfinder forces to be administered by the Tidy Britain Group, an organisation that has already shown extraordinarily good judgment by siting its national headquarters at Wigan pier. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the features that make our areas of outstanding natural beauty so attractive are the canals and

rivers that flow through them? What plans does he have to extend part IV of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to include the banks, thereby giving authorities the ability to keep them litter free?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend makes a serious point. I am concerned at the state of many riverbanks, and the surface of rivers is often badly littered. There are disputes about who carries that responsibility. I am keen to introduce as soon as possible new regulations or legislation that will ensure that there are adequate powers to deal with the issue. I have already had it brought to my attention, particularly in regard to the Mersey basin, but it applies to many other parts of the country. River basins that are badly litter strewn must be cleaned up.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has the right hon. Gentleman had a chance to think about access to the countryside, particularly to areas of outstanding natural beauty, and how that would impinge on the present problems that the countryside is experiencing as a result of foot and mouth disease? It is possible that the Prime Minister will soon call a general election. Rather than cutting and running with a general election, does the Minister intend to stay in his Ministry during the election to make sure that the problems in our areas of outstanding natural beauty, which are causing concern to my constituents, are dealt with by the Government?

Mr. Meacher: That question was rather silly and over the top. Of course there is a very serious point about access to the countryside during the foot and mouth outbreak. In a few minutes, I will make a statement about that. As we stated in the guidelines that we issued on Friday, there are many parts of the country, including areas of outstanding natural beauty, which people can safely visit, as long as they abide by the rules, which are to avoid all contact with livestock, keep away from farmland and, above all, strictly obey the "Keep out" signs.

Disabled Facilities Grants

8. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): If he will make a statement on disabled facilities grants. [152915]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): The disabled facilities grant is a mandatory grant that is paid through local authorities for adaptations to help disabled people to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. The Government have increased the resources available for this grant in the comprehensive spending review by 20 per cent., to £87 million next year and £89 million in 2003-04.

Mr. Cunningham: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Will she outline how Coventry will benefit from the increases, bearing in mind that many families waited for years under the previous Government, but were always denied access to the grant because of the lack of money allocated to them?

Ms Hughes: My hon. Friend is right on that last point. We have increased resources substantially from £56 million, which was the amount set in the last Budget of the previous Government, to £87 million for the coming financial year. I happen to have Coventry's disabled facilities grant allocation to hand. For the current year it is £456,000, but for the next financial year of 2001-02 it will increase by 23 per cent. to £561,000, which is about 5 per cent. higher than the average for the area. The allocation reflects Coventry's very good record on investment in facilities for disabled people and in housing adaptations.

South East England Development Agency

9. **Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks): What the current annual cost is of the South East England development agency. [152916]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hurray!

Mr. Prescott: Any more?

The South East England development agency's total budget will be £79.2 million this year. Only 8 per cent.—£6.3 million—will be spent on its strategic and management role. That is excellent value for money and is less than the 9 per cent. average for the rest of the RDAs. We have a streamlined and effective way of delivering regional development, in contrast with the previous Government, who had no co-ordination and no regional policy.

Mr. Fallon: Is the Secretary of State aware that the South East England development agency has written to Members of Parliament asking them to make representations to the Commission in support of the Chancellor's highly controversial state-subsidised regional venture capital fund? Is he aware that it has supplied MPs with core scripts for that purpose? Is it genuinely the function of a regional development agency to try to rig a competition investigation in that way?

Mr. Prescott: I do not accept for one moment that the agency is doing what the hon. Gentleman suggests. It is doing an excellent job on regional development in the south-east. One can see how many jobs it has created and how much investment has been brought in. That is a matter of record. It is often said in the House that the Conservatives do not support the regional development agencies or the assemblies, which are actively involved, but it is important to bear it in mind that 105 Tory councillors serve on the regional chambers, 41 of whom do so in the south-east regional assembly. I note that the Conservative party is rightly prepared to keep the RDAs for Scotland and Wales, but that it has apparently said that it is prepared to keep them for London and not for the rest of the English regions. Greater London Assembly Member Bob Neil said:

"It is not the policy of the Conservative party to abolish the London Development Agency."

Is there now another area to which it will not subject its policies? Why should the rest of the English regions have RDAs denied to them by Conservative policy? Or are there enough days left before the election for other areas to be covered by the same exemption rule?

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Can my right hon. Friend ensure that the South East England development agency, which leads the No. 1 region in Britain, has the resources that it needs for capital development, such as the proposed heart of Slough development? That would enable the local authority, local business and so on to create a hub of communications and cultural industries in the town that I represent.

Mr. Prescott: Yes, that is exactly what the regional development agency is doing, not only in my hon. Friend's constituency, but in many parts of the south-east. Indeed, we met RDA chairmen only about a week ago and told them about the extra resources and the single pool of development capital that will available for investment in the regions. That was welcomed, but we went further. We gave £500,000 a year to each of the regional assemblies so that they can check what the RDAs are doing in their areas and to ensure that they are more accountable.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I am surprised that the Deputy Prime Minister does not accept that SEEDA is doing what my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) says it is doing, because it has described exactly that in writing to all south-east Members. As the Deputy Prime Minister believes that SEEDA is such excellent value for money—indeed, it is one of the more efficient development agencies—will he say how much it spends on representation and lobbying in Brussels and how much it spent last year on PR and marketing, including its own annual report?

Mr. Prescott: The amount I mentioned for administration was £6.3 million. I do not know the exact figure for how much is spent in Brussels, although it is clear that development agencies want to make representations because much regional funding is decided there. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman to say how much is spent, but a quick call to the regional chair would have established it.

The agencies are doing an excellent job and I am absolutely delighted to hear that the Opposition spokesman believes that the South East England RDA is doing a good job, as 41 of the Tory councillors—[HON. MEMBERS: "He did not say that."] Well, I thought he said that. If he did not, I withdraw my remark. Presumably, he believes that RDAs are not doing a good job. That is fine; he will have a chance at the coming election, whenever it comes, to put his case for abolition. I am sure that many Tory councillors, including the leader in Kent and the leaders of a number of Tory authorities, support the proposal for a development agency and an assembly. They will have a choice and I think they will vote accordingly.

Mr. Norman: The Deputy Prime Minister seems to be totally out of touch, even with his own figures. Let me tell him the figure for administrative expenses, PR and marketing SEEDA itself—£630,000 last year. Furthermore, £50,000 is spent keeping employees in Brussels and a large sum also goes on lobbying there. The leader of Kent county council has specifically assured me, and has gone on the public record as saying, that he opposes the development agency and supports our policy to abolish it.

Is not the real truth that SEEDA is another example of an unwanted quango covering a region that nobody identifies with and spending money that would not otherwise be spent? Does not the Deputy Prime Minister agree that if it succeeds in achieving anything, it will attract businesses that would otherwise go to the north and the midlands, thereby extending the north-south divide? Is not this the real point: England would be better represented as one country with a coherent regional policy rather than by eight regions, all with their hands out for state subsidy?

Mr. Prescott: I fail to understand the logic of the hon. Gentleman's point. He is prepared to accept development agencies for Scotland and Wales, whatever the bureaucratic cost and whatever the difficulties in assisting with the differential between the north and south of Scotland and the English regions. Why can he accept development agencies for Scotland and Wales, but not for the English regions, where the populations are far higher and often in desperate need of economic assistance? The agencies have done an excellent job. In order to inform the House, and so that I can be better informed, will he comment on this statement by a Tory GLA Member:

"It is not policy of the Conservative party to abolish the London Development Agency"?

Would the Tories keep the agency for London?

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour Members have supported RDAs from the very beginning? Like him, I am a Yorkshire and Humber Member, and he will agree that Yorkshire and Humber is the No. 1 region in the United Kingdom. We believe in the RDAs, for all the country, because they are good for investment, good for innovation, good for planning and good for the future.

Mr. Prescott: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Tories said that they would abolish the Scottish and Welsh development agencies and they put that in their manifesto, but when they came to power they found that they needed such agencies to help to change and develop the economies in all regions. I suspect that the same would happen on this occasion were they to be elected, but there is not much chance of that.

Social Housing (Southern England)

10. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What estimate he has made of the need for additional social housing in southern England. [152917]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Because of the wide variation in need between different parts of the country, the Government believe that local authorities are best placed to carry out local housing needs assessments. In determining housing requirements for their regions, and in order to meet the full range of housing needs, regional planning bodies may have to estimate the future balance between general

market and affordable housing. Draft regional planning guidance for the south-east suggests a provisional indicator of 18,000 to 19,000 affordable homes per year, and draft regional planning guidance for the south-west suggests a figure of between 6,000 and 10,000 per year.

Mr. Swayne: That is an extraordinary statement from the Minister, given that his Department is interfering and preventing New Forest district council, which is a beacon council, from getting on with the job of building social houses to relieve homelessness. Is not that why 50,000 fewer social dwellings have been built under this Government than were built in the preceding four years?

Mr. Raynsford: New Forest district council has done extremely well under this Government. In the coming financial year, it will receive a housing allocation of more than £5 million, which is 25 per cent. higher than in the current year and 88 per cent. higher than the allocation when the Tories were last in power. This Government are giving more money to local authorities and more money for housing.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to assess the need for additional social housing it is a good idea to have some plan of the overall housing need in any region? Does he agree that a policy of abdicating the need for any planning guidance or planning decision in favour of allowing local authorities to build housing in their own areas, as the Conservative party believes, is a recipe for little or no social housing or for such provision to be unpredictable? Will he commit himself to ensuring that, in planning regional housing need, careful consideration will be given to what level of social housing is required and how it can best be provided?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend rightly emphasises the fact that it is important to make a proper assessment of the considerably varying needs from area to area. That is why we put the focus on local authorities analysing the needs of their own areas. We think that it is right and appropriate for regional planning bodies to estimate the balance between affordable, social housing and general market housing. That is an essential element in developing a proper analysis of each region's needs to inform local authorities' local plans. We will adopt that approach to ensure that a serious analysis is conducted region by region and local authority by local authority.

Railtrack (Investment)

11. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): What assessment he has made of the benefits of encouraging train operators to invest in Railtrack.

[152918]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): The Government's 10-year plan provides scope for new ways of securing private sector finance and expertise, including from train operators when that makes sense. The Strategic Rail Authority, Railtrack and the preferred bidder for the south central franchise are currently working together to establish the first such partnership.

Mr. McCabe: Does my hon. Friend accept that the fragmentation of the service and the complete split between track and train was probably one of the worst aspects of the previous Government's botched privatisation of the railways? In those circumstances, does he agree that there would be strong public support for any practical measures designed to reintegrate the structure and improve the performance, management and financial strength of the railways so that we can achieve the targets in the 10-year plan?

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly reasonable point, but I have three observations about the argument on vertical integration. First, it would reduce the autonomy of franchisees and undermine current and proposed franchises. Secondly, it would make the Rail Regulator's role more difficult. Thirdly, it could hinder the efficient operation of cross-franchise operators, such as freight companies.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Does the Minister agree that if Railtrack's structure is not changed, the notion of anyone investing in it is almost a joke? Given the complete chaos on our privatised railways, does the Minister believe that privatisation of the railways has created a market where "the customer is king", has led to

"new energy and enthusiasm in the industry"

and has ensured that

"trains are cleaner safer and a good deal faster."

Is he aware that those paeans came from his Labour colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and does he agree with them?

Mr. Hill: It is good to see the Liberal Democrat beast waken from its slumber at last. I am sure we are all extremely grateful for that.

Under the current structure of the railway industry—notwithstanding the difficulties experienced in the aftermath of recent tragic events—there has been a significant growth in rail usage of 70 per cent. over the past three years. The train operating companies are succeeding in attracting customers, and the Government are committed—by our proposal to invest £60 billion in the system over the next 10 years through the transport plan—to increasing passenger volume on the railways by 50 per cent. That is an objective to which I believe the whole House can happily assent.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Has my hon. Friend read the words of the Rail Regulator this morning? Given what he has just said about vertical integration, will he tell us what plans he has to ensure that before taxpayers invest £8 billion in the system they have some indication that their wishes will be carried out, that they will be given value for money, and that they will not be simply handing large amounts of their money to private investors?

Mr. Hill: I have noted the remarks of the Rail Regulator, which the Government broadly welcome.

Through various mechanisms, the Government are working extremely closely with both the Strategic Rail Authority and Railtrack to achieve exactly the goal desired by my hon. Friend—the securing of proper value for money through the investment that the Government propose to make in the railway industry and, in due course, through Railtrack.

Road Accidents

12. **Mrs. Ann Cryer** (Keighley): What steps he has taken to reduce the number of road accidents in the past three years. [152919]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): In March last year, the Government launched their new road safety strategy for Great Britain, "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone". It included targets to reduce overall deaths and serious injuries by 40 per cent. and to reduce child deaths and serious injuries by 50 per cent. by 2010, compared with the average for 1994 to 1998, together with details of many policies and initiatives that will help to achieve them.

Mrs. Cryer: I have very good reasons—personal reasons—to welcome any measures that will reduce the number of road traffic accidents. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that the safest method of travel remains travel on our railways?

Following earlier questions, and in view of many letters in my postbag at home, I am beginning to be increasingly concerned at the number of people who tell me that they are returning from the railways to their cars—which can only bring about more accidents—owing mainly, in my area, to the chaos created by Railtrack at Leeds city station. May I encourage my hon. Friend to read early-day motion 69, which bears 108 signatures, and part of which calls for what is now Railtrack to be returned to public ownership?

Mr. Ainsworth: The whole House recognises and appreciates my hon. Friend's interest in road safety.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. Despite efforts made over a long period to make our roads safer—and our record in that regard bears comparison to that of any of our European colleagues—and despite the difficulties, and publicity about those difficulties, that rail has experienced over the past year or so, rail travel is still seven times safer than road travel. We must continue to make people aware of that, and encourage them as far as possible to use rail rather than roads, for safety as well as for environmental and other reasons.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): What action are the Government taking to encourage county councils to impose 30 mph speed limits through rural villages?

Mr. Ainsworth: We have given councils the power, where they think it appropriate, to introduce 20 mph speed limits. That is part of the programme introduced in the paper "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone".

Foot and Mouth (Rural Economy)

3.30 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I wish to report on the work of the rural taskforce, which held its second meeting this morning. We all agreed that our first priority remains to eradicate foot and mouth disease as soon as possible. The situation remains an extremely serious one. Its effects are very serious for farmers and the wider rural community, especially in tourism. The rural taskforce, which has representatives from a range of rural interests and Departments, is working urgently to develop measures to alleviate those impacts.

I must commend the response of the public who have been very anxious to avoid spreading the disease. However, large parts of the country are not affected, and people wrongly believe that the whole countryside is out of bounds. That has had a devastating and unnecessary impact on many of the businesses that depend on visitors to rural areas. The best way of helping rural businesses is to encourage their customers to return as quickly as possible to the many places where it is safe to do so.

The taskforce has therefore agreed on a number of actions to achieve that. First, last Friday we issued new guidance to the public on what they can do safely in the countryside and what they must not do. The basic message is that the public should stay away from livestock and their pastures, but that there are still plenty of things to do and places to visit in the country without risking spreading the disease.

Secondly, an increasing number of rural properties will be opening to the public again very shortly: English Heritage is announcing today that more than 200 properties will be open from 1 April; the National Trust will announce shortly that it will be opening about 150 properties between now and 1 April; and British Waterways will be reopening many of its canals starting next week. In all cases, that follows a very careful, in-depth review agreed with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Thirdly, local authorities and national park authorities will be considering where footpaths can be safely opened. I hope that there will shortly be a much wider availability of footpaths for the public outside the infected areas.

Fourthly, we are mounting a public information campaign to ensure that the message gets through to the public about what they can and cannot do, and about the benefits that they can bring to rural businesses by their visits to the countryside—particularly to rural and seaside towns and villages, hotels, guest houses and tourist attractions in rural areas.

The Government, in conjunction with the tourism industry, are setting up a public information telephone line which will steer callers to more detailed help on what attractions are open. Extra funding will be made available to tourist boards to promote rural attractions.

We are also developing a preliminary package of measures to alleviate the immediate financial hardship of small businesses in rural areas which have been badly hit by the sudden decrease in visitors and other knock-on effects of the foot and mouth outbreak. In preparing the package, we have met and listened to a wide range of rural interests.

The first stage measures are as follows. First, we can offer help through the rates system. We will consider help through the rates system by increasing the central Government contribution to rate relief, from 75 to 95 per cent., for small businesses in rural authorities in the areas of greatest need and that are suffering genuine hardship because of foot and mouth. Affected businesses can also apply to the Valuation Office Agency for a temporary reduction in their rateable value.

On Friday, we presented a Bill that will extend mandatory 50 per cent. rate relief to all food shops in small rural settlements. We will also lay regulations to extend mandatory 50 per cent. rate relief to sole village pubs and garages with a rateable value of less than £9,000. Local authorities will also consider using their existing powers to allow deferred payment of rates. We are also announcing a three-month extension to the deadline for business rate appeals.

Secondly, we can help through the tax system. As a first step, Ministers have asked Inland Revenue and Customs officials to take a very sympathetic approach to businesses experiencing financial problems as a result of the outbreak. The revenue departments already have power in specific circumstances to defer payment of taxes and national insurance contributions and to agree extended arrangements for time to pay. They will make maximum use of this flexibility for agricultural, transport, tourism and related retail businesses in the countryside, which cannot pay debts because of cash flow problems, where cash flow assistance, through rescheduling tax or national insurance contribution liabilities, would help.

Thirdly, we are considering with the Small Business Service and the banks how we can ensure continuing credit for small businesses badly affected by the impact of foot and mouth disease, including the use of the small firms loan guarantee fund. The Small Business Service, through a national helpline, will provide more information on the package of support available and access to the network of local business links.

Fourthly, we can help through the benefits system. Jobseeker's allowance may be available to employees and self-employed people out of work as a result of foot and mouth. The Department of Social Security will be making its procedures as fast and as flexible as possible.

I have had constructive discussions with the major banks. It is clear that they fully understand the problems faced by businesses from all sectors affected and they are being proactive in contacting their customers who are likely to be in trouble. They have made it clear that they are keen to support their customers wherever possible. They will look, on a case-by-case basis, at mechanisms such as extended lines of credit, capital repayment holidays and other measures. I would encourage all bank customers in difficulty or expecting problems to contact their local bank manager as soon as possible to discuss what options may be available.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the important role that the voluntary sector is playing in relieving rural distress. I can announce today that the Government will match the public donations that have been made to them for this purpose.

I should stress that this is a preliminary package. The taskforce will continue in being as long as it is needed. I look forward to making further announcements in due course.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I thank the Minister of State for his statement. Many people in the countryside will have been awaiting his response today with mounting anxiety. It was a week ago that we first called for action to help businesses more broadly affected than those in the agriculture sector, including a call for business rate cancellation, on which the Minister commented today. It is now four weeks since the crisis started and it is clear that, on all sides, the extent of the crisis has been widely underestimated. The countryside is now risking meltdown and permanent loss of businesses, enterprise and employment. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members may not know about that, but Conservative Members do; we have many examples of enterprises that are threatened with going out of business imminently. The loss of employment will create enduring suffering in the countryside. It is important that all parties in the House address the question with great seriousness, and in a spirit of bipartisanship.

Against that background, the measures announced today will be widely welcomed, as far as they go. I have only just heard the Minister's statement, and the detail needs to be studied, but I have no doubt that the measures will command our support if they are delivered rapidly, and without bureaucracy and delay. However, businesses in the countryside need help now, not in a few months. The Minister was right to say that cash flow is their problem, and speed is of the essence.

Many people will be concerned that many of the proposals outlined by the Minister are conditional in nature and subject to further consultation. They will look for an accelerated time scale for the measures' implementation. It is hard to avoid the impression that the Government are still in the process of catching up with the crisis. We appreciate that the situation is fast moving, but the matter is now of the utmost urgency. When will the cash relief affect the bank accounts and overdrafts of affected businesses? That is the acid test.

In that context, I have a number of questions for the Minister. Will he undertake to look at the bureaucracy and the processes through which businesses must go, for example in applying for temporary rate relief? That process normally takes some weeks. Unless action is taken, however, businesses could go bankrupt in that period of time, especially given that Easter is approaching,

Does the Minister believe that the total tax relief, which he has presumably agreed with the Treasury, goes far enough? Will he give the House an idea of the Treasury estimate of the cost and financial commitment of the total package? That would give hon. Members an opportunity to judge the extent to which his announcement represents a real change.

For many businesses, the loss of cash flow will be irrecoverable. Overdrafts are rising, and tax deferral will merely add to the rising debt. Will the Minister consider going further than deferrals, and perhaps announce his support for enabling local authorities to provide a business rate holiday for the duration of the crisis for those businesses directly affected by it? The livelihoods of the owners of those businesses are at risk. The Opposition have advocated that proposal, and the Minister's statement was not clear on that point.

Again in a spirit of bipartisanship, may I raise the question of the climate change levy? I appreciate that that has been a matter of contention in the House, but I wish to set that to one side. I recognise that the levy has been approved by the House, but does the Minister consider it possible to contemplate a deferral of its implementation? The cost of the climate change levy to agriculture alone is estimated at £17 million. The Cumbria tourist board and others have called for a deferral. The levy is due to be implemented on 1 April, and will adversely affect many of the businesses that are already suffering.

The Minister will know that there remains widespread confusion about public events. Horse racing events in agricultural areas such as Lingfield are continuing, but other events, such as Crufts, have been cancelled. Hon. Members of all parties will have received letters from people who have been given apparently contradictory advice by local authorities and other bodies. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) gave me the example of the Sutherland Lodge activities centre in his constituency. The local authority has advised that all school outings should be cancelled, and as a result the future of the business is at risk.

Is it possible to provide further clarity in Government guidance about the holding of public events? That would enable people in this country—and foreign tourists thinking of visiting from abroad—to be clear about which public events are likely to proceed, and which are likely to be cancelled.

On the vexed question of the pending county council elections, the Minister will be aware that all the political parties involved in Cumbria and Devon have called for a postponement of them in those areas specifically. Many people in the areas worst affected are living under a state of siege. They would find it insulting if politicians were seen to be engaging in a partisan battle during the local elections. It is time, surely, for all parties to pull together in those areas. Have the Government considered our suggestions for deferring local elections, or for taking the powers to defer local elections in those areas, if necessary, so that a decision can be made in the next few days, depending on the way the crisis develops?

I appreciate that the role of the Environment Agency, for which the Secretary of State is responsible, falls at the outer edge of the subject covered in this statement, but the issue is critical to the industry. There is widespread frustration at the reluctance to authorise the burial of carcases. A report in 1969 recommended burials as the fastest and most effective method of disposal, and preferable to burning. Yet reports from all parts of the country suggest that the Environment Agency has adopted a negative and unconstructive attitude towards burial. We appreciate that the agency is now affected by European legislation, but will the Secretary of State undertake to meet the Environment Agency to discuss this and see what can be done to accelerate the process of burial where it is appropriate and where it can be undertaken without adverse environmental effects?

Finally, will the Secretary of State accept that it is critical to have greater clarity from the Government on the extent and severity of the crisis? It is vital that the extent of the problem is not understated. Some in the

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Government have given the impression of wanting to downplay the crisis, while others have emphasised its seriousness. With hindsight, it may have been unwise for Ministers to have briefed last week that the situation was "under control". The Secretary of State spoke of safe zones on the "Today" programme last Wednesday. I do not know what has happened to the concept of safe zones, but the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport did not seem to have heard of them that same afternoon. That may be just one example of what has hitherto been a somewhat confused approach.

We appreciate that the situation is fast moving, and we welcome the Government's more encouraging response today. We will support remedies that bring fast relief to business. However, let there be no doubt that this is a national crisis that requires a national emergency response and a nation that speaks with one voice.

Mr. Meacher: I believe that we fully understand the extent of the impact of the outbreak. Given the efforts of my colleagues in MAFF to deal with the containment, control and extermination of the disease and the measures that we are bringing forward to help non-farm businesses, I do not believe that we have in any way underestimated the gravity of the situation. I believe that we have reacted rapidly and effectively, and that is the significance of today's statement.

I am grateful for much of the sober response of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). However, to refer to a "meltdown" is completely over the top and inappropriate and does not help in making a serious and proper response to the situation. Something like 1 per cent. of livestock have been affected. Of course, the implications go far wider, but we should keep things in perspective.

We accept that the Government will command support for their measures if they are delivered quickly. That is why I have had urgent discussions with the banks and have brought forward measures that will provide rate relief. Concern about the rate demands at the end of the month is, I think, people's prime financial anxiety. We are effectively meeting that anxiety with the proposals that we have made today.

I take the point that we should reduce bureaucracy in every possible way at this time. I stressed that repeatedly in my statement. The process of getting rate relief will be accelerated and prioritised. On the cost, I cannot give the house an accurate overall figure, because it depends on assessments made on a case-by-case basis. However, tens of thousands of small businesses will benefit from the measures that I announced today. Whether local authorities are able to offer a business rate holiday is a matter for their discretion, within the parameters of the extended scheme that I offered today.

The climate change levy, as the hon. Gentleman correctly says, comes into effect in less than a fortnight. I remind him that, overwhelmingly, it will be larger and non-rural businesses that will certainly have liabilities under the levy. I repeat that the measures being demanded of them are cost-effective; over time, those measures will benefit the bottom line of businesses by improving their energy efficiency. Although there is a short-term issue to be dealt with in respect of foot and mouth, the longer-term climate change issue remains with us all the time. We should not abandon measures that are necessary for that purpose.

On sporting activities, of course we want the clearest possible information about the availability of sporting and other public events. That depends entirely and specifically on the advice of the chief veterinary officer. We hope that he will make clear his views on the holding of such events as quickly as possible.

Contrary to what the hon. Gentleman says, it is not the case that all parties in Cumbria and Devon have sought postponement of the county council elections. That is certainly not so in Cumbria. I do not believe that there is a justification for taking such action at this stage. Certainly, we have to take account of the future course of the disease and we have to listen to what people are saying, but to send a message—especially abroad—at this point in time, that the whole country, or major parts of it, is in quarantine and that democracy has been suspended will not give a true or accurate image of our country.

Finally, on the hon. Gentleman's last point, I realise that there is an issue in relation to the Environment Agency and the disposal of carcases. The valuation of carcases can take an unduly long time, but we are looking at ways to speed up that process.

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): May I tell my right hon. Friend that in my rural constituency in Cumbria his statement and these first steps to bring help to businesses will be warmly welcomed? Is he aware of the importance not only of the Government giving a clear, coherent message about the countryside, but of regional and local agencies doing the same? For example, is he aware that more than 100 visitor attractions in Cumbria and the Lake district are still open for business as usual? There is no reason that people should not go to them.

It is important that the Government attack the foot and mouth outbreak more aggressively and urgently bring more resources to bear on the problem in Cumbria and elsewhere. As long as the outbreak continues, rural businesses—large and small—in Cumbria and elsewhere will suffer; they are already suffering very, very seriously—especially the tourist industry.

May I also—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Oh, yes. May I tell my right hon. Friend, the House and the Opposition spokesman that there was a Cumbria-wide crisis meeting yesterday in Kendal? All parties and all MPs attended. At no time was there a call from anyone for the suspension of elections, so the Opposition spokesman is totally wrong on that point. Indeed, the meeting called for a non-partisan approach to these matters.

Finally, let me tell my right hon. Friend and the House that the statement by the Leader of the Opposition that the chief executive of the Cumbria tourist board has called for the cancellation of elections is also completely untrue.

Mr. Meacher: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he says. I am sure that he is right to say that the Government's clear and coherent message has to be reflected regionally and locally. Indeed, the helplines that we have put in place for local authorities and business are designed precisely to try to achieve that. I take note of the fact that, as he said, more than 100 visitor attractions are still open. That information is useful

because there is a widespread perception, which is wholly wrong, that they are all closed. That is not the case, and many more can be reopened.

We are deploying all the resources at our disposal to try to contain and eradicate the disease, especially where the outbreak is greatest—in Cumbria, Devon and along the Welsh border. I take note, as did the whole House, of the correction that my right hon. Friend gave to the statement made by the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I welcome the Minister's interim statement and hope that it represents the first step in explaining to the House how the Government will assist businesses, which will be affected for a long time. I know he agrees that clarity is important in enabling the public and business people to gain access to the support. That is vital. We do not need more bureaucracy and administration; we need more management of the resources and better use of the existing channels.

Specifically on the right hon. Gentleman's discussions with the banks, does he agree that they have an opportunity to show just how supportive of small businesses they are? Is he aware that there is evidence to suggest that they are already pulling out of some projects for which they had originally shown support? On rate relief, will special support be provided to charities? They already receive 80 per cent. rate relief, so the modest increase may not assist them greatly. Will he confirm that the proposals include the deferment of VAT payments for one or perhaps two quarters? Will he also confirm that this is just the interim statement and that he expects to return to the House in the not-too-distant future to explain what progress the taskforce has made?

Mr. Meacher: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, I certainly confirm—as I twice said in the statement—that this is a preliminary statement. I appreciate the point about the need for urgency and rapid response. That is the reason why I have made this first-step announcement today, but there will certainly be other statements, as and when necessary, in the light of further revelation of need. That is the criterion by which we shall decide what further action to take. Of course, as I said, it is very important that people should find it easy to gain access to the support. We are doing all we can to ensure that there is simplicity. We are running a massive advertising campaign to let people know, by using a single telephone number, where they can get help, so that they can be directed locally to precise and specific assistance.

I met the banks, and they said that they were being proactive and were seeking out among their clients those whom they thought might be in difficulty. I am concerned to hear the hon. Gentleman suggest that they might be pulling out of some projects. I should be pleased to know whether that is the case. I believe that they should be held to their word, and those who are involved in those projects should beard their local managers about the consequences of such action.

Of course rate relief is not primarily aimed at charities, and the hon. Gentleman should not belittle the increase in aid—from 75 to 95 per cent.—that the Government are offering. The proposals on VAT payments are primarily aimed at the next quarter, but a further quarter could be included if that were to prove necessary. There are flexibilities in the system, such as deferment and rescheduling, and we shall use them, on a case-by-case basis, where we can.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): My constituency has a mixed economy, in which farmers and tourists are very important. We need a clear and loud message that we have confidence in the countryside as part of the economy. In particular, the X Paragliding Company is entirely situated on National Trust land. It has not just had a cash flow problem—it has had no cash at all because the National Trust has been closed for business. I am very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend say that, within a week, we shall know more about the opening of National Trust land. What advice can I give to my constituents who are now suffering greatly from the lack of paragliding—although the snow may have prevented that from happening any way? How quickly will we be able to tell them which National Trust areas will be open for business?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that confidence in the countryside is an issue of great importance. If confidence returns and people realise just how far they can take advantage of the attractions and the beauty of the countryside and return to it in complete safety in the knowledge that they are not transmitting the disease any further, there will be no better way of bringing relief to rural businesses in their thousands. People may not visit the countryside for that motive, but that will be the consequence. It is an extremely important lesson for everyone in the country to understand.

With regard to paragliding, the advice that I have received from the National Trust is that it intends to open 150 properties after it has carried out a case-by-case analysis. That is the way that everything is being done; there are no blanket restrictions and there will be no blanket openings. Those properties should open in the next week or two, so I suggest that my hon. Friend advises her constituents to contact the National Trust. It will give precise advice about local areas.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Although I welcome part of the Minister's statement, does he really understand the true depth and extent of the fear, despondency and crisis in my constituency? I have questions on two specific issues. First, why will the Government not call out the Army in real numbers to bury the carcases that have been lying around for days in Devon? Why are they culling healthy animals in Cumbria and not dealing with the backlog in Devon? Secondly, how can we have county council elections in Devon on 3 May when many county councillors and many candidates from all parties are farmers? How can there be a proper democratic process in Devon? When will the Minister listen to the voice of Devon?

Mr. Meacher: We are listening to the voice of Devon; indeed, I intend to visit Devon for a whole next day Thursday. Of course, we are listening to Cumbria, to Powys and to Devon. Those areas are hardest hit and we take careful note of all the information that we have about them from MAFF and other sources.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that we should call out the Army to get rid of the backlog of carcases. I said in my statement that we recognise that that is a serious issue. However, we do not at this stage believe that that is the

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right or necessary solution; we believe that there are better ways of dealing with the problem and we intend to put them in place. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will make very clear the Government's proposals on that.

With regard to elections, I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern when so many of his constituents and those in the surrounding area find it difficult to move around at this time. I repeat that I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I genuinely believe that to take such a decision at this point would be deeply irresponsible. If there is the widespread belief in the United States that BSE is exactly the same as foot and mouth, the message that some parts of England cannot even hold democratic elections will be taken extremely badly and it will be utterly counterproductive.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): There is a real crisis in my constituency and it is very hard to put into words what is happening in such towns as Keswick, where businesses, hotels, outdoor centres and shops have found that their turnover has dropped by 90 per cent. The whole turnover of some businesses in my constituency has been wiped out, so we cannot underestimate the significance of the package that my right hon. Friend has introduced. It will be appreciated in so far as it meets some of the central requirements and requests of the tourist authorities in the county.

In the detail of my hon. Friend's statement, he mentioned the countryside and rural areas. Can he assure us that the towns to which I referred will be included in those rural categories? There must be no mistake in the mind of the public, especially when it comes to taxation deferment and rates relief, which is what will concern people.

May I pass on a constituent's suggestion that was made to me on the telephone this morning? He has a simple solution, for which I think he has a case. He said, "Why not subsidise attractions?" My right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) referred to 100 attractions in our area. Why not subsidise those? That would bring people back to our areas to fill the boarding houses, hotels and restaurants and could well be a less expensive way of dealing with a problem that might turn out to be very costly in the long term.

Mr. Meacher: I do not underestimate the seriousness of the situation facing many farms and non-farm businesses, especially in Cumbria. When I was in the east and west midlands on Saturday, I met many representatives of small businesses who said that turnover had dropped by 50 or 70 per cent. and, in one case, by 90 per cent. I understand the problem. The question is how we can best respond to it quickly. That is what the Government have been addressing. There is no specific panacea; the package relies on a combination of measures that give well targeted, practical, short-term and effective help to tens of thousands of firms. That is our intention.

The package does apply to towns and small settlements in the countryside. Indeed, one matter under consideration is how far we can accelerate the application of the measures in the rural White Paper, especially in regard to parishes and small village settlements and the promotion of market towns. We have provided £37 million for that purpose which, if we lever in money, could be £100 million. If we manage to introduce that money quickly enough, it, too, will be an effective measure.

We will certainly consider promoting attractions, but we believe that it is much better to allow the local tourist board, under the direction of the English Tourism Council, to receive extra funding for that purpose, which we propose to provide. That is the best way to get more people to visit attractions and it will reduce the need for direct subsidies. No one wants subsidies; people just want to return to normal business. Carefully targeted extra funding can achieve that.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): Although I welcome the statement, which is a step in the right direction, may I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said about the Army on Dartmoor? It is a permanent home to an enormous military contingent and there are three live firing ranges and dry training areas. The Army are all around the moor, in the moor and on the moor, but they are not helping the farmers. That is madness.

The South Hams, which is part of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend, has no foot and mouth disease and a huge tourism industry, but people from American and the midlands in particular believe that it is a no-go area. The attractions are open and people can walk on the sandy beaches. The Government could help by clearly stating that it is business as usual in the South Hams and that people from the midlands, the north and the United States in particular are most welcome.

Mr. Meacher: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the use of the Army on Dartmoor. I have already responded to that point. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture will certainly be taking account of this exchange, and I am sure that he will have heard what the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said. I repeat that we entirely accept that there is a serious problem and that it is totally unsatisfactory to have carcases lying around for several days. The question is how the problem is best dealt with, and that is primarily a matter for my right hon. Friend. He will have heard those comments, which of course are not unique but have been made by many others, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that he will respond to them.

On the second point, it is precisely the aim of my statement and of the rural taskforce that the Government can open up the countryside where that can safely be done and so long as the basic rules are obeyed. My statement will be followed up with all the institutions that can assist, and there will be massive advertising campaigns so that the message is put across. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Government are doing their best not only in this country but abroad. The British Tourist Authority is increasing its advertising in areas that have seen the biggest drop in the numbers of tourists coming to the UK—the United States, the Republic of Ireland, Germany and France. There is a big campaign to set the record straight and to state that it is far from true that the countryside is out of bounds. In fact, the great majority of it is in absolutely no sense a no-go area.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I call another Member, I appeal for short questions. That will be very helpful indeed.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): The measures offered by my right hon. Friend and the speed with which he has acted will be much appreciated by my constituents. The delegation that I led to the Wales Office last week to meet the Under-Secretary of State was seeking such actions. Will my right hon. Friend take note of the widespread effects that the cancellation of this year's Urdd National Eisteddfod in Cardiff will have? Will he note also the knock-on effects of the cancellation on Llandudno in my constituency? If the 2002 Eisteddfod is cancelled, the area will lose about £2 million. Will he therefore ensure that effects on the whole of Wales will be considered by the taskforce?

Mr. Meacher: I am aware of course that the outbreak has had devastating effects on many national and public events, not least the one to which my hon. Friend referred. I understand that the Under–Secretary of State for Wales has written to her about what was said at their meeting. We want to ensure that festivals with international as well as national significance should be able to go ahead. I repeat that our actions must be guided by MAFF's veterinary advice. As soon as it is safe to reopen venues or to allow events to go ahead, the Government are extremely keen that we should do so, but we must rigorously accept the advice, whatever it is.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Everyone who has known the Minister over the years will know that he made his statement today with complete sincerity. However, at lunchtime we heard the Leader of the House saying that it is not people who are in quarantine, but only animals. Does that not give rise to the suspicion that the Government do not yet appreciate that they have a national crisis on their hands?

I assume that the right hon. Gentleman will have made an assessment of the consequences for a tourism industry that may well find that in certain parts of the country the summer season is already lost. I assume also that he will have made some assessment of the effect that that will have on farmers who may not be able to start up their proceedings again for six or nine months. Given that we have a national crisis on such a scale, what measures is the right hon. Gentleman thinking of introducing, other than those announced today which are very small and specific? Where in his thinking is the sense that we are dealing with a national crisis that needs a national response?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman has not fairly characterised the tone of my statement or my responses. I recognise, as all Ministers have, that this is a very serious situation. I do not think anyone attempts to underplay it in any way. However, the issue is how we handle it, and how we contain and eradicate the disease.

The hon. Gentleman is almost certainly right in saying that there will be significant losses of international tourism in the summer, and that for many farm and non-farm businesses the effects could continue for some considerable time. That is why I said—taking account of the demand of the House for an urgent statement so that the immediate requirements could be put in place and everyone knew what they were, and so that the helpline could be set up within a matter of days—that I would then judge whether it was right to introduce further measures over the next few weeks. Obviously the content of such measures would depend on the course of the disease, and on further and clearer revelations of the degree of economic damage that the situation has caused.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to publicise the fact that many of our tourist attractions in the countryside are still open: for example, in Amber Valley, the midland railway museum, the national tramway museum, the Denby pottery visitors centre and the industrial heritage sites. Will he ensure that nothing is done to muddy the message that Derbyshire and other parts of the country are still open for visitors?

Will my right hon. Friend also note that my constituency is a mixed urban and rural area, and confirm that those who are suffering—such as businesses and those providing holiday accommodation—will be eligible for relief? For example, if the Pentrich rock and blues bikers festival does not go ahead, the local town could lose £500,000 worth of business. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that all businesses in such mixed areas will be eligible for relief if they are suffering?

Mr. Meacher: I repeat that many attractions remain open, and we believe that many more can open without risk. I understand that Derbyshire has been particularly affected. As with other areas, we are keen to see it opened up again where it is safe to do so. That is the message that I am giving all over the country.

With regard to the festival to which my hon. Friend referred, I must make it clear to the House that the statement that we have made is highly significant, and that it is also a preliminary one. It does not mean—the Government have never said that it meant—that there will be full compensation for everyone or every institution that has suffered economic loss. No Government are in a position to offer that. We need targeted measures for businesses at risk of going down, to keep them afloat and to provide them with the essential support to get through this situation. That is what the package is designed to do.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Tomorrow afternoon, a crisis meeting is to be held in Porlock of representatives of Exmoor businesses. This situation affects not only those who provide tourist accommodation or services to tourists, but those who rely on passing trade from visitors to the national park, such as garages and pubs, whose takings have slumped dramatically.

Although the measures that the Minister has announced will be welcome, they will deal only with some of the short-term cash flow problems. They will not help people to pay their immediate bills for the basic necessities of life. Deferring payments will not deal with the long-term cash flow problems. What message would the Minister like me to pass on from the Government to those Exmoor businesses at their meeting tomorrow, to give them some hope for the future?

Mr. Meacher: I hope that the hon. Lady will pass on the message that the Government are listening, responding

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and providing immediate emergency help in a manner that is directly relevant. I have already been around the country a good deal, listening, and I have included in the statement the matters of most concern that were expressed to me.

The hon. Lady is right to say that this is not just about tourist attractions. A vast range of small rural businesses, pubs, shops, bed and breakfasts and hotels have been affected. I have said that transport and haulage contractors can also gain benefit under this package. I do not believe that, as a result of the application of the package, people will still not be able to pay for the immediate necessities of life. If they had to meet new rate demands and demands for VAT and PAYE payments on the dot when they came in, however, they would be in trouble, and we are finding every possible means within the current legislative system to defer some of those payments and to relieve them of their immediate liability. Of course that will leave a greater problem in the longer term, and we shall consider that later on.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): First, may I correct the impression that my right hon. Friend may have given? There has been a single outbreak in south Derbyshire, but the Peak district, whose tourism is dependent on 22 million visitors a year, is not affected by foot and mouth disease in any way and is open for business. Indeed, last Thursday I was at a conference for representatives of the Peak district tourism industry, who have put together a package that they wish to have implemented. My right hon. Friend may have read their proposals, because those which he announced today exactly match those of this vital tourism area.

Finally, will my right hon. Friend look at imaginative ways of making sure that some of our attractions reopen? I am thinking of Peveril castle in Castleton, which has been closed because it uses four sheep full-time to keep the grass down. If those sheep could be moved, the attraction could be reopened.

Mr. Meacher: I am sure that the people responsible for the four sheep will take note of the obvious solution and move them pretty quickly. On the general point about Derbyshire, I agree that it vital to stress that the Peak district, which has about 22 million visitors a year, is totally unaffected by the crisis. When I said that Derbyshire had suffered, I meant that many people in that attractive part of the country who are dependent on the tourist business have been hit secondarily, as their takings have been affected. The statement is designed to assist people in that position.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): May I ask the Minister how best to address a short-term crisis with long-term environmental consequences, particularly in forestry? Christmas to Easter is the maximum planting period; many small businesses across rural Britain have commenced planting, only to be told that they are now in an infected area. In turn they have had to inform customers and clients that they have been in an infected area, even if they are not carrying the virus, which is putting their businesses in crisis. More importantly, we will lose a whole season's planting of trees if we are not careful.

Mr. Meacher: I appreciate that people are in that situation. Again, what I have said about rate relief and the assessment of the situation by revenue departments and Customs and Excise is relevant. Those people will be treated as sympathetically as possible concerning those statutory payments. If there are other means of assisting them, we are very glad to use them. Those who are right inside the infected areas are grievously afflicted; most of them are farmers, who get agreed compensation for animals that are slaughtered, but people who are not farmers, and do not have livestock, have also been seriously affected. The hon. Gentleman referred to a particular category to which we ought to pay further attention.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): The reality in Cumbria is that the economy will not recover until we get on top of the disease. Will my right hon. Friend tell the Agriculture Minister that a senior MAFF official needs to go to Carlisle to take charge of the problem? As for the remit of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, the Cumbrian economy is badly damaged. It is not in meltdown, and it will recover, but the speed of that recovery will depend on the assistance that Cumbria receives from the Government. I am glad to see my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the Chamber.

Will my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment agree to meet representatives of Cumbria county council when they come down here to explain what is necessary to get the Cumbrian economy back on its feet?

Mr. Meacher: Cumbria, and in particular the area around my hon. Friend's constituency, Carlisle, has been one of the most affected areas in the country. I repeat that we are extremely anxious to do what we can to help. I would be willing, I think, to meet a delegation that my hon. Friend brought from his constituency, so long as it was not treated as a precedent for my meeting everyone else from all over the country who comes from an infected area. One must be careful about these matters.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): The Minister will meet only those from Labour marginal seats.

Mr. Meacher: I am very happy to meet people from any kind of constituency, irrespective of the political nature of that constituency or the majority. People can get a little overheated about the issue, which is an extremely serious one. Public opinion outside is not assisted by some hon. Members treating it as political kick-about.

I am glad to help my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) in any way that I can. I suggest that he gets in touch with me with particular proposals. I do not want to offer tea and sympathy. People want practical help, and if they can suggest ways in which we can provide that, we will listen.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The Minister's statement began with a few dos and don'ts, then he gave a list of things that he was considering, studying and deferring, but the only item of substance in the statement was an element of rate relief. That was the guts of it. How exactly will that work? When will he publish clear rules and guidelines? What is his budget for

it? Will it be administered by the county layer or the borough layer? What do people have to prove in order to qualify? Exactly what details must they gather in order to secure the qualifying relief that he announced this afternoon, and when will it start?

Mr. Meacher: Those are perfectly fair questions, and I will give fair answers. Of course, we will produce those details. The statement was produced ultra-quickly, because that is what the public demanded. We will produce the answers to those questions very soon, and I mean very soon, because we want the scheme to be in operation as quickly as possible.

However, to dismiss the rest of the statement as a deferment or a consideration of this, that and the other is wrong. If the hon. Gentleman studies the detail, he will see that the cumulative impact is considerable. In particular, those who deal with the victims of the outbreak will receive case-by-case and very favourable and sympathetic assistance, not only from the revenue authorities, but from the banks and the Small Business Service. The hon. Gentleman should not dismiss that with a shake of his head. It is extremely important and will provide genuine assistance.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I welcome the positive statement from my right hon. Friend, but mixed messages are being sent. Loch Lomond, in my area, depends heavily on tourists and the message to hill walkers is that it is unacceptable to be in the countryside, whereas the message to skiers is that it is acceptable. I welcome the public information campaign that the Government are about to undertake.

To talk about abandoning any elections would put out entirely the wrong message. We must remember that during the second world war, we had elections, while we were still prosecuting a war against the Japanese. In 1974 we had a three-day week, but we had an election, which was called by the Opposition. The message must be that the United Kingdom has not shut down—it is open for business seven days a week.

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend is right. We need to clarify where people can safely go. I have said that repeatedly, and it should be made clear across the piece—given the earlier reference to skiing, that may not be an appropriate metaphor. There should be clarity about all kinds of activities. We will provide a helpline so that if people still have doubts after reading the guidelines, they can get specific and detailed assistance from the helpline. On the question of elections, my hon. Friend put the case exactly. To suspend elections is a sign of crisis, which is out of all proportion to the state that we are in.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The Minister not only dealt with short-term help, but spoke about a Bill that was published yesterday, which is presumably supposed to deal with the long term. First, what is the extent of that Bill and will the aid that it provides apply throughout the United Kingdom? Secondly, what is his definition of a small rural settlement?

Mr. Meacher: The Rating (Former Agricultural Premises and Rural Shops) Bill, which we published on Friday, provides for an extension of mandatory 50 per cent. relief to village shops, pubs and garages under a prescribed rateable value. We are considering to what extent we can fast-track the measure so that its benefits are not only available in the long term, but can apply in the immediate short term. If we can do that, we will. The general definition of a small parish settlement is a settlement with a population of fewer than 3,000 people.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): My right hon. Friend will be aware that his detailed but interim statement will be widely welcomed throughout north-east England. It will be especially welcomed in my Teesdale constituency, where most tourism businesses are micro-businesses that currently have devastating cash flow problems. I should like, however, to issue him with two constructive warnings. First, Ministers will need to have a firm grip to ensure that the clear message that he has given today rings out with equal clarity and cogency throughout the whole country and from all agencies. Secondly, Ministers must have the same grip in respect of money, if it is to get quickly to the people who need it.

Mr. Meacher: I entirely accept my right hon. Friend's constructive warnings. It is always hardest to give assistance to micro-businesses, which are at the end of the line of small and medium enterprises and are not always plugged into their information requirements. That is the purpose of the massive advertising programme that we are about to start—I hope that we will do so before the end of the week—in the newspapers and on the radio. It will be parallelled by similar campaigning abroad as soon as the British Tourist Authority can provide it.

With regard to my right hon. Friend's strictures for Ministers, I assure him that we are conducting a joined-up campaign within Whitehall. Ministers from several other Departments are members of the taskforce, and I have been in constant contact with them during the past few days. Whether it is MAFF, the Department of Trade and Industry or the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, all those other Departments are putting their weight behind the campaign, which is a good example of Government working through close co-operation.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Given that Cumbria is the most affected county, will the Minister tell us whether a Cumbrian serves on his national taskforce? If not, will he consider appointing one? I welcome his remarks about business rate valuations and appeals against them, but is he aware that Ulverston Inland Revenue valuation office already has an 18-month waiting list for current cases? What can he do to speed that up? Furthermore, Cumbria county council, which is run by the Labour party, estimates that the region's economy is already losing £15 million a week. What is the estimated value of the package that he has announced for the nation for, say, the next three months?

Mr. Meacher: The membership of the rural taskforce, which is already large and has between 20 and 25 members, involves all relevant interests. If the taskforce had to be formed on a geographic basis, it would have to have members not only from Cumbria, but from Devon, Powys and the Welsh borders, and Dumfries and Galloway, as it is dealing with a UK effort. Such a requirement would become impossible, although that does not mean that we are not deeply aware that Cumbria is one of the two areas that has been most affected by the

[Mr. Meacher]

outbreak. A great deal of our effort is now directed to it. On the speeding up of rate claims in Ulverston, we are, as I said, postponing for three months the period for receipt of rating appeals. If we can assist in the handling of those claims in any other ways, we shall certainly consider them.

The hon. Gentleman says that the losses in Cumbria amount to £15 million. I am sure he is right; they are considerable in many parts of the country. The thrust of my statement is that the best way to assist people is not to increase Government expenditure, though that is necessary in the immediate short term, but to get people to accept that they can safely go back into the countryside and spend their money as they wish at rural businesses, shops, B and Bs and hotels. That is what the statement is designed to achieve.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Foot and mouth strikes cloven-hoofed animals—ones that we are familiar with and others such as the antelope. The elephant can also be affected. My question is about zoos. Will special consideration be given to the plight of zoos, which are major visitor attractions? If the outbreak drags on for long, it could put some out of business.

Mr. Meacher: I am concerned about that. When I was in the east midlands, I met an owner who had closed her zoo. When I asked why, she said it was because of the fear of the disease spreading to it. I also asked where the nearest livestock were. She replied, "18 miles away." I then asked whether she had sought local veterinary advice, and I hope that she will do so. It is not for me to decide, but I believe that many nature reserves and zoos can open, although that depends on local advice.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Minister's recommendation to spirit away sheep will be studied with interest by the Minister of Agriculture.

The Minister talks about affected areas, but does he realise that many areas with no foot and mouth outbreak are none the less grievously affected and may be in an exclusion zone? He also talks about jobseeker's allowance. Does he realise that many people have a job, but have no work? Companies have no business but want to keep their staff, so will he consider whether jobseeker's allowance can be used to help people who remain technically employed, but are not earning wages because their companies cannot pay them? Are local authorities eligible for the Bellwin scheme in respect of significant expenditure incurred in managing elements of the foot and mouth outbreak?

Mr. Meacher: Of course I realise that many areas outside the immediately infected areas—what are sometimes called the designated areas, in a 10 km radius—are almost as acutely affected, because so many paths, buildings and access routes are closed. Again, we are content to accept local advice as to how far some of those areas, under some conditions, can be opened up. I repeat, however, that that is a matter for local veterinary advice. Assisting areas outside the infected areas is the whole point of my statement.

I hope that right hon. and hon. Members took note of my statement, because many people do not understand that self-employed persons can, under certain conditions, be entitled to jobseeker's allowance if they have no work. The right hon. Gentleman referred to a particular situation that I have not considered and it is for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security to take a view on the matter, but we shall certainly consider what might be done for companies that have no work as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak, but which do not want to lose their trained staff.

The Bellwin scheme is implemented under closely prescribed conditions, as is of course necessary, and it was used in the example of flooding. It may have application in this example. That, again, is a matter that we want closely to consider in the next few days.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the people at Bolsover castle and Hardwick hall will be pleased about the preliminary statement made today and the money involved, because they contrast sharply with what happened during the pit strike of 1984 and 1985? In all those belcaguered pit communities, businesses went under and shops had to close, but there was not one penny piece from the Tories and, to show their thanks, they closed all the pits and made the problem even worse. Does he agree that the only reason he is able to hand out money today is that we have run the economy 10 times better than that lot did when they were in power?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend always makes a powerful political point forcefully and eloquently. We all have our views about the pit strike. It is certainly true that the current economic situation makes it easier for the Government to respond, and we shall do so as fully and as effectively as the circumstances require.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The owner of a local riding stables rang me this weekend to say that she is going out of business. We have not yet had a case of foot and mouth in Lincolnshire, but every footpath has been closed. What plans does the Minister have to work with county councils to ensure that we fight this disease where it is breaking out, and can open footpaths and bridleways through arable areas? Could the Minister also answer the question that has been posed and tell us what the package is worth, because it is important that relief is not spread too thinly over the whole country?

Mr. Meacher: We have been going for an hour and 10 minutes, and I keep repeating that the whole point of this statement and of the rural taskforce is to bring aid to people in those parts of the country outside the immediately infected areas who have been seriously hit by an economic downturn which has been no fault of their own. It has been dramatic, and they have no defence against it. We recognise that they need assistance. The best way to assist them is to get people back into those areas by making sure that they understand that it is safe. We must get rid of people's serious misconception, which is perhaps due to their feeling of patriotism and their desire to help the country. They thought the best way to do that was to keep out of the countryside, but we now know that that is wrong; and it has had a devastating effect. I hope that we will all take a non-partisan approach and join together to get that message across in all constituencies. Hon. Members will certainly have the assistance of Government through an advertising

campaign, and of the tourist boards and local authorities. We are all trying to ensure that we get across a clear message.

I have already answered the question about bridleways and footpaths. They will be opened if it is safe to do so. I have asked the Local Government Association and all local authorities to consider case by case whether they can open the footpaths in their area. I have no doubt that over the next week or two the great majority of them will be safely opened.

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): I thank the Minister for his statement. It will be warmly welcomed in my constituency, which has a large tourism industry. Some attractions are due to open at Easter, but the guidance and advice that they are receiving is unclear about whether they should open or not. Bearing in mind the fact that Easter is only three weeks away, will he ensure that clear guidance is given to those attractions, because we want them to open for business as quickly as possible?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend raises a point that has been of great concern to the Government. People are now making their Easter bookings. Many small rural businesses have a fairly hard time during the winter months, but in the spring and summer their earnings manage to pay back the winter losses. It is critical that they have the full benefit of visits and the increased custom that comes when people are enjoying themselves and taking recreation in the countryside. That is exactly why it is so important to get this message across, and why the Government are doing all in their power to ensure that people realise that they can safely visit those attractions this Easter.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will not be tempted to open access to farmland in some of the finest dairying areas in the country, in Somerset in my constituency. Does he realise that a great many businesses are not directly related to tourism but their turnover is nevertheless being decimated? That applies not only in small villages, but in the market towns to which the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) referred. I hope that the Minister's package will deal with that.

A specific problem relates to the Royal Bath and West show, which is due to open in a few weeks' time. It is far more than just an agricultural show; it is a major showcase and shop window for hundreds of rural businesses. Will the Minister meet representatives from the show to see how they can ensure that the show not only takes place, but takes place successfully?

Mr. Meacher: I have made it clear repeatedly that, while we want as much of the countryside as possible to be opened, we must make certain that that is done with caution. We must ensure that paths across farmland or pastures that might be used by livestock are not opened. Everything must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and the case referred to by the hon. Gentleman may well be one in which such action would simply not be advisable. I entirely accept that it should not be undertaken until it is safe for that to happen.

According to the English Tourism Council, the tourism industry receives about £12 billion a year from visitors to the countryside, especially in spring and summer. It is an enormous industry, and it is crucial. We are not concerned just about tourism, however. I have mentioned haulage and transport, but other rural businesses not seen as directly connected with tourism would certainly be covered by my proposals.

It is not for me to say whether the royal agricultural show should take place. I suggest that its sponsors speak to local MAFF and veterinary officers, and identify conditions under which it could safely be opened. As long as those conditions can be met, no one will be more pleased than me if the show goes ahead; but if it is decided that they cannot be met, we must accept that judgment for safety reasons.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): As the Minister knows, I wrote to him last week commending two or three items that he has included in his package. They are good short-term measures, but they are only short-term. May I urge the Minister to look further? Direct financial compensation will be needed, owing to the disastrous position of many rural businesses.

Does the package cover Wales? Last week, Wales Office Ministers were not even invited to join the taskforce.

Mr. Meacher: As I said a few minutes ago, given the magnitude of the economic impact of this outbreak, no Government would be in a position to compensate each and every business for all the losses it has suffered. What we want to do is enable people to survive the crisis and not go under—to get to the end of it, and then begin to recover their economic strength. If more measures are needed to achieve that, we will certainly consider them.

I understand that a Welsh representative was at the meeting of the taskforce. I stand to be corrected if that is not so, but an invitation was certainly issued. Representatives of all devolved Administrations are invited, and a Welsh representative was present this morning.

I am keen for this to be a United Kingdom initiative, although the work of the taskforce primarily concerns England. It hardly needs to be said that foot and mouth is no respecter of boundaries, and I am keen that we should all act together: that will make our action more effective. It is, however, for the devolved Administrations to decide on the implementation of what is agreed in their own way.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have allowed questions on the statement to continue for nearly an hour and 20 minutes, but we must now move on. I thank the Minister for his patience.

Points of Order

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Department of Trade and Industry has in its possession a report into the affairs of a company called Hollis Industries plc. That company was also the centre of a separate investigation by the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges because of an allegation that an hon. Member had received an undisclosed payment of £200,000. The Committee, at the time, was unable fully to resolve the matter because of a lack of information.

The point of order is that that information does exist and that it forms part of the report which is held by the Department of Trade and Industry. However, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is refusing to publish the report, despite the fact that he has legal powers to do so under section 449 of the Companies Act 1985. The matter therefore constitutes a cover-up for the political convenience of the Government.

Mr. Speaker, can you tell me whether you have received from the Government an indication that they will now explain themselves to the House or provide the necessary documents, so that the House and its Select Committee can get to the bottom of this tangled web of relationships and payments between the late Robert Maxwell and the Labour party and Government of today?

Mr. Speaker: I have received no approach. That is all I can tell the right hon. Gentleman.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Adoption and Children Bill was published last Thursday, 15 March. On the front cover it states:

"Explanatory Notes to the Bill . . . will be published separately as Bill 66".

The notes are still unavailable in the Vote Office, despite the fact that, yesterday, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), said that they would be made available. Consideration on Second Reading will occur next Monday, but the lack of those notes is making preparation for it extremely difficult.

Mr. Speaker: That is a matter for the Government. However, I hope that those documents are promptly made available to the hon. Lady and to any other hon. Member who is interested in the matter.

Standards and Privileges (Independent Appeals Body)

4.52 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to implement the recommendations contained in the sixth report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life, at the time in question, was chaired by Lord Neill, and the report reviews the first five years working of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. The report has been gathering dust for 15 months. The House has been given no opportunity formally to consider the Committee's recommendations, which I think should be debated before the end of this Parliament.

The report expressed concern that our in-house procedures for examining the conduct of hon. Members

"fail to meet the minimum requirements of fairness",

as set out in the Nicholls report.

For hon. Members who are not familiar with the 1999 Nicholls report, I should say that it is a joint report on parliamentary privileges in the Lords and Commons by a Committee which was chaired by Lord Nicholls, who is a distinguished Lord of Appeal in Ordinary. Many distinguished Members of this place sat on that Committee, which had a broad spectrum of views on the way we should conduct our proceedings.

The House of course has a perfect right to determine its own rules on the way in which it conducts its affairs. However, I cannot imagine that any hon. Member would claim that the current system is entirely satisfactory. Lord Neill seeks not to change the rules, but to extend the right to an accused Member to appeal against a decision when that Member feels that his affairs have been treated with less concern than might be considered proper.

The Library informs me that, currently, the only way in which an hon. Member can challenge a decision of the Standards and Privileges Committee would be to go to the European Court of Human Rights, in Strasbourg. That is a lengthy and expensive procedure that prolongs the agony and leaves a cloud hanging over the hon. Member concerned. An appeals procedure, as recommended by Lord Neill, would establish a degree of consistency by building up a body of case law and would help to take some of the politics out of these proceedings.

The first recommendation that my Bill would seek to adopt is that

"in serious and contested decisions of the Standards and Privileges Committee the accused MP should have the right of appeal."

The report goes on to say that

"it is likely that a contested case will involve a range of complex legal issues, with conflicts of evidence and legal debates on procedural points . . . which would be difficult for non-lawyers to control and decide."

For this reason, Lord Neill proposes that what he calls "an investigative tribunal" should be chaired by an independent lawyer, such as a senior retired judge, advised on the parliamentary procedures involved by two or four senior Members of the House.

The second recommendation that I believe we should adopt is that Members who receive an adverse ruling and wish to challenge it should be provided with financial

assistance to pursue the appeal. It is only when the appeal is dismissed that the Committee should report to the House, along with any recommendations as to penalties.

I have raised these matters on more than one occasion with the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. He has said that he is in favour of these matters being debated and that we should examine the possibility of providing legal advice and expenses to Members who wish to challenge decisions.

Lord Neill is not the only one who has expressed concern about the way in which our current procedures are working. In his retirement report, Sir Gordon Downey—the former commissioner, who worked with the Committee for three years—warned of the dangers of tit-for-tat wars breaking out. One would have to have flown in from another planet not to realise that that prediction has already come to pass.

If we were to adopt Lord Neill's recommendations, I believe that they would bring our disciplinary procedures nearer the concept of natural justice and would go some way towards improving public perceptions of the way in which we conduct our affairs. Whether we like it or not, these are portrayed in the press in a manner that must give cause for the public to wonder precisely what this Chamber is about and where our priorities lie. I commend my Bill to the House.

4.58 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I am grateful for this opportunity. I shall speak briefly to answer the points of the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) and—in some limited measure—to oppose them, at least in their emphasis and timing. I do not wish to press this to a vote as it should not be a divisive or a dividing issue. I would be extremely reluctant to see the House divided—whipped or unwhipped—along party lines. What matters in this case primarily is not the feeling in the House, but the feeling in the country.

I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the points that she raised and the particular perspective that she brings to the matter. She has had personal experience of the House's self-regulation, of the procedures of the commissioner and of the Committee, and of the consequences. There is no doubt that an appeals procedure must be introduced.

I draw the attention of the House to the 21st report of the Standards and Privileges Committee, which was agreed unanimously in the 1997-98 Session. The report provides exactly for such a court of appeal, in effect. I was concerned about the case of my predecessor as the Member of Parliament for Tatton. I believe that Sir Gordon Downey was thorough and fair in his investigations.

I believe, too, that the Committee did its best. I was not a member at the time, but I believe that it could stand by its report. However, an appeal procedure was not available. The commissioner is not a prosecutor and the Committee is not a court of law, but the effect of my predecessor's condemnation was akin to a criminal conviction: as he put it at the time, he was condemned to a life of penury and unemployment. That is why it is necessary for a suitable procedure to be put in place.

I very much hope that, between now and the end of the Session, the House will consider and adopt the suggestions made in the Bill. However, the emphasis must be on restoring public trust in public life. My goodness, we have a long way to go: I am not altogether convinced that this Parliament is held in higher esteem by the public at large than was the previous Parliament.

In the end, the answer lies not with commissioners, Committees and tribunals, but with ourselves. We hon. Members should register our interests. When in doubt, we should ask the commissioner, whom I believe to be one of the outstanding public servants of our time, and the registrar. We should not resort to lawyers, except for basic advice. We should certainly not resort to lawyers to obstruct the work of the Committee and the commission.

I think that the public will forgive us if we are too rigorous, and even nitpicking, in how we deal with these matters. People will not forgive us if we are not rigorous enough.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business), and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mrs. Teresa Gorman, Mr. Douglas Hogg, Sir Teddy Taylor, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Christopher Gill, Mr. Austin Mitchell, Mr. Patrick Nicholls and Sir Richard Body.

STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES (INDEPENDENT APPEALS BODY)

Mrs. Teresa Gorman accordingly presented a Bill to implement the recommendations contained in the sixth report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 April, and to be printed [Bill 69].

Orders of the Day

Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I should inform the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

5.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I have never met anyone yet who has not paid lip service to the need for improvements in special educational needs or disability rights. However, sympathy is of little comfort to parents and children, or to adult men and women who have a disability, when discrimination and lack of rights undermine their efforts to achieve equality of opportunity.

I had hoped, therefore, that we might have been able to build on the consensus that was developing in the House of Lords. Regrettably, the Opposition have decided to table an amendment, which means that I shall have to go into greater detail on the issues on which the amendment touches that could undermine that consensus.

It is not that there are no differences of opinion when it comes to achieving disability rights or bringing about equality of opportunity for people with special educational needs. Those differences exist, but debates can be conducted in a way that ensures that we secure the improvement—the step change—that the Bill promises. We can ensure that anomalies are ironed out, that obstacles are removed and that interests that can be promoted without undermining others' well-being are so promoted. *[Interruption.]* I am being heckled already, even though I plead guilty to saying nothing offensive or controversial—

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Or meaningful.

Mr. Blunkett: Or meaningful—I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that remark. I am always in favour of listening to the Opposition, even when they mumble away from a sedentary position.

I want to pay tribute to my noble Friend Baroness Blackstone for the way in which she conducted the Bill's proceedings in the Lords and for being prepared to listen and respond to requests for amendments and alterations in the code and the guidance. It is on that basis that we shall proceed. There were 92 amendments in the House of Lords. Although two thirds of them were technical, 27 were in response to concerns. I intend to continue conducting the Bill and the debate on the code and regulations in the same spirit.

I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who has been conducting discussions with the various groups, including the consortiums, to get this right. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), led the disability rights taskforce towards finding a way forward through difficult areas in relation to further disability rights. We have been able to accept the taskforce's recommendations and can move forward on them.

The Bill builds on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. It enhances disability rights and extends the role of the Disability Rights Commission and the rights established under the Learning and Skills Act 2000. However, there is still a long way to go. Securing rights, not simply through writing them into legislation, but through the changing of attitudes, will take time.

The Bill is about having an education service that is tailored to the needs of children and the wishes of parents. It squares the circle when one claim sometimes leads to accusations that another set of rights has been infringed. It will overcome the contradictions when words appear to mean one thing but actually mean something else entirely. It was Humpty Dumpty in "Alice Through the Looking-Glass" who said:

"When *I* use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): That is not original.

Mr. Blunkett: It is not original because it is from "Alice Through the Looking-Glass". *[Laughter.]* No wonder all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put them together again. What a silly intervention.

Mr. Bercow: It was a particularly silly quote.

Mr. Blunkett: It was not. I am all in favour of promoting English literature at its best. The reason I used the quote was very simple: today's reasoned amendment and the interventions of Baroness Blatch in the other place were predicated on a misunderstanding of terminology relating to the needs of the child. If the needs of the child, as put together in a statement, are used by schools to prevent that child from having access to the parents school of choice, words are turned on their head and have the very opposite effect on that child's needs. That is why the debate in the other place, and presumably this debate, need to be predicated on getting right the balance between parental wishes and the avoidance of damage to other children's education.

We must ensure that we protect others and that, if a school's ability to deliver education adequately is undermined, other facilities are found for youngsters with special educational needs. We must try our utmost to ensure that we have an integrated education service—not necessarily in terms of an individual being placed in a particular school or setting, but we must always try to integrate the opportunity of the child.

It is always difficult to match parents' needs and requirements to what is available, and it always will be because supply and demand are not perfect. However, all of us want to ensure that, through the maintenance of adequate special school facilities and through meeting specific—sometimes profound—needs, we get that balance right.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I thank my right hon. Friend for the award of more than £16 million that has just been made to Kirklees for special educational needs.

When considering how to use that money to enhance education for children with special needs, would it not be right for the local education authority to reflect carefully on the words that my right hon. Friend has just spoken and to ensure that the child is at the centre of policy? A range of provisions should be available in the area so that children with both mild and severe learning difficulties can be accommodated in the education system.

Mr. Blunkett: I agree with that. I am pleased that my hon. Friend's campaign to retain Lydgate school has, apparently, been so successful. I understand that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) visited the school, in a truly non-partisan fashion, to try to secure its future. We were all grateful for her intervention—as was the local council—*[Interruption.]* That caused a little kerfuffle and stir.

Mr. Bercow: Get on with it.

Mr. Blunkett: I am getting on with it. The hon. Gentleman should not be so irritable—*[Interruption.]*—and irritating. I was about to say something that he would be interested to hear.

Some right-wing thinkers and commentators on special needs education have something sensible to say. There is a tendency to label youngsters as having special educational needs when all that has happened is that they were poorly assessed as youngsters and poorly taught in school. If we can put that right, neither individuals nor schools will feel that the special educational needs label is required.

Furthermore, through baseline assessment and the development of the literacy strategy, we can tackle specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, with which I have some familiarity. It is important to be able to identify and thus to address conditions such as dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and, indeed, autism in ways that we have not done previously, to try to meet the needs of the child in both mainstream and special schools.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I hope that my right hon. Friend does not mind being squeezed by both sides of Huddersfield in such quick succession. Although some Labour Members disagree with some of Baroness Blatch's comments in another place, some parts of her speeches were good. She put her finger on the fact that there is a lack of consistent research into assessment and long-term outcomes—to consider what we actually do for those children over time. We need such research to check that evaluation is right, that what we are doing is right and that it leads to a successful outcome.

Mr. Blunkett: I have not spoken to my hon. Friend on this matter, but he inadvertently throws me up an easy ball. I agree with that point. That is why we are putting another £100,000 into research into dyslexia—as I can announce today. That will help us investigate causes and apply best practice. We need to do much more than we did in the past to get that right.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): Will my right hon. Friend consider the training possibilities for teachers? He probably knows more than me about the dimensions as regards training or courses.

Mr. Blunkett: Initial and in-service training programmes are crucial. I pay tribute to the work of special educational needs co-ordinators—I shall refer to them henceforth as SENCOs—in learning about, spreading and reinforcing best practice in schools. A great deal of good work on that is taking place. A few years ago, that work would not have been done—that is a non-partisan approach to the situation.

Some parents are clearly worried whether, even with the best will in the world and the best training, their children will receive the help, support and resources that they need if there is a clearly identified, on-going problem. It is therefore not surprising that parents seek a statement when their children have severe special educational needs.

I want to make it absolutely clear that the controversy that arose last year about the consultation on the code of practice needs to be put to rest. We were seeking to ensure that a flexible and responsive way forward existed. Clear views were expressed across the range of opinions, suggesting that it would be better if we could secure specificity and clarity through the code of practice. I intend to read into the record our proposals on the code of practice.

We shall make it clear that education authorities are required to specify provision in statements, as they always have been. We shall retain the requirement in the regulations for provision to be specified, matching the terms of the duty on education authorities set out in the Education Act 1996. The code will state clearly that statements should

"describe clearly all of the child's special educational needs in full; set out the main objectives that the special educational provision aims to meet; specify clearly and in detail the provision required to meet each of the child's needs; describe the arrangements for setting shorter term objectives for the child; describe any special arrangements for the annual review of the statement; stress the importance of the school monitoring and evaluating the child's progress during the year; emphasise the importance of the local education authority monitoring the child's progress toward identified outcomes—with the school".

The guidance will make it clear that provision may often need to be expressed in terms of hours, equipment or personnel. It will make it absolutely clear that education authorities must not, in any circumstance, have a blanket policy not to quantify the provision in statements. We made a commitment on Report in the House of Lords that we would also enhance the guidance on assessments to make it clear that education authorities should not have blanket policies that prevent those from whom they seek advice from commenting on the amount of provision that they consider appropriate for a child.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): May I tell the Secretary of State how much that statement will be welcomed in the special needs world? Will the cash resources that must be made available to meet the provisions that he describes specifically come from the school's budget, or will they come from the local education authority? In either case, where will those resources emanate from?

Mr. Blunkett: Of course part of the required resources will travel with the statement in terms of the amount allocated. I am intent on not making this a party political matter, which is why it is important that we do not simply delegate resources to schools on a blanket basis, and it is why we must be sensitive to those needs and to retaining

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authorities that can co-ordinate and deliver the necessary provision. Sufficient access funds must be allocated to education authorities, again, to be able to pick out where that investment is required. Those are fairly basic precepts of a system that, in the words of a former Conservative Select Committee Chairman, cannot have 24,000 bobbing corks on a murky sea.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): On that point, I am happy to reassure the Secretary of State that our proposals for free schools—although he did not utter that term, I assume that he was alluding to them—make it absolutely clear that the statementing function will remain with the local authority and that the local authority will be funded accordingly.

Mr. Blunkett: I am deeply grateful for that clarification. On 12 March—only eight days ago—we challenged the hon. Lady about that policy, and she put on record that all the funds would be delegated to schools. That is what she said. Now, at least some of the funds that the education authority—I am sorry, I meant local authority; as Humpty Dumpty rightly said, "Choose words carefully." Local authorities, as opposed to education authorities, which would be abolished, would presumably have the money that the hon. Lady mentioned to allocate according to need.

I wonder whether the authorities will have the access funds that are being provided. After all, this year alone, we are providing five times more money in access funds than we inherited. By 2003-04, we will provide 10 times more than we inherited, and that money will be applied to meet the needs of the individual child.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I very much welcome what my right hon. Friend has said about the code of practice, but may I raise the specific issue of children suffering from autistic spectrum disorders? I know that he will agree that provision for those children is not what it should be and that the problem goes back many years. In particular, does he agree that there is a problem in pre-school and nursery years when provision for those children often falls between the two stools of the health authority and the local education authority? That is highly unsatisfactory, so will he take this opportunity to spell out how the Bill will address those children's problems?

Mr. Blunkett: There has been a specific problem in that much of the good work that began—dare I say it—in the early 1970s when Baroness Thatcher held this portfolio has not been taken forward. Real moves were made by local government, central Government and the health service to develop good assessment programmes. Some of them remain, but they have not been accelerated or developed for many years. Therefore, we propose to allocate £25 million over the next three years to develop services in the early years. We shall train staff to ensure that a co-ordinator is linked to every facility for early-years provision. Sub-regional and regional provision will ensure that there can be monitoring, support work and the spreading of best practice. Some £11 million of that sum will go to the specific improvement of services, including joint multi-disciplinary assessment, so that we link the health, social services and education services in a positive regard.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is today publishing a White Paper on the needs of the young and old alike who have learning disabilities—or mental handicaps as we used to call them. I hope to be able to integrate the policies that we are developing with the proposals in the White Paper to give tens of thousands of those with learning difficulties a much better deal and their families much greater security as they grow older. We shall address both the educational and personal needs of those people.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) *rose—*

Mr. Blunkett: I shall give way once more, but I would then like to make more progress in case I am accused of not having dealt with the Bill.

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. In response to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), he described the route by which the money will reach the pupil, through both the local authority and the school. However, although he mentioned additional sources, he did not address the central issue of the amount. Is he saying that resources will not be a problem, whatever the terms of the statement?

Mr. Blunkett: Of course I am not. Were the resources always available to match supply and demand, we would be living in a happy third-term Labour Government. We are intent on winning the second term first. I can promise that the £3 billion for special needs, which is either devolved or provided through local education authorities, will be used effectively and wisely. Additional resources, both devolved and delegated to schools and enhanced by education authority resources, will be available. Specific funding, such as access funds, will also be provided. That is in addition to the quadrupling of capital spending, which, by allowing us to improve, remodel and rebuild schools, enables us do the job more effectively.

We want to promote centres of excellence in the special school system and to protect schools that offer an expertise. They should act as a resource that provides peripatetic support to pupils in other schools. We want to ensure that they offer high quality and excellence regionally and nationally. Progress has been made in the regional planning experiments. There cannot be a market in the provision of residential facilities for special needs purposes. There is no guaranteed supportive stream of funding for such facilities, and that knocks schools out. We need to use the co-ordinating structure at a regional level to secure a basic minimum provision that gives parents a choice when they consider their children's requirements and gives us the ability to retain that key expertise for the development of research and for delivery in the future.

In case people think that there has been a massive acceleration of the closure of residential facilities, let me state the facts. The proportion of children in special residential and day provision has remained almost the same in the past decade, at 1.2 per cent. Some 317 special schools closed in the 10 years between 1987 and 1997; 129 closed between 1997 and today, and 17 will close in the next year—a total of 146 closures within a five-year period. Seven schools are to open this year, which means that 38 new special schools will have opened in the same

five-year period. I make no party political point, but 317 schools closed in the 10 years from 1987 to 1997, and 146 will close in the past five years, with some new schools opening.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Given what the Secretary of State says about the importance of special provision and the need to harness the undoubted expertise that is available, why does the Bill discriminate against non-maintained special schools such as the royal school for deaf children in my constituency? Why does he not want to harness that special expertise?

Mr. Blunkett: Not only are we not discriminating against non-maintained schools, but we have started to provide them with the devolved revenue and capital that we announced in the last two Budgets. That has not been a feature of any other Government, Labour or Conservative. We have reached out to the non-maintained sector and want to draw it into the regional planning process. If the hon. Gentleman feels that there is a specific problem concerning that school, I shall be happy to address it if he writes to me. We need to retain expertise in a range of provision that would otherwise not be available.

The Bill is designed to take us one step further on the road to getting this right; it is not the end of the story. I appeal to all hon. Members to ensure that it has a clear passage. I hope that, in the end, no one will be able to suggest that the Government or the Opposition sought party political gain. I certainly do not seek such gain, and I did not do so in the previous Session when mechanisms were used to delay the introduction of the measures under specific regulations.

The first 10 clauses apply only to England and Wales and cover special educational needs elements. Part II has 30 clauses and covers disability issues in education, with the exception of strategic planning and access functions in Scotland, which are dealt with by the Scottish Parliament. Otherwise, the measures in part II apply throughout Britain; they do not include Northern Ireland, because equality is a devolved function.

Clause 1 contains a commitment to strengthen the right to a mainstream place for children with special educational needs where parents wish it and where it is not incompatible with the education of other children.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): If there is one part of the Bill about which I have a slight concern, it is that second caveat about the impact on other children. I am concerned that it might be used to justify not placing the emphasis on parental choice which my right hon. Friend and I would like to see.

Mr. Blunkett: That is one reason for our rejection of the reasoned amendment. A school needs to be able to show that it has made an effort to provide access and to accommodate a youngster. By being inclusive and gaining a reputation for supporting particular needs, some schools have found themselves swamped, and admissions have resulted in them being unable to fulfil the second condition in clause 1. Getting that right is a matter not simply of common sense but of reasonableness on the part of all those who take part in delivering an inclusive service. I have faith that people will get it right, but we need to provide protection to ensure that it happens in practice.

Clauses 2 and 3 place a duty on the education authority to provide parent partnership services and arrangements for resolving and preventing disputes, which are another important part of getting it right. Clauses 4 to 10 amend existing special educational needs frameworks to streamline the process for parents and to maximise the benefits for children. That means slimming down bureaucracy and administration and making access to rights easier.

Part II deals with disability discrimination in education. It covers discrimination in schools and in post-16 institutions—that aspect that was not dealt with in the Learning and Skills Act 2000—and contains miscellaneous supporting provisions. Clauses 11 to 16 place new duties on education authorities and schools, including independent and non-maintained special schools in England and Wales, and on local authorities, independent, self-governing and grant-aided schools in Scotland.

In England, as well as in Wales and Scotland, the new duties include not treating disabled pupils less favourably than pupils who are not disabled, unless there is justification. There is also a duty to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled pupils are not put at a substantial disadvantage.

Additionally, in England and Wales there is a new duty to plan strategically and to make progress in improving accessibility to premises and to the curriculum. I mentioned premises earlier, but access to the curriculum is also important. The development of information technology is making that possible in circumstances that did not exist a few years ago, and we should take full advantage of it.

Clauses 17 to 25 provide enforcement through the special educational needs and disability tribunal in England and Wales and through the sheriff court in Scotland. Clauses 26 to 29 place new duties on colleges, universities and local education authorities in relation to adult education, community education and youth services. Those duties did not exist before, and will be enforceable through the tribunal in England and Wales, and through the sheriff court in Scotland. For adults, enforcement will be through the county court, or its equivalent in Scotland.

It is important to change attitudes. We cannot bring about a step change in equality simply through legislation. We can set the framework, begin to change the way in which people see problems, and consider ways of overcoming them. We have sought to do so by extending part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, by developing the new deal for disabled people, and by creating greater inclusion through the changes in the work of Remploy introduced by the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking.

We have provided much better non-repayable grants and support for students with disabilities in post-16 and higher education, including part-time and postgraduate students. That provision did not exist before. We can ensure that we apply extra resources to make that happen, as we committed ourselves to do in the Green Paper. However, in the end, there must be a change in attitude and outlook. This will be about seeing ways round problems rather than seeing the problem, and about ensuring that when we talk about an inclusive society, we

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mean it for everyone. Let us all join together in taking yet one more step on the road to equality of opportunity, to inclusion and to social justice.

5.37 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I beg to move,

That this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]* because it does not explicitly give priority to the special educational needs of the child and contains no mechanism for safeguarding a viable choice for parents between types of school.

This is an important debate because the measures in the Bill will have a significant impact on the educational opportunities and development of children with special educational needs, and particularly those with disabilities. Because this issue is so important, we need to ensure that we get the Bill right, that we discuss it properly and fully, and that we consider its implications. In that connection, I am sorry about the tone that the Secretary of State took in some of his comments on the Bill.

I am happy to tell the Secretary of State that we support the principle of the Bill—that is, its desire to widen access to mainstream education and to ensure that no artificial barriers are put in the way of providing all children with the education that meets their needs. Much of the Bill builds on work done by the previous Government in the Education Acts of 1981, 1993 and 1996, all of which dealt with special educational needs.

When considering any legislation of this kind, it is essential to ensure that the needs of the child are paramount, and that the education provided genuinely meets the child's needs and is in their best interests. That focus on the child has driven the work of my colleagues in another place when scrutinising, and tabling amendments to, the Bill. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them and, in particular, to pay tribute to the work of Baroness Blatch, who has done sterling work in examining the detail of the Bill and suggesting improvements to it. In doing so, she has reflected the concerns and interests of parents of children with special educational needs, and the concerns and interests of disability organisations.

The Bill was initially promised in the Queen's Speech in 1999. We were then promised that the Government would publish a draft Bill, which did not materialise. That is a pity because a Bill such as this, which has a broad sweep of support in principle, is one where an early opportunity to consider a draft Bill would have been welcomed by many, including interest groups which, I know, regretted that they did not have that opportunity.

Now, however, we have a Bill to consider. As I have said, our approach is driven by the needs and interests of the child. Any approach to the issue must be characterised by a belief that the educational needs of all children must be accommodated; whatever the background, whatever the mental and physical needs or abilities of a child, our education system must be able to meet those needs and interests. It is important that the Bill ensures that schools, local education authorities and others act at all times in the best interests of the child.

At the moment, the Bill includes important provisions that ensure that the wishes of parents and the interests of other pupils in schools are heard. Indeed, it is necessary to consider other pupils in a school and the impact that the inclusion of a child with special educational needs will have on them. There are many examples showing that the inclusion of a disabled child in a mainstream school has enormous benefits for the child and his or her peers. I visit many schools that are already doing good work to include disabled children. Wessex infants school in my constituency has a unit for hearing-impaired children. On Monday, I was in Piggott secondary school in my constituency, which has a number of pupils who are wheelchair users.

When I visit such schools, I am struck above all by other pupils' attitude—or perhaps I should say their lack of attitude, as they treat disabled children as they do any other member of the class, which is as it should it be. The inclusion of those pupils therefore has a very positive benefit. However, situations will arise in which the inclusion of a child with special educational needs can have a deleterious impact on the education of others. That is most likely to occur when a child has behavioural problems. The inclusion of a particularly disruptive child in a mainstream class can damage the education of others.

It is therefore right that the Bill includes consideration of the provision of efficient education for other children as well as parents' wishes. However, it does not include a provision which would require action to be taken specifically either in accordance with the special educational needs of the child or in his or her best interests. In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State talked about having to balance competing needs and provide an education service tailored to the needs of children. I agree that we need a service tailored to children's needs and that we must balance competing needs. The Bill is flawed because it does not set out and balance those competing needs.

My colleagues in another place tried without success to insert the phrase

"the best interests of the child"

in the Bill. Indeed, on Third Reading in another place, my noble Friend Baroness Blatch said:

"The primary aim of the Bill is to serve the best interests of the child with special educational needs. I have yet to hear a coherent argument against that from the Government. We have had this debate at each stage of the Bill and Members of all parties have argued in favour of serving the best interests of the child."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 1 March 2001; Vol. 622, c. 1285.]

To most people, it is common sense that that should be the Bill's aim. So far, however, the Government have resisted pressure to include such a statement in the Bill, which is one reason why we tabled our amendment.

The importance of our approach is that it ensures that children with special educational needs are not compelled to attend a maintained school simply as part of some dogmatic drive that sets a target for inclusion above the needs of individual children. The needs of children must be assessed thoroughly, and then those children should be provided with the education that they need.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is right to emphasise that the system should be structured to meet the needs of the individual child, rather than expecting the child to be structured to meet the needs of the system. In that context, would my hon. Friend consider visiting the admirable MacIntyre school in my constituency, headed by Helen

Willdridge, which caters magnificently for the interests of children with severe disabilities? It does a wonderful job, but it gets very little praise; it could do with some support.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and for rightly pointing out the excellent work done by the school in his constituency. I am happy to visit the school and see the work of the teachers there, and look forward to his further invitation to do so. I am happy to visit schools across the country to see the excellent work carried out in both mainstream and special schools. I make no apology to the Secretary of State—who made one or two comments about the fact that I had visited a school in the constituency of his hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford)—for going into schools and listening to parents and teachers about what they consider to be the issues that we politicians should address.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I thank my hon. Friend for coming to the Jubilee Room just before the debate started, to listen to the concerns of pupils, teachers and parents from Alderman Knight school in Gloucestershire, who feel that their school is under threat because of the Government's actions. Does she regret, as I do, that not a single Labour Front Bencher was able to call in, even for five minutes?

Mrs. May: Indeed. Those parents, teachers and children were speaking from their hearts and expressing their feelings about the proposed closure of the Alderman Knight school and other special schools in Gloucestershire. Later in my remarks, I shall deal with the threat that hangs over so many special schools.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Among all the party political point scoring, is she concerned that as a result of the actions of the Conservative party we could end up losing the entire Bill? Is she concerned that the "needs of the child" condition has been used to deny children places in mainstream schools? That condition is already covered by protections in the Education Act 1996 and overarching legislation in the Children Act 1989. Disabilities charities are satisfied with the conditions set out in clause 1.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that non-party political intervention. I fully accept that the needs of the various parties in the equation must be balanced. That is why it is important that we do not ignore the best interests of the child by wiping out that condition. Our amendment seeks what Ministers in another place have accepted and what the Secretary of State has accepted in some of his comments. At the heart of the Bill should be the best interests of the child. It is sad that the Government will not write that into the Bill, as that would allow us to balance the competing needs.

I accept that achieving those best interests and balancing those needs is not always easy. There are occasions when parents are naturally protective of their children and fearful of their inclusion in mainstream schools, when that might be the right solution for a particular child.

There are also parents such as those whom I met at Thurlow Park school in Lambeth and the Lydgate special school in Colne Valley, and those whom I heard this afternoon from Alderman Knight school in Gloucestershire, whose children have tried mainstream schools and have found that while they might be physically included in the mainstream school, they have often been excluded from full participation in the school and from realising their full potential. The same children have blossomed in the special school environment.

It is only common sense, and fair and just, to include the best interests of the child, alongside those of other children in the school and of parents. The latter two groups are already identified in the Bill.

Dr. Ladyman: Does not the hon. Lady fear that adding a further caveat to the Bill will be used by some local authorities as an opportunity to override the primacy of the wishes of parents, by saying that they know better what should happen to a child?

Mrs. May: No. The three parties would be identified, and the need to balance their interests would be written into the Bill. The alternative is the circumstances currently facing parents such as those whom I have mentioned, who want their children to be in special schools and believe that their decision is in their children's best interests, but are forced by a local authority that has an inclusion agenda to opt for a mainstream school.

Dr. Ladyman: Surely, without the caveat, the Bill ensures the primacy of the parents' wishes in respect not only of mainstream places but of special school places.

Mrs. May: As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), I intend to speak in more detail about special schools. Sadly, the primacy of the interests of special schools is not being maintained. The Bill does not allow it to continue or to be enhanced. We must ensure that children's best interests can be taken into consideration and that their needs are balanced. I accept that that balance can often be difficult to achieve, but if it is not clearly stated that the best interests of the child lie at the heart of the Bill, many children will be unable to develop their full potential. Children will be placed in mainstream education against their interests and their parents' wishes.

Some of my further points on the specifics of the Bill have also been made by colleagues in another place. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) spoke about the Bill's implications for education in independent special schools. Clause 1 expressly excludes local authorities from paying for places in independent special schools. We have expressed concerns in another place about preventing local authorities from funding such places and from taking into consideration the correct provision for a child and his or her best interests. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says that he does not believe that that is the case, but clause 1 states that the cost of a place at an independent special school cannot be met by local education authorities.

I understand that Ministers gave assurances in another place that the ability to fund places in independent special schools is protected in legislation. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 contains provision enabling local authorities to buy places in independent schools, but that required regulations that the Government have been singularly slow to introduce. I assume that the Bill

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revokes that provision anyway. The ability to pay for places in the independent sector is especially important in respect of children who require 24-hour residential places, which are often purchased from the independent sector. It is also important, however, with regard to specialist schools run by disabilities organisations, such as the royal school for deaf children in Margate, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet. If the Opposition are not convinced by the Government's reassurances that local authorities' ability to fund such places remains in place, we will seek to remove the relevant provision in clause 1, which states that proposed new section 316 in the Education Act 1996

"does not prevent a child from being educated in . . . an independent school that is not a mainstream school . . . if the cost is met otherwise than by a local education authority."

There is, however, a wider threat to independent special schools. Constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) have drawn to my attention the problems that parents face in relation to the code of practice, which obliges local authorities to comply with the preference that is expressed by parents for a particular maintained special school. However, the code contains no duty to comply with parents' representations—there can be only representations, and not preferences—regarding independent special schools.

A further problem exists in relation to the information that local authorities provide to parents. Authorities are required to provide information on maintained special schools so that parents can express a preference, but they are not required to provide information on schools that are in the independent sector or that are provided by voluntary, charity or disabilities organisations. Many such excellent schools currently exist, including the royal school for deaf children in Margate, and we do not want the Bill to remove the ability to give children places in them.

Mr. Blunkett: We do not want to set any hares running and mislead people outside the House into believing that a measure is being withdrawn when that is explicitly not the case. That is especially important as it relates to what is currently available to parents. The implications of the hon. Lady's comments—the provisions to which she referred do not give necessarily give the same impression—are completely incorrect. We are not withdrawing any current right for a parent to have a place paid for in an appropriate school, whether it is independent or not. That right will apply if such a place is appropriate and the matter is discussed and agreed as part of the process that has been set out this afternoon.

Mrs. May: I am sure that the matter will be the subject of an interesting debate in Committee. I look forward to considering a Government amendment that clarifies the words in the Bill, which currently state that independent special school places cannot be paid for by a local education authority. If the Secretary of State is saying that that is not his intention—*[Interruption.]* He remarks that he said what he said, and I accept that, but I suggest that he asks his officials to consider the wording of clause 1. I do not believe that his intention, which I welcome, is reflected by that wording as it currently stands. I look forward to debating the matter further and to considering an appropriate amendment.

As I said, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement about the intention to keep independent special school places available to parents. I trust that he will consider the code of practice with regard to parents' ability to express a preference for an independent special school, as well as to the information that local authorities must make available to parents in respect of the special schools that are suitable for their children, whether they are in the independent or state sectors. I also welcome his comments about the terms of the code of practice in relation to the nature of the statement. Despite the letter that he circulated before Christmas, the issue has continued to cause anxiety among parents. We were previously placed in the difficult position of having to consider the Bill without knowing the content of the code. I am grateful to him for setting out what the Government intend to include in the code to ensure that the ability to specify provision in the statement remains.

Another continuing concern to which hon. Members have referred is the future of special schools. During the debate on the Queen's Speech, the Secretary of State said:

"I want to make it absolutely clear that the inclusion agenda is not a wholesale closure of specialist facilities and schools that meet particular needs of youngsters and their families."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 259.]

I welcome that statement, but many Opposition Members, parents, teachers and governors are worried by the fact that a number of local education authorities have decided—some claim to be under behind-the-scenes pressure from the Department—to pursue an inclusion agenda that leads inexorably to the closure of special schools. I have visited a number of special schools, some of which were concerned about that issue and about the possibility of closure. Government figures show that there are now 1,000 fewer special schools places than there were in 1997. If parents are to have the real choice that the Government want to establish through the Bill by saying that parents' wishes should be met, there must be diversity of provision for children and it is vital that special schools can be maintained.

As more children are integrated into mainstream education where that is right for them, the number requiring special schools is falling. However, a more worrying process is at work. Local education authorities simply stop statementing children or so drag their feet over statementing that children do not enter special schools. Those schools then close, not because parents have chosen another school but through a process of stealth. That point was specifically made to me by the parents and governors I saw from Alderman Knight special school in Gloucestershire, who said that that was happening in the county.

Parents of children at Kingswode Hoe school in Colchester, whom I met recently with my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), are also concerned about that. In a letter to the Secretary of State, a member of the Kingswode Hoe action group said:

"To apply the limited success stories and suggest Inclusion works for all children with special needs is a gross misinterpretation of the truth. One cannot apply a blanket rule for all children.

Parents of children who attend special needs schools recognise the difference in education that they have to offer. Many parents may have experienced a failed Mainstream education for their special needs children who then subsequently flourish in a Special needs school setting. There is no need for radical change. Surely the task in hand would be to improve even more on what we already have rather than set a policy in motion which may adversely affect these young more vulnerable members of our society."

The same concern has also been raised by parents from Alderman Knight and other special schools—those who are members of the Gloucestershire special schools protection league—who clearly make their point:

"Inclusion has never been the issue!

Our dispute with the LEA concerns:

The right of parents to choose the most appropriate type of provision for their child.

The right of each child to be educated in an environment in which they feel secure and can realise their potential.

We also do not expect miracles. We do, however, expect that after several years of little progress and often misery for the child, it should be recognised that this provision"—

that is, mainstream provision—

"is not appropriate and that transfer to a special school should be routine. We do not expect to encounter obstruction and even downright lies in support of a dubious political objective.

Surely it can be of little surprise to anyone that parents are united in support of these excellent schools in which we have seen our children flourish, when so many of us have direct experience of the failure of the alternative on offer."

That is where the balanced approach is important.

I fully accept that, over the years, some children with special educational needs and some disabled children who would have flourished in the mainstream have not had the opportunity to go into mainstream education and develop their potential in the way that was right for them. However, in remedying that wrong, we must make sure that we do not create another wrong for those children for whom special schools are the appropriate provision. Ensuring that that choice is available is extremely important.

We must also ensure that the needs and best interests of the child are at the heart of our actions. The wishes of the parents must be accommodated in the best interests of the child when it is right for that child to attend a special school.

I want briefly to touch on two issues. The first is the cost implications of the Bill, which have been referred to in a number of interventions. The Government have given the impression that putting the Bill into practice will have few cost implications, but if its consequence is a significant shift towards more children with special educational needs being educated in the mainstream, there certainly will be a cost implication, and inclusion without the necessary resources is less likely to work. That is not in the interests of the child and it will also put enormous strain on teachers.

As a result, a child with special educational needs or other children in the class may not receive the quality of education that they deserve. I do not want the Bill to raise parents' expectations only for them to be dashed because the resourcing and funding needed to make it work properly are not available and because the Government have not made a proper assessment of the implications of the cost of that legislation.

Secondly, we must also ensure that teachers are involved in decisions on whether educating a particular child in the mainstream will affect the education of other children. It is important that teachers' professional judgment is involved in that decision and in making such assessments.

The official Opposition support the Bill's intention to ensure that children with special educational needs whose interest will best be met by a place in a mainstream school are able to access such a place, but we must not be driven by some dogmatic inclusion agenda that pursues inclusion for its own sake rather than for the benefit of children. We shall give the Bill the fair and detailed consideration that it deserves and I hope that the Secretary of State will respond, as he said this afternoon he would, to the concerns that we have raised. Above all, our comments and any amendments that we might table will be driven simply by the best interests of the child.

6.6 pm

Mr. Roger Berry (Kingswood): I welcome the Bill with great enthusiasm for two simple reasons—it will strengthen the right to mainstream education for disabled children and children with special educational needs, where their parents wish it, and, under part II, it will outlaw discrimination in education on the ground of disability. Thus, it will put right a major flaw in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995—namely, the exclusion of education from part III.

The objective for us all is to create a society in which everyone can participate fully as equal citizens, but we have a long way to go in respect of disabled people, who are twice as likely to be out of work and to have no formal qualifications. Education provision for disabled children and disabled adults is central; and appropriate education in an environment free of discrimination is essential, as it is the foundation on which so much else rests.

Therefore, I welcome the great changes being introduced by this radical and progressive measure. I congratulate the Government wholeheartedly on the Bill, the high priority they have given it and on the extensive consultation. It has given rise to much debate and my files, like those of every other hon. Member, are full of comments from the detailed consultation exercises.

The Government have done the most thorough job imaginable and the consultation has secured overwhelming support for the Bill. Therefore, I was genuinely saddened and not a little angry to read the amendment tabled by the Leader of the Opposition, which asks hon. Members to decline to give the Bill a Second Reading. I know of no organisation in the country, apart from the Conservative party, that wants the measure to be blocked tonight.

The special education consortium, which represents 247 bodies including the major disability organisations, parents' groups, children's groups and local authorities, says, "We want this Bill and we want it now." I have the privilege to be secretary of the all-party disablement group. I therefore checked our minutes carefully and the SEC told us that this is the Bill that

"the sector had wanted since 1995"—

the year of the much-flawed Disability Discrimination Act.

The SEC wants the Bill on the statute book

"at the earliest possible opportunity".

The organisation, which speaks for virtually every disability group and for parents, local authorities and children, is not the only one that wants the Bill. The Disability Rights Commission has said:

"Disabled children and adults, and their families, would find it hard to understand if such an excellent piece of legislation did not reach the statute book."

[Mr. Roger Berry]

The Royal National Institute for the Blind strongly welcomes the Bill and has said:

"It is vital that the Bill becomes law as soon as possible."

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People very much welcomes the Bill and has also said:

"It is vital that the Bill becomes law as soon as possible."

Scope has said that the Bill

"is a huge step forward"

and wants it to have a "swift passage". The Local Government Association has welcomed the Bill, and the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation has called for no delay in its implementation. Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities,

"welcomes the legislation warmly"

and wants to see it become law as soon as possible. I will happily give way if the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) can name one organisation of disabled people or one parents' organisation that does not want the Bill to get a Second Reading.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Surely it is clear that the Conservative party welcomes the Bill in general terms, because it builds on our own success with the three Bills that we introduced in our time in government that dealt with special educational needs. However, we question certain aspects of the Bill, and the purpose of any amendment on Second Reading is to make those concerns concrete, which is exactly what we are doing.

Mr. Berry: The amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition states:

"That this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill".

Mr. St. Aubyn: Because.

Mr. Berry: Yes, the amendment gives reasons, but a little more effort would have made its terms slightly more persuasive. It does not say that the Conservatives welcome the Second Reading of the Bill and will propose amendments in Committee to improve it further.

Mr. Gale: I think that I am right in saying that every organisation that the hon. Gentleman has prayed in aid, while welcoming the Bill, has also sought amendments to it. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made a point relating to a school in my constituency. Conservative Members have learned the hard way that the Government do not listen and will not accept amendments, even intelligent amendments, to Bills, which is why we must go down a road that none of us would choose to go down. If the Government would listen, things would be different.

Mr. Berry: Forgive me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had thought that this was a Second Reading debate. I shall show that in the other place the Government have listened on a number of matters, and I am pleased about that. I may even, if tempted, list areas where I think there is scope for modest refinement. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah".] My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the outset of the debate that these are extremely important matters, so presumably intelligent adults, let alone Members of the House, may offer a few views. I am simply saying that the Opposition have tabled an amendment to decline a Second Reading to the Bill when every disability organisation supports it.

Mrs. May: The purpose of a Second Reading debate is to consider the principle behind a Bill. One of the key principles of the Bill that concerns us is that it does not put the best interests of the child at the heart of the legislation. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best interests of the child should be the aim of the Bill?

Mr. Berry: Education legislation should be clear on what education authorities are supposed to do, and of course the interests of the child are extremely important. Clearly, I have touched a raw nerve, and I was hoping to be non-political. I was slightly confused by the Opposition amendment. Perhaps they are now saying that they will support Second Reading.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): The hon. Gentleman went through a long list of charities that he reckons support the Bill. Not one of those charities has contacted me in Gloucestershire. Could it be because they are beginning to see the reality of the Government's policy through the wholesale closure—despite the Secretary of State's denial—of special schools in the county? Is that why those organisations in Gloucestershire do not support the Bill?

Mr. Berry: I was not "reckoning" that those organisations support the Bill: I was quoting what they had said to me in writing. I can let the hon. Gentleman have my file of letters. With respect, if the hon. Gentleman is not aware of the position taken on the Bill by those organisations that is his problem.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend forgets to tell Conservative Members that the special education consortium not only welcomes the Bill, but it is so anxious to get the legislation that it is seeking no further amendments to it.

Mr. Berry: Indeed, that is correct.

Part I amends the current framework for special educational needs, and most of the debate has so far focused on that. I want to say a few words about part II, which amends the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): I can produce written evidence from two organisations that would not want to be missed off my hon. Friend's list. The Local Government Association and the National Association of Head Teachers have written to all Members supporting the Bill.

Mr. Berry: I am extremely grateful for that contribution. I do not know about the postal services in Tewkesbury, but everyone else seems to be aware of the support of those organisations.

Part II addresses a major gap in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which did not embrace education in equal rights legislation. The Bill is a major

plank in the Government's strategy to secure comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people.

I am tempted to say—I cannot resist temptation—that the 1995 Act was not introduced because the Government of the day wanted it. Indeed, they had been assiduous in trying to prevent such legislation. They had blocked a previous Bill in such a ham-fisted and devious manner that it led to a massive public outcry, and the DDA was introduced on the hoof. It is frequently pointed out that when the Bill came back from the other place there were more pages of amendments tabled by the then Government to their own legislation than there were pages in the original Bill. I mention that merely to point out that the DDA was drafted on the hoof by a Government who did not want it. It is hardly surprising that the DDA is seriously flawed: it did not provide for a Disability Rights Commission; it contained a too narrow definition of disability and a small firm exemption under the employment provisions; and it excluded education.

After the election, the Government set up the taskforce to consider how best to proceed—initially, with the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission. That provision reached the statute book in 1999, and the commission opened its doors in April last year. The Government have recently responded to the taskforce's recommendations for further improvements in legislation. It is important to put this Bill in that context.

I am delighted that, on the definition of disability, the DDA is to be extended to provide legal protection to those with non-symptomatic cancer or HIV, that small employers are to be covered, and that, before Christmas, in the other place, the Government introduced this Bill on access to education. This is part of a wider and substantial disability agenda.

There is still a lot to do, as my right hon. Friend said, and we could all raise some issues for attention in the future. However, by any fair assessment, there is a dramatic contrast between the Government's policies on disability and those of their predecessor. I am proud to be a supporter of a Government with such a record. I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his ministerial colleagues, past and present, who have brought about these progressive changes. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), who is present, and her predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), have worked on the disability rights agenda, and I am proud to be associated with them. They have done and are doing a fantastic job.

I want to refer to funding, and particularly the schools access initiative, which my right hon. Friend has already mentioned. Although we all know that the provision of more public money is not the only way in which to improve people's lives, on many occasions it makes a fair amount of difference, and this initiative is a classic example of that.

While I am in the mood for congratulation, let me congratulate Scope and the National Union of Teachers. Readers of the *New Statesman*—who, no doubt, include Members in all corners of the Chamber—will have observed an advertisement in this week's issue congratulating the Government on their spending programmes for the schools access initiative. One of the first documents that I read on becoming a Member of Parliament in 1992 was a report produced by Scope and the NUT, entitled "Within Reach." It basically said "We really do not know very much about access". A year later, the two organisations produced a report telling us rather more about the subject—and, I am delighted to say, the schools access initiative was established by the last Government as a result.

The *New Statesman* advertisement reminds me that allocations have increased dramatically under the present Government. My right hon. Friend has already given the figures. The fact that we are currently spending five times more on the access initiative than the last Government spent during their last year in office, and that in two years' time we shall be spending 10 times as much, illustrates the priority that we have attached to the programme. It is a wonderful programme, which deals with key access issues. The standards fund for special educational needs has also been increased dramatically: this year it will be three times larger than it was during the final year of the last Government.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Conservatives also consider the report on schools access to be constructive and worth while? It is not merely a paean of praise for the past practice of either Government; it issues some interesting and pointed directions for the future, suggesting that there should be—as it were—better access to the access initiative, and that it should be distributed more equitably in that more schools should be made aware of it.

Will the hon. Gentleman accept that as constructive comment, which is what it was intended to be?

Mr. Berry: With pleasure: I agree with all that the hon. Gentleman has said.

As we know, the Bill was considered at length in the other place. I now recognise the relevance of my right hon. Friend's invocation of Humpty Dumpty: it was especially apt in view of what I have heard so far, and, more important, what I discovered when I read the record of debates in the other place.

The Government have given a number of welcome undertakings as a result of those debates, but I feel that three issues are still worthy of comment. Clause 1 is a Humpty Dumpty clause, is it not? To a large extent, it is a question of how people interpret certain words and phrases. Under the Bill as it stands, a pupil with special educational needs and a statement must be educated in a mainstream school, unless that is incompatible with the wishes of the parent or the efficient education of other children. I realise that the Opposition would like a third condition to be included. May I make a comment that I do not intend to be dogmatic? It relates to an issue that others have raised. Of course I respect the wishes of parents, but it must be said that the wishes of a parent and those of a child are not exactly the same.

In the other place, there was much discussion of how the child's best interests and the wishes of the child—the child's voice—could be taken into account. Comparisons were made with the provisions of the Children Act 1989, which require account to be taken of the child's wishes. The Government argued that, if such a provision were included in this Bill, children who could benefit from inclusion could be prevented from gaining a mainstream place. That is possible, but it is not entirely obvious that it would happen.

[Mr. Berry]

I welcome the Government's assurance that the child's views would be given clear prominence, as an important principle in the revised code of practice. This is a difficult problem to which I can offer no simple solution, but which we need to address increasingly as society pays more attention to the views of children as well as those of their parents.

I note that the taskforce did not recommend the retention of the condition relating to efficient education. I agree with my noble Friends Lord Ashley, Lord Morris and Lord Rix—I usually agree with them on matters such as this—that reference to efficient education could leave a loophole enabling local education authorities to exclude from mainstream education SEN children who would otherwise benefit from it. However, I acknowledge the Government's assurance that mainstream places would be refused in only a small number of cases.

My final reservation is one that some of my colleagues are expecting. The Bill refers to the remedies available to disabled children who experience discrimination. The Government have argued that if a child experiences discrimination on the ground of disability, the educational remedy is appropriate. I consider that remedy to be the most important, but I agree with what was said about the issue in the other place. It was pointed out there that if a child were refused a place on a school trip on the ground of race or gender, the case could be pursued, with financial compensation being a remedy at the end of the day. Under the Bill, if a child were refused a place on the trip on the ground of disability, financial compensation would not be possible.

I appreciate that, given the way in which the new tribunals are being structured, the Government rightly want to minimise antagonism and conflict. I am reluctant to say more than this: there is currently an inequity in the approach to discrimination in education, which depends on whether that discrimination takes place on the ground of disability or on the ground of race or gender. I hope that the maximum range of remedies will be considered in regard to disability discrimination.

Despite those small reservations, I think that the Bill constitutes a massive step forward. More important, disability organisations, parents' groups and local education authorities see it as such. A number of organisations have gone out of their way to tell most Members that they think it should be passed as quickly as possible, and I hope that no Member will do anything to prevent that this evening. This is a landmark Bill, which should be supported with enthusiasm.

6.29 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I welcome the Bill, and pay tribute to the way in which it was handled in another place. It was handled in just the way a Bill of such sensitivity should be handled. I am thinking especially of the Government's responses to criticisms from, in particular, lobbying organisations. Bills of this kind should not be dealt with in a party political fashion. The hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) was right to say that the Bill is yet another staging post along the route on which we started in 1979 with the Warnock report, and on which we have travelled since.

Liberal Democrat Members welcome the Bill's two underlying themes. First, disability should never be a barrier to access to mainstream education. I do not think that any hon. Member would not support that principle. Secondly, unlike some official Opposition Members, we believe that there should be a presumption that, whenever possible, children with special educational needs or with disabilities should be educated with their peers. We believe that that is an issue of natural justice that should be enshrined in law, and that the Bill goes some way towards meeting that goal.

We welcome many of the Bill's provisions. The establishment of parent partnerships to try to resolve disputes is one of the issues that has bedevilled special needs education for so long. I have been closely associated with that issue for many years. Nothing is more unseemly than to have a dispute about where to place a child with special needs or to argue about a child's statement. There have often been such disputes, and we welcome action to resolve them.

The Government expect that the Bill will enable, both at local education authority level and at school level, planning for access for youngsters with special educational needs. That issue has not been mentioned so far in the debate, but we welcome that provision. However, in Committee we shall be arguing for a proper implementation timetable. It is no good simply saying that we should have planning. As we know from so much experience in schools and local education authorities, planning can become a distant ambition rather than a means of producing tangible outcomes.

Liberal Democrat Members also support the Bill's minor provision on the duty to inform parents if their child has a special educational need. It might seem obvious, but there are still many cases in which schools do not inform parents of such needs, even when children have been placed on stage 1 or stage 2 of the register. It is important that parents should be informed, although it is often hurtful to parents to receive the information.

We welcome the fact that the Bill addresses the issue of disability discrimination, to which I shall return later in my speech. We particularly welcome removal of the third caveat, in section 316 of the Education Act 1996, on the efficient use of resources. That was a cop-out clause, then section, and we are delighted that it is being removed.

We particularly welcome the emendations to section 329 in the 1996 Act, as they will allow schools or other responsible bodies to begin the statementing process. So often, relying solely on parents or on some other type of intervention to begin the process has bedevilled the child's best interests. I hope that, in her reply, the Minister will clarify whether parents will have the right to veto the process once it has been started by a school. I support the principle of allowing schools to begin the process, but we should know where the duty of the school or other responsible body—such as a health authority—to the child begins and where the parents' duty ends.

I closely followed the debate on the Bill in the other place. Lord Northbourne, Lord Rix, Lord Ashley, Baroness Darcy de Knayth and my hon. Friend Baroness Sharp of Guildford made particularly cogent contributions in speaking to various amendments. Lords Rix and Ashley have of course contributed for many years to disability rights and special needs legislation. We appreciate their many contributions.

Despite what I shall say in a moment, I think that it would be churlish not to express our thanks to Baroness Blatch. Her scrutiny of the Bill in another place was, to put it mildly, very thorough, and it was consistent with much work done by previous Conservative Administrations since 1981. Indeed, the way in which those Administrations progressed from Baroness Warnock's 1979 report to the 1981, 1993 and 1996 Education Acts to make special needs a real issue in schools, was one of the hallmarks of those Administrations—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps it was too good to last.

I think that the hon. Member for Kingswood was a little churlish in his comments on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Although one tends to remember the unseemly scenes of father and daughter fighting, that was important legislation. I pay tribute to the fact that it was passed.

How sad, however, that on Third Reading in the other place, and, today, on Second Reading in this place, the official Opposition should sink so low as to seek to stop the Bill's progress. It is especially sad when one considers the record of those past Governments and the record of some of their colleagues in the other place.

Baroness Blatch and the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) purport to raise as their standard the best interests of the child, and they do so as if the best interests of the child were not already enshrined in a host of legislation. It is sad that anyone working with children in schools, local authorities or the independent sector should not have children's best interests at heart. Although I appreciate why Conservative Members are seeking to make the change, it is sad that we should have to make such provision in legislation.

Conservative Members believe that the omission of such provision in the Bill is sufficient reason to deny all children with special educational needs and disabilities the opportunities that the Bill would make possible. Denying them that opportunity would be the consequence of accepting Conservative Members' reasoned amendment.

The amendment is only a hollow gesture. The best interests of the child will be served by guaranteeing that the Bill receives Royal Assent before the general election. Every one of the special needs and disability lobbyists who have been involved in the issue over very many years will never forgive Conservative Members if they halt the Bill's progress.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: I think that the hon. Gentleman has the issue upside down. People who have children with special educational needs are concerned that their children will not receive an appropriate education. Can he also tell us why the Liberal Democrats in Gloucestershire have driven through a closure programme since publication of the Government's Green Paper?

Mr. Willis: I cannot speak for my colleagues in Gloucestershire or elsewhere; they must speak for themselves. Clearly, they are elected locally to act in the best interests of youngsters in Gloucestershire, and I have no doubt that they have done so to the very best of their abilities.

Mr. Robertson: They have done their best to close schools.

Mr. Willis: As the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said, the record of the previous Conservative Government shows that as many special schools closed between 1992 to 1997 as between 1997 and now. I am not in a position to know whether it was right or wrong to close those schools. The reality is that schools close as the education system moves on. I have often been involved in school closures.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The Secretary of State did not relate the number of school closures to demand. The truth is that over the 15-year period detailed by the Secretary of State, the number of statements has risen dramatically and our understanding, identification and analysis of special needs have moved on apace. To quote numbers irrespective, and out of the context, of changing demand is disingenuous and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will dissociate himself from it.

Mr. Willis: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point. He surprises me, as he has not done his homework. He has looked at one side of the argument. He is right that the number of statements has increased dramatically, but the number of students who are in special schools has remained fairly constant, at about 98,000 to 100,000 for each of the past 10 years. To answer the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), that means that in some places special schools will close and in others they will open. That is the nature of an evolving education system. We must not simply create an education system in aspic. However, I will return to the subject of special schools; no doubt the hon. Gentleman will be delighted with what I have to say.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Just because the number of children with statements has risen does not necessarily mean that the desire for places in special schools has risen. There is a recognition that many children in mainstream education need records of need, in Scotland, or statements, in England and Wales.

Mr. Willis: I am pleased to echo the hon. Lady's comments.

The one thing that I thought was missing from the speech of the hon. Member for Maidenhead was how special needs and the provisions of disability legislation would be delivered in free-for-all schools. How is that to be achieved? We have had two U-turns within eight days on the free schools policy, but there has been a dramatic U-turn today also. Suddenly, special needs responsibility is no longer to be completely devolved to schools, but will be held by the successor body.

Mr. Boswell: I hope that we can now close this silly argument. Right from the first day the free schools policy was enunciated, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and I have made it clear that the assessment and statementing process will remain a local authority function. There is nothing new. It is merely a reiteration of something that we decided more than 18 months ago.

Mr. Willis: That is yet another revelation; something that many hon. Members will have heard for the first time. The £540 extra that every school is to get for every student includes all the funding for special needs, transport and every other administrative cost. The Conservatives cannot say on the one hand that they will

[Mr. Willis]

give that to schools and, on the other, that they will keep the most expensive functions centrally. Where is the money to come from? Perhaps the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) will explain later. Some 24,500 separate schools—each with its own independent admissions policy—would mean that special educational needs and disabilities provision would be put back at least 10, if not 20, years. That is too horrendous to contemplate.

Mr. Levitt: Does the hon. Gentleman find it odd that the Conservatives want to give these powers to local authorities, having abolished the need for such local authority powers in legislation they passed when in government?

Mr. Willis: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to go further. I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, would wish me to get back to the Bill.

My noble Friend Baroness Sharp was castigated on Third Reading in the House of Lords for changing her mind in respect of supporting the amendment on the interests of the child that was proposed to clause 1. I defend her, because she bothered to listen to all the organisations that wanted the amendment dropped, and responded accordingly. She was right not to allow an amendment in the House of Lords that would have ping-ponged here and back again and would have had exactly the effect that the hon. Member for Maidenhead and her hon. Friends want—to delay the Bill and to prevent it being enacted before the general election. That is shameful, and I am delighted that my noble Friend was tough enough to stand up to the bullies in the other place.

Mr. Hayes: I have enormous admiration for the hon. Gentleman's understanding of and commitment to these subjects, but he is again being slightly disingenuous. The Conservative party did not choose when to propose the Bill. The Conservative party will not choose when to hold the general election. Frankly, to suggest that the squeezing of the Bill into its narrow timetable is somehow the responsibility of the official Opposition is a distortion of the facts.

Mr. Willis: That intervention was not worthy of the hon. Gentleman. He knows that my hon. Friends and I met the Secretary of State nearly 18 months ago to give our support to the Bill and to ensure that it reached the statute book. We were committed to ensuring that we tabled amendments and debated the principal issues, but we wanted to see the Bill on the statute book.

During the Third Reading debate in the House of Lords, we were able to extract from the Government an important change to the original clause 12, which would have driven a coach and horses through attempts to make sure that young people were able to get mainstream education. That clause contained a number of caveats—concerning, for instance, the need to maintain academic, musical, sporting and other standards, and the financial resources available to the responsible body—all of which would have undermined exactly what the Government, my party and, I hope, the official Opposition are trying to do with the Bill.

My association with special needs education goes back a long way. I have spent almost the whole of my life in schools where there have been significant populations of disadvantaged youngsters and children with special needs. Working in Chapeltown in the late 1960s convinced me that unless we could educate the whole community together—wherever they came from and whatever their needs or disabilities—frankly, we would breed dysfunctional communities. It is a point of principle to me and my colleagues that inclusive education goes to the heart of the education system.

As head of two schools in Middlesbrough and Leeds, I found it interesting to see the development take place. When I see the posturing of certain hon. Members, I think of those young people who have been denied access to mainstream education simply because of the local authority area in which they lived: the post code lottery. That cannot be right and, hopefully, the Bill—and in particular the comments of the Secretary of State earlier—will have made that clear.

Current legislation may have been well intended, but the caveats in section 2 of the 1981 Act—repeated by section 316 of the 1996 Act—allowed LEAs and schools to refuse entry to children on the grounds of the efficient use of resources. That was not right. Ricky Corner, a youngster severely disabled by thalidomide, was in my school in Middlesbrough 20 years ago. He would not have been allowed to sit on the science bench, using his mouth and toes to do his science experiments, in a great number of schools; but thanks to an enlightened local authority—Cleveland—and the dedicated staff whom I worked with, he could at ours. That was 20 years ago.

Carrie, a girl with Down's syndrome—she caused a lot of work for me—and severe behavioural difficulties would not have been allowed to enter most schools in Leeds when I was there in the 1980s, but thanks to the support of the local authority and dedicated staff, she could enter ours.

Mark was totally blind and came from one of the most deprived estates in Leeds. With his inspirational teacher at the school for the blind, he fought to be allowed to enter mainstream education. He would not now be a lawyer in one of London's main firms had it not been for inclusive education and the results that it achieved. I rejected that young man because my school had four blocks, each of which had stairs. I did not think that Mark would be able to cope, but other people persuaded us that he would cope, and that he should be allowed to cope. That made a huge difference.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me a second time, and I appreciate the moving examples he has cited. However, does he accept that similar examples could be offered of children who plead to be allowed to go to special schools?

Mr. Willis: I certainly agree that it is not an either/or proposition. People who say that it is are wrong. Each child must be considered as an individual: my premise is that no child should be denied access to mainstream education simply because of his or her special need or disability.

Thousands of examples of children such as Ricky, Carrie or Mark could be cited, but I contend that the real advantage of inclusive education is felt not by the child with a disability, but by the rest of the community. That important principle needs to be understood. We live in a world that is embarrassed by physical, sensory or

cognitive impairment. People who are different are perceived as a threat, but I assure the House that that does not happen when children grow up together in school communities. Ensuring that children grow up together in that way will help to overcome a great many barriers.

On 1 March, Lord Baker said in the House of Lords that never in his 30 years as a Member of Parliament had parents of a child with a disability or with special needs come to him and asked that their child be allowed to go to a mainstream school. I found that a really sad comment, because parents come to me with exactly that request all the time. The real crisis in my constituency, and with the local authority with which I worked, is that so many parents want their children to be normal and to enjoy the same opportunities as other children. I am saddened that we cannot give them that chance.

The hon. Member for Kingswood was right when he mentioned all the organisations that have written to us. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury has not received the same series of letters—perhaps they have not been sent to Gloucestershire.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I wonder why.

Mr. Willis: So do I, but I am pretty sure that all the disability and special educational needs organisations are not conspiring against Gloucestershire. I have no doubt that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury will receive the letters.

All the organisations want the Bill to go forward, but a number of matters need to be addressed. We touched on the question of resources earlier. We can use all the fine words and say all the nice things that we like, but they will come to nought without the resources to back them up. As the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) pointed out, the Secretary of State's response to me was totally inconclusive: the Bill is littered with resource implications, but he did not say where the extra resources would come from.

Plans cannot be made for access programmes in every school in a local authority area without incurring a bill of significant size. I accept that £222 million over three years is being made available for access, but that will just scratch the surface. That total, divided by all the schools in England and Wales, comes to about £10,000 a school over three years. The research by the NUT and Scope entitled "Within Reach" said that £625 million was needed to meet access needs in schools.

No mention has yet been made of the fact that the Bill also covers further and higher education. In the further education sector, £172 million has been allocated for access, but the small print makes it clear that colleges can get that money only if they find match funding. So £172 million will have to be taken out of further education budgets that are incredibly tight already in order to access the £172 million from the Government. That is not acceptable, given that the Bill is a piece of primary legislation that requires colleges to act.

The next problem has to do with revenue funding. The Secretary of State has made vague commitments—and he was vague again today—about money coming from the standards fund. Other hon. Members may know differently, but my experience is that every school that I visit is using its standards fund money to the hilt. There is no spare money sloshing around in that fund at the moment, which means that something would have to be cut to provide the necessary extra resources. I hope that the Minister, when she responds, will not say that the £25 million announced today is sufficient to meet all the requirements: it is not.

Two major elements of expenditure are involved in ensuring access to the curriculum. The first is staff training: inclusive education means that every member of staff in a school has to be trained. There is nothing in the Government's proposals to say that that is a requirement or need, or that what goes on in teacher training establishments will be changed. However, if inclusive education is to be the norm, the question of staff training must be dealt with.

The second element of expenditure arises out of ensuring access to the curriculum. It is no good if children can access buildings but not the curriculum. The Secretary of State rightly mentioned the impact of information and communication technology. The effect will be profound, as children with sensory, physical and sight impairments will be able to use equipment and machinery. However, it is enormously expensive to put loops into every classroom, to invest in ICT that is supportive of youngsters with disabilities, to acquire adapted technology, and to establish the necessary support in the school infrastructure. The Government must come clean and say where the extra resources will come from.

My final point on the question of resources has to do with statements. All hon. Members in the House today—and, I presume, over the past 10 years—will be used to parents saying at surgery meetings that what is contained in the statements that they have received is not being delivered. To be fair to the Secretary of State, he has made a clear statement today about responding to criticisms of the code of practice, and we must praise him for that. However, it has been noted already that there has been a 27 per cent. increase in the number of statements issued since 1994. We have been told that resourcing for that is not guaranteed, but statements make no particular difference if they are not supported by the necessary resources. Again, I hope that the Under-Secretary will respond to that point in due course.

I shall conclude by dealing with special schools. One myth is that those of us who fervently support the inclusive agenda are somehow against special schools, and that the proposition is therefore either/or. Another myth is that special schools are closing by the day, that soon none will be left and that no one will be able to make a choice in the matter. In that regard, Gloucestershire is clearly different from the rest of the United Kingdom, but I must take the word of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury on that point.

I mentioned earlier that the number of youngsters going to special schools has been virtually unchanged for the past 10 years. The reality is that it is unlikely to change in the next 10 years as well. We will still need significant special school education provision for many of our youngsters. However, the disabilities and needs of children in special schools are becoming ever greater because the inclusive agenda ensures that youngsters who can move into mainstream education are doing so. We must therefore look at special schools in a different way.

We must re-examine the role of special schools in our school communities and education services. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), who is no

[Mr. Willis]

longer in his place, touched on this. I see special schools not simply as centres of excellence but as research and development establishments for good practice that can be spread across the entire education service. Special schools need to be linked, in research terms, to universities to make sure that we are always at the leading edge of education provision, in terms not simply of teaching aids but of teaching methodology elsewhere.

This is an interesting and worthwhile Bill. I earnestly hope that the hon. Member for Maidenhead, who has, like the grand old Duke of York, marched her troops to the top of the hill, will decide to take them back down again and support the Bill's Second Reading.

7.1 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): For the reasons so well articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), I support this very good piece of legislation.

I am sure that this debate will attract many expert and informed contributions, such as the one we have just heard from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). Unlike many of the other hon. Members who may seek to catch your eye in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have no such experience on which to draw. I have no significant background in the issues with which the Bill deals. However, when I practised law, I was regularly in front of the sheriff court representing families whose children should have had records of needs—or statements, as they are known in England. I also represented families whose children had records of needs but whose local education authority could not provide the resources necessary to fulfil the demands that those records of needs entailed. I always felt that that was a distinctly inappropriate way in which to deal with matters relating to education.

The second half of the Bill applies to Scotland and if it improves the situation there in any way, it will have served a significant purpose. I will come back in a few moments to the role that the sheriff court plays in education in Scotland.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the fact that the hon. Gentleman has given way to me on that vital point. So many education authorities did not make statements because they did not have the necessary finance. Will the hon. Gentleman join Opposition Members in pressing the Government to provide the extra resources that will be needed to make the Bill what we want it to be?

Mr. Browne: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Resources are, of course, the key to delivering the Bill's objectives. I am speaking post-devolution, at a time when the responsibility for providing such resources in Scotland lies with the Scottish Executive, which is answerable to the Scottish Parliament. Already more resources are being made available for education in Scotland. The delivery of those resources in some respects increases the distinctiveness of Scotland's system of education from that in England and Wales.

I am satisfied that the Government will deliver the resources that are necessary to achieve the objectives of this legislation in Scotland. My local authority is already doing a significant amount in that respect.

As I said, I am a relative newcomer to these issues, and I am very grateful to the Royal National Institute for the Blind, Scotland and to Children in Scotland for helping me to understand some of these provisions and to work my way through the implications for Scotland. I could have doubled the list cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood of organisations supporting the legislation, wishing it a fair wind and wishing to see it enacted very soon, simply by adding the word "Scotland" to the name of every organisation that he mentioned. I was tempted to make an intervention at the time, but I thought that the point would probably be better made in my speech.

The Under-Secretary responsible for disabled people and disability rights, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), who is unfortunately no longer in the Chamber to hear this, met with those organisations, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) and myself on 27 February to discuss some of the Bill's implications for Scotland. It was a very constructive meeting. On behalf of us all, may I say how grateful we are to the Minister and the civil servants in her Department? It is comparatively unusual, these days, for a Scottish Member of Parliament to have such meetings with civil servants in that Department. The civil servants were extremely helpful and their understanding of the differences in relation to Scotland was encouraging. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary undertook to write to the relevant Minister in the Scottish Executive, and she has done so. I am sure that progress will be made. I hope that my hon. Friend's fellow Under–Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), will forgive me if I go on to raise some of the issues that we discussed, because it is important that they are put on the record.

I say that this is a good piece of legislation for the same reasons as all other right hon. and hon. Members. It will advance significantly the educational opportunities of pupils and students with disabilities and special educational needs. I support wholeheartedly the principle of inclusive education. From the experience of my constituents, inclusive education, when properly provided, adds to the lives of our children, improves educational standards and benefits child and parent alike. I agree with the hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and for Harrogate and Knaresborough that, through it, children come to value difference and treat their colleagues with the respect they deserve. My own children have learned from the experience.

Although inclusive education presents teachers with a professional challenge, they, too, learn from experience. They are able to translate positive skills for the benefit of all young people in their care. As I see it, this is a win, win situation.

An integrated inclusive approach to education is of paramount importance in a modern education service. I recognise that there are many benefits to individual students with special needs in East Ayrshire schools who are included in local educational provision—a practice that is positively promoted and supported in the council's education and social services department. For example, a blind pupil who attended a Kilmarnock school has gone on to Strathclyde university. The most important aspect of that man's experience of school was that his accomplishment as a musician was encouraged through performance in school shows and the annual East Ayrshire showcase. That involvement would have been denied him had he not been included in mainstream education.

One deaf young person had a distinguished academic career in a Kilmarnock school before going on to Glasgow university. Even before leaving school, he was an articulate advocate for the deaf community, engaging regularly in advanced debates with council officers about service provision for people with disabilities. He became a leading figure in his school community.

A number of autistic spectrum children are totally integrated within the mainstream school setting in my constituency. Another fine example is the facility for children of secondary school age that has been established at Grange academy for about 20 years now. Young people with hearing impairments are supported in a purpose-built base, but their main learning takes place in classrooms beside, and on the same basis as, children of the same age. In that way, the pupils become fully integrated into the life of the school and its wider community; they are able to participate in the same range of artistic, sporting and cultural activities enjoyed by their peer group. They are able to gain exactly the same range and nature of qualifications as other young people. That important point was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood.

More important, the Grange hearing-impaired pupils have learned to relate to their classmates on an equal footing. In turn, their peers accept them as equals, learning about their culture and sign language, and befriending them on an equal basis.

My final example relates to a young student in an East Ayrshire secondary school who has a most complex package of educational, social work and learning support, but who has been successfully integrated into the school. Furthermore, because the education department was the sole pilot authority for the education maintenance allowance scheme in Scotland, many young people—some with exceptional needs—have been helped and supported in the community with a financial bonus to stay in education.

My contribution to the debate will focus on the Scottish dimensions of the Bill. Its passage through another place has been especially interesting to me as a Scottish Member. This is the first occasion, post-devolution, that Parliament has considered equal opportunities legislation that has an impact on a devolved matter—education. Although serious efforts have been made by the DFEE to take account of the differences in the Scottish education system, some questions remain—perhaps inevitably. It is those questions that I want to address. I will argue that, in order to ensure clarity in implementation, a separate Scottish code of practice should be drafted by the Scottish Disability Rights Commission to accompany the legislation in Scotland.

Members will be well aware that Scotland has a distinct system of education—I am sure that many of my predecessors from Scotland will have told the House that often enough. Of particular relevance to today's debate are the differences relating to special educational needs. For example, unlike England and Wales, Scotland does not have a special educational needs tribunal system, nor do we have statementing. Moreover, the Scottish equivalent to statementing—the record of needs—is soon likely to be abolished, or at least substantially reviewed. Those expected reforms come in response both to withering criticism of the record of needs procedure from every quarter of the Scottish education scene, and to this year's highly critical final report of the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee into special education needs.

I highlight those differences because the provisions of the Bill that proved most controversial in Scotland appear to be predicated precisely on statementing and SEN tribunal arrangements that pertain only to England and Wales. The two most controversial provisions are the lack of a right to financial recompense for disabled schoolchildren who have experienced discrimination, and the exemption from the duty of reasonable adjustment of auxiliary aids and services and of physical features. I shall briefly deal with each of those provisions.

On the thorny question of financial recompense, I preface my comments by saying that I share the Secretary of State's emphasis on the prime importance of educational remedies in cases of disability discrimination. The problem arises in the minority of cases where no educational remedy is available. In that connection, I received a briefing from a Scottish disability charity which asks:

"If a final year disabled pupil fails a GCSE or Standard Grade because they had not been given access to a field trip or had missed out on essential handouts and course books in accessible formats, what remedy would there be? What action by the school could put that right?"

The Scottish dimension to that matter is that as there is no SEN tribunal structure in Scotland, cases under this measure will be heard in the sheriff court. Indeed, that same sheriff court could—under this measure—offer financial recompense to a 16-year-old disabled Scot at college, but not to a 16-year-old disabled Scot at school. More generally, it seems odd that a disabled school pupil can receive financial recompense from a shopkeeper, but not from his or her education authority when no educational remedy is possible.

Although the sectors in England and Wales may be somewhat divided in their view of financial recompense in cases where an education remedy is not available, the Scottish sector is united. Indeed, it is as united on that matter as it is on its wish to see the Bill enacted. Joint amendments on the issue were drafted for another place by RNIB Scotland, the Law Society of Scotland and the Children in Scotland consortium. Although I am not supporting any amendments at this stage in the Bill's passage, the issue may have to be revisited at a future date.

The second controversial provision in the Bill, from my perspective, is the exclusion from the reasonable adjustment duty both of auxiliary aids and services and of physical access to schools. Again, there is a Scottish dimension: the record of needs system, which should provide the necessary support for disabled pupils, patently does not work. Indeed, in a submission to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, the Forum on Scottish Education stated:

"The Record of Needs procedure has been corrupted to the point where its future must be considered. On the one hand, teachers have encouraged the opening of records in order to gain additional resources; on the other hand, education authorities have resisted the opening of them because of fears over the cost implications."

That criticism is all the more devastating when the membership of the forum is reviewed; it comprises all the key players—from the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Scottish School Boards Association to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the

[Mr. Browne]

Scottish TUC. Statementing may be an appropriate basis on which to provide for the needs of disabled pupils in England and Wales, but the record of needs procedure certainly does not currently fulfil that role in Scotland.

I am mindful of the time, so I shall deal quickly with the physical accessibility of schools in rural areas of Scotland. Although it may be possible to invest in the accessibility of schools serving disabled pupils from a wider catchment area in towns and cities, that is not easily achievable in rural Scotland, where the nearest school may be more than 100 miles away.

My final point is on the case for a separate Scottish code of practice. Scottish education is distinct—it always has been; post-devolution, it is diverging even more from the system in England and Wales. There is thus a strong lobby in Scotland for a separate Scottish code of practice, drafted by the Scottish Disability Rights Commission. That will avoid something that we have had to put up with for years: Anglocentric legislation with references to Scotland in footnotes and between brackets.

The Bill should be viewed alongside recent measures that significantly enhance the effectiveness of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, such as the creation of the Disability Rights Commission. The failure of the Conservative Government to extend the DDA to education has long been highlighted by disability campaigners as a major weakness of that legislation. The Bill addresses that weakness, and it does so for Scotland; the Secretary of State and the Government should rightly feel proud of that.

7.18 pm

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): Like the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), I am neither an education expert nor an expert in special educational needs—I apologise for that. I have four brief points on the Bill.

A cross-party consensus, in which I share, has already been expressed. It was referred to by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). There is cross-party consensus on the desirability of mainstreaming pupils with disabilities wherever possible. As noted by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, that was the thrust of section 316 of the Conservative Government's Education Act 1996. Furthermore, our agreement reflects an international consensus—the UNESCO Salamanca statement in 1994 was in favour of inclusive education.

The first of the four points that I want to make is that there is this consensus among the well-meaning. Among hon. Members, including myself, the basic philosophy is that, wherever possible, children should be fitted psychologically and educationally for life in normal society, and alongside that consensus we have the necessary set of buzzwords—if I may dare call them that—"integration" and "inclusiveness". Who could possibly be in favour of disintegration and exclusiveness?

My second point is that the history of social policy tells us that well-meaning intentions often give rise to unexpected and, indeed, perverse consequences. It is now generally accepted that the classic case of that was the Seebohm report and its consequences on provision for the mentally ill. Even in the relatively limited and more recent field of special educational needs provision that rule can be seen to work.

Last year, the Centre for Policy Studies published a pamphlet, by Dr. John Marks, on special educational needs. It showed how the numbers involved have increased well ahead of the expectations when the legislation was introduced and suggested some reasons for that, not all of which I agree with. Let me put the figures on the record. Since 1991, the number of pupils with special educational needs, but without statements—the English nomenclature—have increased from 11.6 to 19.2 per cent. of those in primary school, and from 9.6 to 16.5 per cent. of those in secondary schools. The numbers of pupils with special educational needs has increased from 0.8 to 1.6 per cent. of those in primary schools, and from 1 to 2.5 per cent. of those in secondary schools.

Dr. Marks speculates that one reason for that growth may be the coincidence of the introduction of the special educational needs policy with that of national performance tables for schools, which gives incentives to schools, he argues, to protect themselves from complaints about low performance by increasing SEN numbers. That is one explanation. Another, perhaps more plausible, explanation, which will ring a bell with all of us who have had the experience in our surgeries that has been mentioned several times, is that parents may believe that they have an interest in getting their children statemented—recognised as having special educational needs—so as to attract additional support and funding to their children. So I come to my third point.

One of the reasons why good intentions in social policy so often miss their mark is that insufficient regard is paid to the economic incentives that changes in policy bring into play. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has always spoken strongly on that point, and I agree with him about it. Let me illustrate that with some rough figures. A statemented child in Oxfordshire is likely to receive on top of the provision for ordinary children about 10 to 20 hours a week of "learning support assistance", which will add roughly 50 per cent. to the normal unit costs for an ordinary child. That has at least two economic consequences.

First, as I have said, parents become very interested in the extra provision in our generally under-financed state education system. So there are the strong pressures, with which all hon. Members are familiar from their surgeries, from parents on LEAs and schools for more and better statements. Incidentally, the procedural reforms in the Bill, which I support, represent an attempt to address those pressures, but the Bill will do nothing about the underlying economic forces that drive the process.

The second economic consequence is that the LEAs and ultimately the Treasury—we must never forget the power of the Treasury, which hovers like a shadow over all our proceedings—are undoubtedly increasingly concerned about the rising cost. That brings me to my fourth and last point.

The concern about the mounting costs of special educational needs provision threatens the range and quality of special needs education. That is the point referred to in the amendment tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench. Again let us consider some figures. Oxfordshire's special schools use a

banding system. A child in band 3, with moderate learning difficulties, attracts current funding of about £3,000 a year. A child in band 7, with profound and multiple learning difficulties, attracts about £7,000 of current spending a year. Relative to the cost of the current provision for an ordinary child, those are high figures—multiples ranging from two to six are involved. And of course the figures are also high in relation to the cost of provision in mainstream education for special needs children, with or without statements.

Cynicism would not be an appropriate note to strike in a debate of this kind, where we are all being high-minded, but I wonder whether we could not speculate a little on whether the growing consensus, among us well-meaning people, in favour of mainstreaming might have something to do with the economic incentives to reduce the unit costs of the growing demands for special educational needs provision.

I strongly support the aspiration—which has been expressed on both sides of the House, including by the Secretary of State—in favour of maintaining a range of high-quality special schools alongside the important trend of mainstreaming children with special educational needs. However, I agree with my hon. Friends on the Front Bench that that aspiration may need to be more fully articulated in Committee. I need not reiterate the arguments for special schools alongside those for mainstreaming, but I am concerned about the underlying trends that I have described.

Again, let me propose a simple economic equation. The more special educational needs children are mainstreamed, the fewer will be available to attend special schools, so the unit costs of provision in those schools will be higher. Some of us have already picked up the dialogue and know that arguments of the following kind will be articulated. Some may say, "Of course these kids' needs are very serious, but surely it isn't fair that they should get such a large share of the cake." Some may say, "Any way, inclusion and integration are best for the children." The bottom line is that others may say, "The truth is some parents are too pushy."

The Bill is a well-meaning measure, but I do not believe that some of the important facts of life in special education are fully recognised in it. To that extent, it will not improve the situation as much as we all hope it will. That is a matter of regret. The problems are real; our aspirations are for the best, but, as the poet said:

"Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow."

7.28 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): It gives me enormous pleasure to support the Bill, which will do so much for children who require special education and their parents. May I say from the outset that I vehemently support neither mainstream nor special schooling; they both have a serious place in the education system. However, I would fight to the death for parents' ability to choose the sort of education that they want for their children. That is precisely what the Bill will do; it will facilitate education and give parents a more equal footing on which to fight for their children's needs, so that they can get exactly what they believe their children should have.

Much has been said in this debate about the loss of special schools. I have to tell the House that Crawley is losing two special schools, but we are going to have one beautiful, new special school, costing more than £6 million. It will be sited close to our mainstream schools to allow integration between schools and to ensure that all services are properly integrated.

I am here also to convey very grateful thanks from all the parents in Crawley. We are still reeling from a recent announcement that there will be £60 million pounds of investment in secondary schools. We cannot believe that that has happened after decades of neglect in Crawley new town. The schools in which I was educated are still using the same equipment, and they can hardly believe that they will receive the investment that they wanted so much from the Government. I wish to highlight that fact, because parents are delighted and want me to thank the ministerial team for making it happen.

Let me make a few comments about new build. Most of us would assume that access for pupils with mobility problems is a given in new buildings. Sadly, that is not true. Many of us have seen examples of new buildings and we cannot quite believe that they do not offer accessibility to pupils who do not have full mobility. Those pupils cannot get into the buildings to use their facilities with their fellow pupils. It is important to focus on that issue. The Bill will ensure that not only do we focus on the needs of individual pupils, but that every new building in the education system is accessible to everyone.

There are many ways to do that, and Crawley gives us an example of good practice. The town access group, known as the TAG team, is at the heart of the planning process in the education system and throughout the town. It consists of people with varying disabilities—some are wheelchair users, some are not sighted and some are deaf—but for all sorts of reasons they have become mobilised to ensure that everyone has access to buildings. The group will be very much involved when the planning process for new schools comes to fruition. It will be shown the plans and encouraged to take an interest in what is going on, so that we avoid the disaster of building a beautiful new school only to find that pupils who wish to go there cannot make their way around it safely and easily. What a message that sends out to young people with disabilities.

Such young people should have access to new buildings without first having to make special arrangements, so that they can take advantage of the new facilities. I hope that the Bill will put that issue at the fore as it proceeds through the House. The party has not finished in Crawley; people are delighted and are looking forward to the time when the schools are up and running.

The other issue that I wish to raise relates to something that most of us would consider to be a hidden disability. It is rarely discussed in school circles, because it is a difficult subject. I am a member of the all-party group on AIDS. Although the number is thankfully still relatively small, a growing number of children have HIV and even more suffer from the hepatitis B infection. Those children want to play a part in mainstream schooling, but their small numbers sometimes mean that it is difficult for them to obtain the education and care that they rightly deserve. That is especially the case for children with HIV who become ill. I hope that the Bill will take account of their needs. As I said, the number of such children is growing and they should be recognised in the Bill.

[Laura Moffatt]

I hope that the House will give the Bill the fair wind that it deserves, because it will help all parents. We know that inclusivity benefits us all and allows us to flourish as a civilised and healthy nation. I hope that the Bill has a smooth passage, so that we can hold up our heads knowing that we have done the right thing for children with disabilities in the United Kingdom.

7.35 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Today has been quite an experience, because I welcomed 50 people to the Jubilee Room from the Alderman Knight school in my constituency. The school feels very much under threat because of the policies pursued by Gloucestershire county council and an unholy alliance of Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors.

The county council has already proposed the closure of Bownham Park school in Stroud and I have written to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to ask him what judgment he will make on that proposal. People in Gloucestershire are certainly not persuaded that the school should close, and his decision will give us an indication as to his views on special schools.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): I know that the hon. Gentleman has taken a close interest in the future of the special schools in his constituency, but does he accept the point, which I have made to him previously, that the final decision is not for the Secretary of State, but for the local school organisation committee? If it is not unanimous, it will then be a matter for an independent adjudicator.

Mr. Robertson: Yes, I accept that, but the school organisation committee has failed to be unanimous, so it will be left to an adjudicator to make the decision. Therefore I do not accept that the decision is entirely out of the Secretary of State's hands. *[Interruption.]* Well, we shall see what happens. Certainly, Gloucestershire county council was sparked into action by the Government's Green Paper and is proposing to close the special schools.

If the Bill is accepted in its present form, it will be a triumph of theory over practice. When the people from the school visited the House of Commons, almost the entire Conservative Front-Bench team came to listen to their views. Although Ministers were asked many weeks ago to attend and were reminded this week, not one member of the Government team could find even a couple of minutes to call in. Perhaps that reflects their views on special schools. Ministers are shaking their heads, but I do not know why. The invitations were sent out many weeks ago and they were reminded again this week.

A young boy called Brian Beard has not been educated in any school since September, because the local education authority will not recognise his parents' wish for him to be educated in a special school. He was present today, as was another girl. She was in tears as she described how she simply could not cope in a mainstream school. Eventually, she was placed in a special school and she has developed considerably since she has been there.

For many children for whom inclusion has taken place, it is the correct policy. However, it is important to recognise the needs of individual children and they and their parents must decide the best place for their education. The Bill will not give parents that ability. It states that if there is no statement, the child will have to be educated in a mainstream school. The problem, however, is that local authorities are not efficient in their statementing.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend the Minister may correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that local education authorities have to take account of parents' wishes for their child to be educated in a special school. Nothing in the Bill will change that. If that does not happen in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, it is up to him to make sure that it does.

Mr. Robertson: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can tell me how to do that without bringing it to the attention of the Secretary of State and Ministers. It is my job as a Member of Parliament to raise issues with them. That is what I am doing and what I have done many times before. Only a few hours ago, I got the permission of the young boy's parents to give Ministers his name and address if they want it. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has good intentions, but the boy has not been educated since September.

Miss Begg: I am slightly puzzled by the hon. Gentleman's statement. He describes the situation as it pertains today. Nothing in the Bill will make that the norm. If anything, the Bill will help to ensure that children are appropriately educated, according to the wishes of their parents. He should welcome it.

Mr. Robertson: My reading of the Bill is different. I can only base my comments on the experience in Gloucestershire since the Green Paper was published. The other parties in the council have got together to drive through a programme of closure of special schools. That is the reality. We can talk in this place all we want, but that is what is happening on the ground. I am paid as a Gloucestershire Member of Parliament to bring that to the attention of Ministers and I hope that they will respond.

Many hon. Members—in particular Labour Members—have claimed that children are being denied access to mainstream schools because of their special educational needs. I fully recognise that that might happen. However, no parent has written to me about that problem. Instead, many parents, including those who were here today, have complained that they cannot get places in the special schools that they believe their children deserve.

Heads, teachers, governors and pupils at mainstream schools are concerned about the inclusion policy. They know that if children struggle in mainstream schools, other pupils will suffer as a result. They are not being selfish, and neither are the parents. They merely recognise the reality that children need to go to an appropriate school. As one or two Labour Members stated, that has to happen by considering the needs of individual pupils.

Let me tell the House—not for the first time—where I was educated. I was excluded, in the sense that I did not successfully negotiate the 11-plus examination all those years ago. I am neither proud nor ashamed of that and, if I could have my time over again, I would not change the secondary school that I attended. It was a good Church of England school, with a good ethos, and it was right for me. Whether it was the best school in the area is irrelevant.

The girl who spoke at the meeting earlier today was brought to tears when she said, "Nobody is listening to us." We are sat in this place and councillors are sat in Shire hall in Gloucestershire. We come out with fine theories, but no one listens to the parents and pupils who know that they are better off in special schools. The closure of those schools in Gloucestershire makes them wonder why they have elected representatives. The parents, teachers, governors and children in many schools throughout Gloucestershire are expressing a clear wish that is being ignored by hon. Members and members of Gloucestershire county council. No wonder those people are dubious about the role of politicians and have no faith in the democratic process.

7.44 pm

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Even if we were not having this Second Reading debate, there would be every reason to discuss and celebrate what the Government are doing for children with special needs and disabilities. They introduced the schools access initiative, which received £45 million in the first three years and will get £220 million in the next three. The grant that is available to disabled students who go into further and higher education has doubled. The new deal for disabled people has ensured that they get access to training and skills, which has been a tremendous success. Those measures and the Bill fit into a framework that includes the Disability Rights Commission, the disabled persons tax credit and much stronger disability discrimination legislation, which is better than the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 that we inherited.

We have not heard much about the 1995 Act. Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen have not given a feasible explanation as to why education was excluded from it. That omission gave the message to young disabled people they have the right to gain access to a pop concert, a pub for under-age drinking or a video shop, but they do not have the right to gain access to their schools. That is nonsense.

I appeal to the hon. Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) and for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) to withdraw their amendment. All three have been—and, in some cases, still are—active members of the all-party parliamentary disablement group. I cannot believe for one moment that they are happy to lead their troops through the Lobby to vote in favour of the amendment and against the Bill on Second Reading.

Mr. Boswell: Having expressed disbelief about our alleged attitudes on some matters, will the hon. Gentleman ponder on the fact that we might have reservations about the Bill? It does not seem odd to me to reflect that in an amendment.

Mr. Levitt: What seems odd to me is to vote for an amendment that, if successful, will defeat the whole Bill. Surely the hon. Gentleman should ensure that the Bill is agreed to on Second Reading so that he can take up his concerns in Committee. That is the logical response.

Dr. Ladyman: Is my hon. Friend as baffled as I am by the comments of Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen? Has it occurred to him that they have not read the amendment and do not realise that it will prevent the Bill from making progress?

Mr. Levitt: At least two of us have told Conservative Members that. Perhaps there will be a change of heart before 10 o'clock.

There is little disagreement about the principle of inclusion. After all, we meet disabled people every day, we live in a mixed-ability world, and there is wide acknowledgment that it is a positive experience for non-disabled children to mix with disabled children. On the other hand, it is possible that in the past we paid lip service to special educational needs. Perhaps we allowed some special schools to become out of sight and out of mind. Perhaps units within our mainstream schools share a postcode but little else with the school to which they are attached. Perhaps—I speak as a former teacher—some teachers might be quite happy for the special needs department to get on and do the job, as long as they do not have to sully their hands.

I commend the report by Scope and the National Union of Teachers. "Within Reach 3" says that, in 90 per cent. of schools where access initiatives have been implemented and schools have become more inclusive by introducing into the mainstream disabled children and children with special needs, attitudes towards children with disability have improved. There is less bullying, less exclusion and more physical inclusion.

The Bill assumes that education will be inclusive rather than exclusive. It gives all parents the right to send their child to a mainstream school, but it also reserves their right to special education if that is best. I have sympathy with those people who defend the special schools cause for at least one good reason: I think that I am the only Member of Parliament who can use sign language to any extent. I am certainly the only Member of this House who is a trustee of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, although Lord Ashley in the other place is another.

I was present in the Chamber a couple of years ago for an Adjournment debate in which the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) sought to save a school in her constituency which was operated by a London borough and provided a sign language environment in which young deaf children could grow up. She asked the then Education Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), for permission for a trust to be set up to help the school to survive the policies of the distant LEA, which would have closed it, and to set itself up as an independent school. My hon. Friend gave that permission on the night, and I was pleased that we would retain an institution in which deaf children were educated in an environment where sign language was the norm. That is an example—perhaps an ironic one—of a listening Government.

Another example of our listening Government deserves mention. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to it briefly. I refer to the code of practice for statementing. My postbag, particularly in December and January, was full of letters from people complaining about proposals for that code. As a result, the Government withdrew the document that had been put out for consultation and allowed the existing code of practice to proceed. It will not necessarily remain unamended, but

[Mr. Levitt]

the Government listened and said, "Perhaps we haven't got these proposals right. Let's go away and think about them again."

Turning once more to children with a hearing impairment, I want to place on the record the fact that only 14 per cent. of deaf pupils in mainstream schools achieve five or more A to C grades at GCSE, compared with 44 per cent. of hearing children. Some children with a sensory impairment have to travel 20 miles a day to have their special needs met, and many will have had to stay in a special unit or school when integration and development of lip reading and speech skills might have been better for them. That is a different group of children from the one to which I referred a moment ago. Where there are questions of language development, it is particularly important that we accommodate the children concerned.

Some 840 babies are born with a significant hearing impairment each year; 400 of them will have that impairment detected by the age of 18 months, but 200 will not have had it properly detected at the age of three and a half years. That leads us to question whether those children are receiving the right education, help and diagnosis from that early stage.

Mr. Boswell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we can persuade this Government, or a future Government, to introduce universal neonatal hearing screening on a national basis as soon as possible, we could pick up those problems at an earlier stage? We would then both create a problem for ourselves and require that we answer it.

Mr. Levitt: I certainly sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's desire to achieve that aim. Typically, the children to whom I referred are tested by the health visitor distraction test at seven or eight months, but the test is not infallible at that age. Certainly, I agree that we need improvement by one means or another.

That leads me to a situation that I have encountered in my constituency. In Derbyshire, four-year-olds have traditionally gone into primary schools early. We now have universal pre-school education for four-year-olds whose parents want it, and thanks to the Government's policies, we now offer it to three-year-olds. What happens to the two-year-old or three-year-old with special needs? There is a little confusion, to say the least, about who has the responsibility for finding the right help for those children.

I find that people who run pre-school schemes for three-year-olds in the voluntary and private sectors are very uncertain, and indeed scared, about the idea of a child with special needs wanting to enter their group. They call the social worker, but they are not sure whether the problem should be dealt with by social services or by the education or health services. They might have been running the group for only a couple of years, and their basic training will not be sufficient to diagnose special needs properly. Now that we have the opportunity to extend pre-school education to three-year-olds, we have the chance to improve the diagnosis of special needs. We can then address the thorny problem of statementing a child of that age.

I want the statementing process to be speeded up. I want to see "easy win" assessments being carried out within days of referral. The whole pre-school sector should be given the same support and opportunity to help children with special needs in their care.

Another constituency case, which hopefully will have been resolved today, involves a girl at the other end of the age spectrum. At 16, she has been in a special school for children with multiple learning difficulties. Had she been born a year earlier, the careers service would have led her into a full-time residential place in further education. Had she been born a year later, the Learning and Skills Council would have placed her in full-time residential education. This year, however, it appears that the careers service is pulling back from its former role and the Learning and Skills Council is not yet up and running. Parents have been left facing weeks and weeks of uncertainty about what is happening to their 16-year-olds with severe learning difficulties. Those children will go to a new school in September, but parents need a reliable framework to assist them in meeting their children's needs and in exercising the choice that we have all said we want the Bill to preserve. I am sure that it will do so.

There are excellent initiatives in special needs education. Many of us attended a fringe event at last year's Labour party conference where we were privileged to have conversations with young people with special needs. That might not sound unusual in itself, but they were young people with whom I could not previously have had a conversation. They were using the latest speech synthesis technology, which is very expensive. By using synthetic speech, those children, who have very little muscular control and no speech, were able to have bright, engaging and intelligent conversations. That was an example of how technology can come to the aid of children with severe communication difficulties. It was a tremendous evening; children were liberated and I and others were educated.

The Bill is a milestone. It finally recognises the needs and entitlements of children and adults to access appropriate education. Nothing more needs to be said about it and I commend it to the House.

7.59 pm

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I appreciate having the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Undoubtedly, children with all manner of special needs and disabilities are able to be integrated in mainstream education. I visited every school and college in my constituency. I went to see the work that Godalming sixth-form college is doing. At Badshot Lee and Broadwater, I saw the special units for children with various disabilities. Much can now be done in mainstream education and with new technology, and I endorse the point that training and investment in information and communications technology is enormously important in enabling more children to release their potential. I remember our excitement in the Department of Health when cochlear implants were going to be made available on the NHS. Young people with all manner of physical disabilities can be released from the constraints under which they have lived, and lead full lives as active citizens.

It is not, however, my view that the mantra of social inclusion is necessarily always the right one in education for children with special needs. I say that having worked for many years—when I had a proper job before entering Parliament—in a child guidance unit, having been the chairman of a magistrates court, and having worked at some of the special residential schools that the then Inner London education authority set up amid great grandeur all over the home counties.

Many young people need special assessment and special provision, and coercive social inclusion is counter-productive. I do not dispute the degree to which having a fellow pupil with a disability reduces the fear, ignorance and stigma shown by the other, able-bodied members of the class, but I do dispute the idea that all children should be forced into this socially inclusive pattern.

I was interested in the comments made by Professor Peter Farrell, the professor of special needs and educational psychology at the university of Manchester. He said:

"Social inclusion, as equal members of society, is something that most people would support. But this is not necessarily the same thing as educational inclusion. For very disabled kids"—

I do not like the word "kids"; it is patronising, but be that as it may—

"with minimal communication skills and demanding physical needs, some degree of separation may be more appropriate—even a precondition for social integration."

Badshot Lee primary school has a wonderful facility for children with severe physical disabilities. A young man, Igor, to whom I am particularly attached, suffered grievously in the Chernobyl disaster. He lives in my area. He is very small because he lost a number of his limbs. Until the age of 11, he was comfortable at Badshot Lee. However, at 11, he wanted to go to a special school because he felt vulnerable and unusual, as adolescents do. Adolescents with severe physical disabilities may feel even more so. There is not one answer, but coercive social inclusion is wrong. Igor wanted to go to the Lord Mayor Treloar college, and had great difficulty achieving his objective.

I am particularly persuaded by Melanie Phillips, who recently warned of teachers being left

"to flounder with pupils whose very disruptive behaviour still spells chaos in the classroom . . . for the majority of heads and teachers, the problems of incorporating severely disruptive children are overwhelming."

My special concern is with children with mental health problems. I am disappointed that they have had so little mention in this debate. That is extraordinary. I particularly applaud the work of Young Minds, led by Peter Wilson. He is having the greatest difficulty in securing funding. Despite all the talk of joined-up government—the words never match the reality with this Government—he cannot get adequate funding to provide the mental health services necessary for so many young people.

Fearing that I was not going to catch your eye for a long time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I briefly visited, for sustenance and information, the launch of the manifesto card of the NSPCC, the Child Poverty Action Group—my first employer—and Barnardos. In the material that they have produced, they make it clear that one in five children and adolescents suffer from some form of mental health problem. One of their campaigns, which I applaud, is that

"independent counselling schemes in all schools to provide emotional support for all children who need it"

should be available. That is a tall order, but it is not my view that every child benefits from being forced to stay in the mainstream.

I wish that we had heard more from Ministers about what they are doing to co-operate with health providers, social services and the criminal justice system to ensure that those young people who often end up in the sheriff court—as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) said—and the juvenile court, as I would have called it, receive the help that they need when they need it. So often with the goal of social inclusion, problems are delayed until a child is really suffering and falling out of the system, and until the teachers and parents are desperate. The great idea that social inclusion is the objective and that special education is somehow a failure or a lesser option is, in my view, misguided and misjudged.

I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) had the right of it when she said that children's needs should be given priority. I am sceptical about the mantra of children's rights. Children have a right to be cared for and a right to be heard, but the concept of children's rights is not a wise one because so many children need control, care, support and containment. When hon. Members talk about the disability rights legislation applying the same language and understanding to children as to adults, they misunderstand the nature of childhood.

I strongly support the work done by my noble colleagues in another place, when they talked about the best interests of the child. I spent many years working on children's legislation, including the Children Act 1989, and I believe that to fail to give children the support and care they need is a great error. Children are not adults with adult status, and we fail them instead of serving them if we fail to understand that.

It has been said by a number of my colleagues that there is a role for special schools. I support the comments made by Doug McAvoy, the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers. Goodness, I remember him coming in long ago, when I worked for Chris Patten at the Department of Education. I did not feel, then, that I had many points of agreement with Mr. McAvoy, but I agree with him when he says:

"There is a continuing role for special schools, not least as centres of expertise and as resource centres, as well as providing for each young person's special needs."

If hon. Members came to the Abbey school or the Ridgeway school in my constituency—one is for young people with mild learning disabilities, the other for those with severe learning disabilities—they would see how young people can gain status, have leadership roles and be celebrated at prize-givings and other events for their success and their status. Those opportunities are, with the best will in the world, hard to achieve in the mainstream.

I am also concerned about the role of residential provision. I return to the issue of co-operation over funding. I was deeply influenced by the late Lady Faithfull, who was for many years instrumental in the all-party parliamentary group on children, and also in the Caldecott community. The difficulty of securing funding for residential places continues to be as problematic today as ever.

[Mrs. Virginia Bottomley]

I ask the Minister to comment on what steps are being taken to achieve co-operation between social service departments, health departments and education departments. It was ever thus that the children who need residential provision often have not only educational needs but social needs. Children with special educational needs come not with one label, but, increasingly, with multiple labels. There is a degree of buck-passing and cost-shunting between agencies in relation to who will fund the provision. There will be few hon. Members who have not had experience of parents desperate for their children to receive a place, but somehow the agencies could not resolve the problems until, all too often, the criminal justice system has to pick up the bill.

I am also worried about the degree to which residential provision, which probably used to be excessive, is under threat. The reasons for a placement are rarely purely educational; almost always social factors are behind it. When we read of the effect of having a severely handicapped child—marital breakdown and family pressure—it is scarcely surprising that social factors combine with educational needs.

I share the profound concerns, represented widely in my constituency, about the potentially adverse effects of the Bill on the independent sector. It is hard to explain, but there is a huge demand, certainly in my area, for placements in the independent sector. There are a number of not-for-profit denominational independent establishments in my constituency which have prestige and cachet. Parents who are coming to terms with their child's disability may believe that if the child can be placed in one of those independent establishments, the school will provide added value. I understand that parents can find valuable the additional contribution that the faith community often provides in those circumstances; I would feel that myself.

My worry is the degree to which the independent sector will be discriminated against in a needless and serious manner. In my area, St. Dominic's school and More house have both provided remarkable care, education and encouragement for many decades, and have given self-esteem to youngsters who were failing to thrive and flourish in the mainstream.

I very much hope that the Government will re-examine the matter and accept the view of the Opposition that choice for parents is important, especially when people are coming to terms with their children's difficulties. All parents want their children to overcome obstacles and be free from difficulty; having a choice can make a huge difference to their accepting the outcome. I hope that the Government will recognise in statute that the best interests of the child should have priority.

I hope that the Government will look again at joined-up government. I am sure that other hon. Members have received letters of anguish from advisory and support services for children and the family court on the Lord Chancellor's proposals for self-employed guardians ad litem. Guardians ad litem do much to ensure that children in the looked-after sector realise their potential and achieve all that they can, given their resources and their adverse circumstances. In the interests of joined-up government, I am sure that the Department will want to talk to the Department of Health, social services, those dealing with criminal justice matters and the Lord Chancellor's Department.

I am sure that many hon. Members have read Lord Renton's comments in another place. He described his daughter, who has severe learning and physical disabilities, and said:

"Having children with learning difficulties in mainstream schools causes serious problems. The first is that the children become more conscious of their mental handicap, which gives them an inferiority complex. Alas, sometimes they are bullied and often they are treated with casual contempt by normal pupils and even by teachers."

Lord Renton continued:

"Integration into mainstream schools often means disruption and delays in the classroom detrimental to the normal pupils."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 February 2001; Vol. 622, c. 616-17.]

I hope for a more optimistic view of the vast majority of children with special educational needs. This country has made progress in the past two or three decades; one only has to go overseas and see the special educational provisions in many other countries to realise that the House is right to be proud of that progress. I hope that the Government will not get so carried away with their own rhetoric that they fail to understand that individual children, their assessment and best needs should be their guiding light.

8.14 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Following the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), it comes as a surprise to realise that I agree with much of what she and many Opposition Members have said. My surprise is that we reach different conclusions from our shared experience and attitudes. Certainly the view that children ought to be the centre of policy should be shared by Members on both sides of the House. I am therefore surprised that Opposition Members conclude that the Bill should be opposed, while Labour Members conclude that, where change is needed, it should be sought and made.

I wish to draw the attention of the House to two constituency issues. The first is the review of special educational needs provision in my area in Kirklees education authority; the second is my personal interest in ADHD—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—which is little understood and needs closer examination.

In my own area, about a year ago, the education authority felt, with good reason, that special educational needs provision needed to be reviewed and changed. Some schools in the neighbouring constituency of Huddersfield—my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) spoke earlier about local education—do not offer good provision. Some of their buildings are not the best; ideally, we would not children to be in them, as they are not comfortable. Some schools are far removed from communities and, for certain pupils, travel is difficult. Change in provision was therefore not necessarily a bad idea. However, to assume that the outcome of the Bill will be identical to the first paper read by members of the education authority is not necessarily the best thing to do. The fact that those LEA members based some of their consultation on the Education Act 1996, which dealt with another matter, also changed the focus of what could have been a good review into something that caused suspicion.

Some of that suspicion has been voiced in the House today and rests on the fact that, when we look at special educational needs, we are really talking about taking

places out of the current system and making a single overall change by saying that all children with needs should be included in mainstream education. However, there is nothing in the Bill to suggest that. I share the view of the right hon. Member for South–West Surrey that children vary so much that we have to look at a range of provision. If, after long consultation, we do not do that in Kirklees, I would be extremely disappointed.

The Government have just announced a grant of more than £16 million towards the change in education provision in Kirklees, yet still the consultation goes on, as it must because parents also need to be listened to during the process of change which, after all, affects their children. The voices of children are rarely heard directly. We often listen to their parents, but perhaps we need to spend a little time listening to children when discussing inclusion. Children often tell me, "I do not want a statement. I do not want people to think of me as different. I do not want the people who I mix with in the youth club or football club to say that I am different and not in class with them."

Often, children themselves have a different view of what their statement should be about, especially as they get older and articulate their own needs. The Bill includes a great deal that will allow us to tell parents and children that everyone should be encompassed in the process of change. All of our views should be taken into account.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) made some interesting points about resourcing, with which there are problems. Resourcing is not always just about money. I have encountered a big problem when looking at assessments of need—we do not have enough educational psychologists to do that work. They are in short supply not simply because we cannot afford them, but because they have not been trained and are unavailable. That obviously slows the process down. We should be examining such issues in detail, not putting up a straightforward barrier and saying that, as a matter of principle, we oppose the Bill. We should be working together to find solutions.

In Kirklees, we decided that there should be an all-party statement declaring that the issue was non-political, and that we would all work together to find out what was in the best interests of children. I pay tribute to the chair of the education authority, John Smithson, who is a Liberal Democrat councillor. I am not ashamed to congratulate him. When it was drawn to his attention that parents were uneasy about the change that the authority was making, he listened. Listening is at the heart of everything that has happened.

I went to see Ministers, and the Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who has just left the Chamber, met parents and explained carefully her view of what should be done for children who had been statemented and the range of provision that should be available. She made it clear to those parents that, for some children, inclusion in mainstream schooling is desirable, but that such inclusion is not necessarily desirable for all children. For some children, a temporary period in some form of provision may be a solution—perhaps a period of catching up, a period of adjustment or a period of being supported. For some children, a permanent statement of needs will be required. For some, a specific range of equipment or a style of teaching may be the solution.

Much has been said today about the ways in which we can deal with problems, but we have not heard much about styles of teaching. Some children, particularly those with mild learning difficulties, benefit a great deal from being taught in a slightly different way. I am thinking especially of children with dyslexia, who could stay in the mainstream, with the right support—possibly technical equipment such as a laptop in the classroom or, for very young children, learning to draw with a finger in sand. Such a solution gives them a multi-sensory experience that helps them to learn.

We need to consider a range of different ways in which children can be taught. Learning to write with a finger in sand is not the most expensive way in which education can be delivered, so money is not always the issue. We need to use our collective resources and our imagination to find out what is best for each child. I do not want a one-size-fits-all education system, and that is not proposed in the Bill.

A one-size-fits-all education system would certainly not help children who suffer from ADHD. The condition is hugely misunderstood and has a wide range of effects on children. It has a huge effect on almost all the families of those children. Some children with a mild form of ADHD present almost no problems at all. Parents are often told that the problem is simply bad parenting, and that if they took control, their children would be better behaved.

A multidisciplinary approach is needed. The children whom I have met with their parents display such a wide range of problems that labelling those children as hyperactive, naughty, disruptive, behaviourally poor or not paying attention in class does nothing for them, and does not recognise the stress and strains that the condition causes for families. We must find out how early we can identify needs. That applies to almost all special needs, but particularly to children with ADHD.

Sometimes a doctor identifies the problem. With MRI scanning, the effect on the brain can be identified quite early. However, I recently met a young man who is about to go into secondary education. He was diagnosed as suffering from ADHD and is being treated with ritalin, but has not had a statement of needs of any kind. Because he can reach a certain level of attainment in his classroom, the rest of his needs are being ignored. Teachers say that he is coping, but he can do better than coping.

Parents of such a child say that they struggle to pay for extra tuition in the evening, work hard with the child with his homework, and that the family is crumbling under the strain of trying to cope with the child educationally. None of that is taken into account under the current system. That must change. The Bill should not allow children to carry on coping, when they could be achieving. It should maximise the potential of everyone.

Those are views that I have heard from Opposition Members, so I am surprised that we cannot find some agreement and some way of co-operating to take the matter forward. No one claims that the Bill is the be-all and end-all—the end of the process of dealing with special educational needs. That would be a disappointment, because it should be a devolving process that includes everyone, not least the children and the parents. If we refuse to give the Bill a Second Reading because there are flaws in it, and because it does not go far enough, that sends out a strange message to my constituents, who have grave concerns about children who are still waiting for their statements.

[Kali Mountford]

Will we deny those children the resources that they need? We can argue quite properly about whether the resources are sufficient and whether they are being spent in the right way, but let us not argue that nothing should be done. That would be a bizarre response to the moving stories that we heard today about children's specific needs. I am thinking especially of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), who is not in his place. I was moved to learn that children in Tewkesbury are suffering as he described, and that Gloucestershire council has not been able to respond to their needs. I hope that Kirklees council is listening carefully to the debate and learning from it.

When we go out and listen to parents, we will hear some who say that their children have had a good experience at school. Those parents will ask us to ensure that the special needs school is not closed, but adapted and made more useful. Can we find a better way for pupils in such a school to link with mainstream education? Perhaps we can create a better path through education. The school that I have in mind is Lydgate school, which has good links with both primary and secondary schools and with further education. We could do even more. That school could serve as a model for special needs education and links with mainstream education and with the community.

The solution does not have to be the closure of existing schools and the building of new ones. One solution might be to adapt existing schools. Less successful schools that cannot deliver the sort of education that we want may have to be replaced with new schools. I hope that both solutions will be available in Kirklees, and that we will listen to both sets of parents—those who say that we need a new school and those who want to keep the schools that we have. It is possible to compromise and find solutions to suit everybody. Councillor Smithson has taken that approach, and I commend him for it. I commend also the parents who have fought so hard to keep the education that is appropriate for their children.

The Bill is about finding the appropriate response to the needs of children and parents. It should not be about a cash reduction in spending, which is what some people think that we mean when we speak about reducing places. It is mischievous and misguided to lead people into believing that that is what the Bill is about or to suggest that it ensures that no children will have their special educational needs met in a specialist sector. The multidisciplinary approach that I believe to be necessary for children such as those with ADHD requires links with the health authority, social services and housing providers, as well as with education.

For children with ADHD in my constituency, I want to give credit to the National Children's Centre, which is located in Huddersfield, to Huddersfield university and to doctors at St. Luke's hospital. They have all been working with the council to produce an integrated approach for the needs of children with ADHD. I agree with Opposition Members that people do not have special needs only while they are in school, at home or out in the community. People's special needs encompass their whole lives, which is why an integrated, all-encompassing approach seems the right one to adopt. I believe that the Bill sets us well along the way to achieving that target.

8.30 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I congratulate the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) on a contribution that was obviously well informed. Clearly, she takes a keen personal interest in the matter. For my part, I should like to declare an interest, as I am married to a teacher who teaches children with severe learning difficulties. Whenever I am at home, the joy, achievement and frustrations of the Pear Tree school at Kirkham, about which I shall say more in a moment, fill our house. On Sunday, we had the pleasure of looking after one of the school's pupils who came home after a school concert in the outskirts of Preston which was attended by teachers. It was a joy to see what the school had done for that young man.

Labour Members have made many critical remarks about the amendment. The title of the Bill states that it is intended

"to make further provision against discrimination, on grounds of disability, in schools and other educational establishments; and for connected purposes."

I have not heard my hon. Friends say anything to make me believe that we do not support the principal purpose of the Bill. In another place, Baroness Blackstone said:

"All children have a right to an appropriate education that affords them the opportunity to achieve their personal potential."

She went on to say that

"where parents want more specialist provision, their wishes should be listened to."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 December 2000; Vol. 620, c. 635.]

Those words seem entirely compatible with our amendment, which states that we want the Bill to contain provision to

"explicitly give priority to the special educational needs of the child".

Nobody disagrees with this aim or has suggested that it should not be our principal objective. However, as the amendment points out, the Bill

"contains no mechanism for safeguarding a viable choice for parents between types of school."

The reason that Opposition Members have criticised the Bill was reflected in the comments of hon. Members who pointed out that the philosophy that underpins the changes in special education, such as the move towards a more inclusive regime, has caused much concern and worry among people with good experience of special schools. The hon. Member for Colne Valley spoke about the review that is being conducted by her local authority. A similar review is occurring in Lancashire, where there is considerable anxiety about the threat that it carries with it. I believe that one London authority has already eliminated all its special schools—

Mr. Boswell: Newham.

Mr. Jack: People have seen what can happen. There may be good reasons for what happened in Newham, and I do not want to debate that specific case, but people are worried.

Mr. Berry: What does the right hon. Gentleman believe would be achieved if the amendment were agreed to and the House declined to give the Bill a Second Reading? What would happen next?

Mr. Jack: If the Bill were not given a Second Reading, we would be the Government. We would not have introduced a Bill containing such measures in the first place. The hon. Gentleman has a selective memory. I seem to remember that the previous, Labour Opposition often tabled amendments to good Bills. That is the only mechanism that Her Majesty's Opposition can use to register a point of principle about a Bill. He shakes his head. I am sorry if my comments are inconvenient to his argument, but I reiterate that we are simply registering a point of principled disagreement about an aspect of the Bill and are not objecting to Second Reading itself.

Mr. Boswell: My right hon. Friend may recall that we also tabled a reasoned amendment on Second Reading of the Learning and Skills Bill—the Act of 2000—which was also introduced in the other place. Although I make no presumption as to our actions after this evening, I remind the House that we did not vote against that Bill on Third Reading: we abstained. We had reservations, we expressed those reservations and, to some extent, they were met.

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. To conclude my remarks to the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), were we lucky enough to win the vote and were the Government to remain as committed to the Bill as they say they are, they would reintroduce it in a modified form that we could all support. No doubt the thesis behind our amendment will be discussed in Committee, but to try to label us as being against making further progress is wrong. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Kingswood should not laugh at us, because some of us speak with passion and a degree of understanding of the subject, just as he did. We want to protect both the interests of the children and some remarkable educational establishments.

I put on record my appreciation of all teachers, particularly those in special schools. They not only deal with the nice side—the happy, smiling children at the Christmas concert—but clean up after an incontinent child, administer the valium when a child has a fit, and deal with the child who may have a violent outburst through no fault of his own. Such teachers are dedicated and sometimes their role can easily be forgotten as we take a broad-brush approach to these matters.

Teachers are ably assisted by many others from the health services. Certain provisions will create a need for more assistance from a further army of occupational therapists, speech therapists, physiotherapists and educational psychologists. All are in short supply, but that point was not dealt with by the Secretary of State.

May I take the House on a brief trip to Pear Tree school? I want to paint a picture by using not my words, but those in a recent Ofsted inspection report. Pear Tree is an all-age community school with 61 pupils on the roll, and Ofsted observed:

"Pupils love coming to school. A high proportion of lessons are simply inspirational".

How often does Ofsted describe a school as inspirational? The word "excellent" is used 18 times in the report, and only one lesson out of 72 observed was anything other than satisfactory. That is a tremendous testament to Mrs. Jean Cook, the head teacher, and her staff, in terms of what the school can achieve.

Parents speak about the school in remarkably glowing terms and Ofsted said that the leadership and management are excellent, that the teaching

"is often excellent and very good overall",

and that inclusion for pupils is very good. The school is complimented on its efforts to ensure that a

"growing number of pupils are successfully engaged in integration activities in primary schools and opportunities for pupils from other schools to work alongside Pear Tree pupils in their own school are regularly and successfully made."

That is what a centre of real excellence in the world of special education can deliver, but hon. Members should consider how Lancashire's review of special educational needs is being conducted. The council

"intends to maintain a vibrant special school sector within its overall policy of inclusion."

In the world of special schools, however, a growing paralysis is setting in. People are uncertain as to what will happen. The review has been inspired by the consultative exercise and, indeed, by the Bill. There is a great need to try to remove some of that uncertainty.

There may be an argument for special schools in Lancashire to be re-examined, but I am worried by the apparent assumption that more and more pupils will move to the mainstream, to the extent that many special schools such as Pear Tree might not be viable and there will be no choice for parents when they have to make up their minds about what is best for their children. When parents show their passionate support for Pear Tree school, as adjudged by their comments to Ofsted, they are speaking on behalf of the consumers of education—sadly, some of their children cannot articulate their feelings themselves. Those parents know the tremendous contribution that Pear Tree can make.

What worries me about the Bill is the provision on guidance to parents to enable them to make up their minds about what is right for their child. Will the Minister comment more specifically on clause 2, which refers to local education authorities making arrangements to provide parents with information on SEN matters? Who will provide sufficiently dispassionate advice to enable parents to make their minds up?

Parents are not a homogeneous commodity. Some of the parents whom I have had the pleasure of dealing with at Pear Tree are articulate, well resourced and remarkable people, and will fight to the last for what is right for their child. Some children come from fractured homes where there may be only one parent and the child does not always get the attention that he or she deserves because there are many siblings and the family does not have the resources. Who will explain the arguments in an understandable and dispassionate way so that a proper choice can be made? There needs to be a debate so that we can avoid any stigmatisation, but we must also ensure that the right advice is given to the parents of a child with special educational needs so that a proper choice can be made to meet that child's needs.

Mr. Willis: I have listened carefully to the passionate and cogent argument that the right hon. Gentleman has put. How is it compatible with the policy of members of his Front-Bench team—of getting rid of local education authorities and taking away that plank of advocacy which has hitherto been the central role of the LEA on behalf of the very children to whom he has rightly referred?

Mr. Jack: As the hon. Gentleman may have observed, there is more than one source of advice. The Government point to the role of the voluntary sector as a possible source of help. We are debating the Bill in the context of the present arrangements, to which my remarks are directed.

There is an omission in the Bill. What has saddened me more than anything is the fact that, after hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of effort has been put into enabling children to come out of Pear Tree with every possible resource at their disposal to enhance their further living, they then face a real problem that is not dealt with by the Bill—it does not say what is supposed to happen next.

I have known many cases of children who have found it difficult to go into training, employment or, more importantly, the specialist institutions that provide further training, nurture, succour, education and comfort for the children who come from Pear Tree school. One faces an enormous battle to give those children the opportunity to derive benefit from the investment that has been made in them by the Pear Tree schools of this world. Lancashire county council often fights against providing resources for those children. If they do not get those resources, all our efforts to improve special education, whether in mainstream or special schools, will be wasted.

The university sector has not so far been covered in the debate. I received from the university of Lancaster a copy of the minutes of a meeting of its court held on 10 February. It was supportive of the Bill, but said that it could be improved by

"including a definition of disability which adequately covers all those with an impairment which may affect their education. For example, a student with dyslexia may be able to concentrate for a short period of time but will need modifications when taking a three-hour exam".

I should be grateful for the Minister's assurance that Lancaster university, as well as others, will be contacted, so we can be sure that its observations on the way these powers can be strengthened further will be taken fully into account.

Many of us speak passionately and with some knowledge about special education. The most important thing is to keep the child at the centre of our arguments; but I hope that the Bill will not lead to a lessening of choice or to any diminution of the resources devoted to caring for the many children who find it difficult to give us their own views, and for whom we therefore have a huge responsibility.

8.45 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) indeed spoke with passion. He also spoke with great eloquence, and with first-hand knowledge of the issues. Let me simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman. If the Opposition support the principle of the Bill—as they have said they do—and if they also feel that the Bill needs further amendment, they should surely vote for it on Second Reading, try to amend it in Committee and, if they fail to amend it satisfactorily at that stage, decide whether to vote for Third Reading.

It strikes me as foolish for the Opposition to break the all-party consensus that has been built up, not just in both Houses but among all the organisations that have worked together on the Bill. I ask them to reconsider, even at this eleventh hour. By all means let them fight for their amendments in Committee, and then make a decision on Third Reading, but I urge them not to divide the House tonight.

I agree with many members of other parties who have spoken about the importance of special schools. I support such schools. There are many excellent special schools in my constituency; a number of my constituents attend them, are flourishing, and would flourish only in those schools. Nothing in the Bill undermines special schools, but the Opposition amendment would undermine them. Some local education authorities would undoubtedly use it as a cop-out. It would enable them to keep children out of mainstream schools when it was inconvenient for children to be in such schools because the authorities had not made sufficient provision. It would also enable some LEAs not to put children into special schools when that was their parents' wish, because they could not provide the necessary places and wanted to force the children into mainstream schools. If the Opposition are serious about supporting special schools—and I accept that they are, for very good reasons—I ask them to think carefully about their amendment.

We need to continue the dialogue about the Bill. One of the most powerful aspects of its progress is the fact that it has developed as far as it has as a result of dialogue. The Government were accused earlier of not listening, and of not being prepared to accept amendments. In whatever other contexts that may or may not be true, it is not true in the context of this Bill, which has been improved considerably in the House of Lords. The Government have listened, and the Secretary of State said earlier that he was prepared to go on listening if we continued the dialogue.

I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on autism. I would not presume to speak for the group tonight, but my experience of working with it, the people whom I have met and the organisations with which I have been able to discuss the issues have given me some ideas. Before relaying the concerns of autistic people and the organisations that look after them, however, I want to tell the House a story about a child with special needs—not autistic—whom I encountered about three weeks ago, when visiting a mainstream primary school in my constituency. It was one of those mainstream primary schools that were built about 30 years ago. I shall not name it, because the individual concerned might then be identifiable, and the privacy of that person should be respected. The school is in a dreadful state and essentially needs to be replaced. I was visiting to see the damage that had been done to it recently and to talk to the head teacher about the campaign to renew it.

Inside the school hall, there was a little girl who looked very much like my own daughter. She was about six years old and had long, curly hair. She was jumping on a trampoline with the help of a learning assistant, who was holding her hand. The little girl was counting each time she jumped, and, every time she reached the number five, she would fling herself high into the air. She was laughing as she jumped, and her laughter was absolutely infectious and filled the hall.

I continued my tour with the head teacher. When I returned to the hall, the little girl was running across it, still laughing and giggling. She would run back and forth

and the learning assistant would catch her and then set her free again. As she ran past me, I realised that she had no eyes.

That little girl is in a mainstream school. I suspect that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is the only hon. Member who knows how much guts it must take for that six-year-old to run across a hall with no one there to guide her and no idea of what is in the hall. My right hon. Friend is probably the only hon. Member who has experienced anything remotely like that.

That little girl has so much guts that, if we give her the support she needs, she could achieve anything. As I said, she is being supported in a mainstream primary school, where she is able to fulfil herself. At some point, however, she will have to make the transition to a secondary school. After that, she will have to make the transition to a sixth form, and then to higher education. Each of those transitions could be a huge obstacle for her, but I believe that she can do anything. We have to give her that chance. It is up to us—the House, her local education authority, her parents and her teachers—to give her that chance.

A few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was reported in the newspapers as saying that he did not think he would ever be Prime Minister because the country was not ready for a blind Prime Minister. I disagree with him. I think that, when the present incumbent decides to give up the post, my right hon. Friend is one of several senior Ministers who would make an excellent Prime Minister.

I also believe that, if we give that little girl the support that she needs throughout her life, if that is the type of course that she decides to pursue, she, too, could make the transition—but only if, throughout her life, she has access to the type of education that is right for her. That is why we have to clear away obstacles and ensure that every mainstream school and every college is available to little girls like her.

The Bill identifies the need to remove obstacles. It says that the parents choice will be paramount. An additional caveat has also been included in the Bill—on the efficiency of education for other children. I admit that, if I had a magic wand, I would wave it and remove that caveat. The only caveat that I would leave in the Bill is the one concerning the primacy of parents' wishes.

Someone has to speak on behalf of the child. If we include caveats such as that proposed by the Opposition, on the particular needs of the child, the parents wishes will no longer be paramount and someone else will have to judge the weight to give to each caveat. The parents wishes will have to be subordinated to the judgment of another authority. Parents wishes are not perfect and some will need a lot of guidance to make choices. However, parents are the best hope we have because they know their children best.

The Bill is going in the right direction, and I hope that the Opposition will come to understand that. The Special Educational Consortium understands that. It says:

> "The Consortium believes that proposals contained in this Bill will dramatically improve the quality of education available for disabled pupils".

Many other organisations have a similar view; my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) quoted many of them. The National Autistic Society certainly has that view, and the society and the Special Educational Consortium want the Bill and seek no further amendment to it. They believe that the Bill can have a dramatic effect on the people whom they represent.

The Bill will be important for autistic people because of the duty to provide a mainstream place. Many people have quoted examples of how a mainstream place can be important. The National Autistic Society has identified a girl of average ability with autism who was excluded from mainstream primary schools because the teachers said that her problems were too great. Yet a secondary school was prepared to help her, with a dedicated team that was prepared to look after her needs. She made a great transition to that secondary mainstream school, and has now independently gone on to art college. That shows that we sometimes close our eyes to the possibility of what can be achieved in mainstream schools.

The duty to plan is regarded by the National Autistic Society as a vital amendment in relation to children with autistic spectrum disorders. Two specific areas of planning that need to be considered are transition and staff training. The transition of a child between different schools is vital, and a child who is flourishing in one school must be allowed the opportunity to flourish in the next school.

One example of good practice is Blackpool local education authority, where school support assistants are trained to make transition plans for pupils. An example from the authority is that of an autistic boy who was identified as needing to use public transport to get to his secondary school. The school support assistants made plans to introduce him to public transport and make sure that he could use it to make the transition.

On staff training, an example of which I am aware is that of a little girl who was in a mainstream primary school. She was starting to become disruptive when all the children were sitting around for story-telling and reading. The reason, it was worked out, was that because the child was autistic, she needed a fixed place in the circle. Because she was not given a fixed place, she became uncomfortable and disruptive. The staff realised what was going on and put a red carpet tile down, explaining to her that whenever the class was sitting in a circle, she would sit on the red carpet tile. After that, there was no more trouble from her because she had her place and understood what was necessary. That sort of staff training is vital if we are to introduce autistic children into mainstream schools.

We have to look at teaching strategies. Classes must have visual structures and a clarity of purpose. The objectives of the lesson must be set out so that autistic children can understand them. They will then learn much better and feel more comfortable.

If we are going to plan, we must understand how many people we are planning for. So far as autism is concerned, we still have no real idea. The Government have started to recognise the need to work out how many autistic children there are, but we need to speed up that process. A few decades ago, it was assumed that only four people in 10,000 were autistic. In the 1970s, that figure was raised by studies that suggested that 20 people in 10,000 were autistic. By 1993, the estimate was 71 in 10,000, and the National Autistic Society currently estimates that 91 people in 10,000 are autistic. Recent studies suggest that one person in 175 is autistic.

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

Moreover, there has been an increase in the number of pupils who are now considered to be autistic, and perhaps one in eight pupils with a special need are now thought to be autistic. That matter must be addressed, or planning will be impossible.

Early years education for autistic children must also be looked at. If children up to the age of two can be identified as autistic, we can start giving them intensive help, with the result that they will do very much better in later life. However, we must be able to identify such children and to ensure that early years education is available for them. The people who help in the schools must also be able to employ the techniques needed to identify autistic people.

As has been said, the Bill is a milestone. It will dramatically improve the lives of autistic children and make a huge difference to children of all disabilities. At this eleventh hour, I appeal to the Opposition not to break the huge consensus that has built up in support of the Bill. I urge them to step back from the position that they have adopted, and think again.

I hope that the Opposition will work with the Government in Committee to try and get the amendments that they want into the Bill. However, the important thing is that we all carry on working together to deliver what is a vital measure for disabled people.

9.1 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I rise to support the reasoned amendment tabled in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. I do so because I am anxious about certain parts of the Bill—my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) gave a fair account of the problems involved.

All hon. Members are united in our desire to give all our children the best possible opportunity, regardless of whether they are disabled or have learning difficulties. It is interesting to reflect on how legislation is first brought to the House. Does it come as a result of the work of pressure groups, or is it based on the advice of civil servants? Does it derive from the experiences of individual Members of Parliament? Some hon. Members are disabled, and many had special learning difficulties when they were children. When I was a small child, I had to go to a speech therapist for three years, reciting the phrase "how now, brown cow" and so on. I am very grateful for the help that I received, and not at all ashamed.

It is on the record—and I am sure that the Minister will accept this—that the Secretary of State did not entirely enjoy his experience at school. My brother-in-law is blind, and my wife's sister has very little sight. They are about the same age as the Secretary of State, and went to a school similar to the one that he attended. However, their experiences are different from his. He has all the power, and they have no power at all.

I want to share with the House the practical effects of the Bill. When my noble Friends Lady Blatch and Lord Baker spoke in the other place, they were very concerned about how the Bill would be funded. Lord Baker thought that the costs would be astronomical in educational terms, and felt that the Government had not estimated the financial consequences of what they were doing. The care in the community policy was very expensive, as the House knows, and I believe that the Bill will also turn out to be very expensive.

At the start of the debate, hon. Members asked whether anyone could point to an organisation that was not in favour of the Bill. Given that other hon. Members wish to speak, I shall not spend time on that point, but there are any number of organisations—

Mr. Berry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Amess: I will not give way, as that would be unfair to other hon. Members. I want to tell the House that there are organisations that have expressed concerns about the Bill, among them the Royal National Institute for Deaf People. The letter from the National Association of Head Teachers, which has been referred to, shows that that association, too, has reservations, which it outlines.

I want to share with the House what has happened in Southend. The Liberal-Labour council, driven by the Government's intention to develop their policy of inclusion, decided to consult. The council's proposals have upset parents and children alike. I went round all the schools, and not one parent wrote saying "David, for goodness' sake, we must close these special schools and put the children into mainstream schools."

My constituency has magnificent schools, including Lancaster, Kingsdown, St. Christopher, Fairways special needs unit and Priory school, which, along with the school mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde, also received a magnificent Ofsted report. In the neighbouring constituency we have St. Nicholas school. I pay tribute to all the teachers for the magnificent job that they do.

The chairman of the education committee, Councillor Mrs. Sally Carr, said to me that this was a fine policy, but did the Government realise that, perhaps uniquely, there was a teacher crisis in Southend? We do not have the number of teachers that we need in our secondary and junior schools. One need only look at *The Times Educational Supplement*, which advertises a huge number of vacancies, to realise that there is a dire shortage of teachers. Is it any wonder, considering the Government's policy outlined in circular 10/99? There are three cases in Essex of children who have been caught with drugs on school premises. Government circular 10/99 has enabled the parents to appeal against the exclusion of such pupils. The Government's policy is that if children bring drugs into school their parents can appeal against their expulsion and they can be taken back. Children can be permanently excluded only if they are actually selling drugs on school premises.

That has obviously undermined a number of head teachers, who have quite rightly expelled children caught with drugs on school premises. However, as a result of Government circular 10/99, whose potential consequences the Government presumably fully understood when they issued it, the good reputation of those heads has been completely undermined.

I spoke this afternoon to Mr. Peter Brown from Essex Mencap about the Bill. He said that everyone welcomes inclusion in so far as it means assisting people with learning disabilities to access community facilities where it is their wish to do so. Those are not my words; they are the words of Mr. Peter Brown, who also said that although

politically correct thinking says that the learning disabled should use community facilities, in fact in many cases they prefer to associate with people who are also learning disabled. Mr. Brown drew an analogy: people want to play tennis with others on their level, not necessarily with professionals. Mr. Brown said that of course Mencap was against discrimination and that it was not against the learning disabled having access to community facilities. However, he was wary of the danger of pushing people with learning disabilities to do something that they were not necessarily comfortable with for the sake of political correctness.

The head teacher of one of our excellent special schools said that if we are to begin the process of inclusion, we must ensure that mainstream schools have the right resources and staff to provide services.

I presume that Labour Members are putting it around that the Conservative party is opposed to helping children with learning difficulties and disabled children. However, we all know that that is not so. As parliamentarians, we want to be party to good, sensible legislation, so we should scrutinise measures.

I salute all those teachers who are working so hard. We have a tremendous teacher shortage at present. It is all very well for the Government to say that this Bill is wonderful and that it will help all our children, but it will fail if it is not carefully thought through and if we do not have the resources to back it up.

9.10 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Like many Members, I welcome the Bill. I, too, have received a large number of representations from organisations in Scotland; they also welcome the Bill and hope that it will pass speedily through this place so that it can be enacted before a general election comes along.

I have always felt strongly about the subject of the Bill—it is very dear to my heart. Apart from my first four and a half years and the past four years since my election to this place, I have spent all my life in education. It is a pity that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is not in his place—although perhaps I am glad. Earlier, he was jumping up and down heckling my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

I spent a long time in education not because I was a slow learner, but because I became a teacher. I felt passionately about that. However, I almost did not become a teacher, because in 1973, when I applied to the college of education in Aberdeen, I was told that I could not go there. Why? Because I had an encroaching disability, and people with disabilities could not be teachers. I suffered discrimination.

Had my disability been slightly more advanced while I was at school, I might not have been able to attend a spanking new school in 1970, when I was in the fourth year of secondary school. At that time, I was still walking, although my legs were beginning to break and so on. Had I been in a wheelchair, I would not have been able to go to that school, but would have had to go somewhere else. As I lived in a rural community, it would probably have been several miles away—possibly in Dundee, 26 miles away. Thirty years ago, that was a long distance. In 1970, no one even thought that someone in a wheelchair could attend mainstream school.

I felt passionately about the fact that education was left out of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. That was a glaring omission and I am glad that the Government are putting it right.

In my comments, I had intended to concentrate on part II of the Bill, because its anti-discrimination provisions are relevant to Scotland; part I deals with special educational needs and does not apply to Scotland. However, as I have been called towards the end of the debate and shall perhaps be the last Labour Back Bencher to speak before the winding-up speeches, I want to correct some of the impressions given by Conservative Members.

I have looked carefully at the Bill. Nothing in it suggests the end of special schools, and no Labour Member has said that. I, more than most people, appreciate that, due to advances in medical science, an increasing number of babies and young children survive and live with severe disabilities who would have died in previous generations. They will need an enormous amount of support if they are to be educated. Sometimes that will be in special schools, but I find that, in Scotland, they are frequently educated in special units of mainstream schools. The situation may be different in England and Wales.

Those children do not necessarily follow a mainstream curriculum. Indeed, they may not be very integrated with the mainstream. They go through the same school gate, but they attend a specially equipped unit. They often mix with the other pupils at interval time and lunch time, but there is a special curriculum that they can access. In some cases, they mix and match: sometimes they dip into the mainstream curriculum; at other times, they are taught in the special unit. I taught at a school where there was such a unit. Nothing in the Bill outlaws any of that provision.

The Opposition want the Bill to be passed, but if their amendment is accepted, the Bill will not receive its Second Reading and it will fall. Thus many parents who want their children to receive mainstream education will be denied it, as happens now. Parents who want special education for their children will not be denied it under the Bill, but if it is not passed, plenty of children—perhaps younger versions of myself—will be denied access to the school of their choice, because the local authority or the school can say that it is too expensive to put in the necessary ramps or lift, or that it is too difficult to find a way round the barriers that exist in the school. I therefore hope that the Opposition will think again and reconsider the Bill.

I had intended to concentrate on part II, and I shall do so now. Much has been said about whether the Government listen. I can attest, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), that the Government have listened to those representing the Scottish dimension. RNIB Scotland and Children in Scotland were concerned that the model of English special educational needs provision would be used as a delivery mechanism in Scotland. They felt that that might be inappropriate if rolled out in Scotland.

The Bill is interesting because it is, I think, the first of its kind—it will put the devolution settlement to the test. We are legislating on a reserved matter—anti-discrimination legislation—but it will be applied to a devolved matter, education. The test is to find out whether the right relationships exist between the House and the

[Miss Anne Begg]

Scottish Parliament, and between the officials at the Department for Education and Employment and those at the Scottish Executive.

Initially, charities in Scotland, such as Children in Scotland and RNIB Scotland, were concerned that perhaps the relationship was not right, but many of their anxieties were laid to rest after a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), who has responsibilities for disabled people. They were anxious about two matters: the code of practice and the planning duties.

I shall deal first with the planning duties. The Bill states:

"The duty to produce an accessibility strategy or plan will not extend to Scotland."

That rang alarm bells at the charities, as they thought, "Well, if the Bill is not going to extend to Scotland, LEAs will have no duty to provide proper access and auxiliary help." However, that is the devolved element of the Bill, so it will be up to the Scottish Executive to produce their version of that provision to ensure that the accessibility strategy is in place. There will not be a planning duty, because that is not how such things are done in Scotland.

It is interesting that the Scottish Minister who will be in charge of implementing those provisions is the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Aberdeen, South—a Liberal Democrat, working in a Labour-led coalition. I spoke to him yesterday, and he is very well aware of the issues. I am sure that the Scottish children's charities will be in touch with him to ensure that, if the Bill is passed, the time scale for implementation in Scotland is in line with that in England, and that that is done speedily and timeously, as I hope it will be in England.

I seek the Minister's assurance that the Government will continue to work with Ministers in the Scottish Executive and their officials. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun has already paid tribute to the officials at the Department for Education and Employment. I should like to add my thanks to them and the Minister for listening and for taking those concerns seriously.

I appreciate that, whether in Scotland or England and Wales, there must be a rolling programme within the strategic development plan that will make schools accessible. I understand that we cannot do everything at once. We cannot suddenly make all schools accessible to every child overnight, and the needs that should be met first are those in schools with children who have real needs; they should be foremost on any plan. However, I seek an assurance from the Minister that we shall try to speed up that process to make it as rapid as possible. It is not just pupils who use schools. Parents have to visit them for parents evenings, and I hope that there are more disabled teachers than there were when I left the profession four short years ago. I hope that I will not have to go back into the profession—although I must say that that would not be a problem for me. I really enjoyed my time in it, but "Not just yet, please" is my plea to my constituents in Aberdeen, South.

Parents, teachers, relatives and visitors all use schools. When I was a teacher, I used to coach the debating team in my school and I had enormous problems getting into other schools when I visited them with the debating team. I would not like to tell the House how many flights of stairs I had to be carried up to reach debating halls. It was ridiculous and no teacher would have wanted that to happen, but that was often the only way in which I could get to the halls.

Matters are improving, and such problems do not exist in every school and local authority. Things have moved on dramatically in 30 years, and there are examples of good practice, but the time has come to legislate to ensure that those problems that still exist are properly addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun also referred to the need for a Scottish code of practice. I reiterate that point because it is important. The code of practice is not just about physical adjustments, as the example of Julia shows. She arrived in Arbroath aged 11 with her mother, having gone to special schools throughout her primary career. Her mother wanted to put her into mainstream education, so she looked for a secondary school and Julia arrived at the school in which I taught before I was elected.

Julia had severe cerebral palsy. Although she had good oral skills, she could not move much of her body. She had an electric wheelchair and, with an auxiliary, she was happy at school. Her mother told me that, for the first time in Julia's life, people would say hello to her and ask her how she was when she went down the street on a Saturday morning. She had never been part of a community before. Attending school was good for Julia and good for the other children. The worst scallywag in the class bought her a box of chocolates for her birthday. We think, but are not sure, that he bought them; they came in a brown paper parcel.

The interesting point about Julia's story is not that she went to a mainstream school, but how she ended up at the school in which I taught. There are two schools in Arbroath: the one in which I taught is a 1960s monstrosity with glass, many different levels and lots of stairs; the other is a brand-new school that is properly adapted with wheelchair access everywhere. Julia lived in the catchment area of the new school, so why did she end up at the school with worse access?

The school was not a problem for me. I was an English teacher on the ground floor and the pupils came to me, but there were problems in the school. Julia came to my school because, when her mother visited the two schools, she found that their attitudes were totally different. One said, "Oh, I'm not sure how we can cope with that; that might be quite difficult", while the other said, "Yes, I see that that might be a problem, but I am sure that we shall find a solution." It found a solution and Julia was able to get upstairs even though there was no lift. The local education authority bought a brand new, super-duper, stair-climbing wheelchair. It cost £6,000 and it belonged not to Julia but to the LEA. However, that piece of lateral thinking got Julia round the school relatively cheaply. The solution was certainly much cheaper than installing lifts. I echo the opening remarks of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State: that was seeing a way round the problem rather than seeing the problem.

Education is the basis for ensuring that young people are given equality of opportunity. It is crucial if we are to raise their expectations and aspirations. We must give them goals to aim for, hope for the future and the opportunity to realise their potential.

Young people with disabilities need those opportunities as much as their peer group. If the education system discriminates against them, that discrimination will follow them throughout their lives, denying them the chance to succeed and to be all that they can be. Discrimination has no place in education, which is why I am pleased that the Labour Government will outlaw it. I make a last minute plea to the Opposition: please withdraw your amendment. Some matters can be argued in Committee, and it would be inappropriate to vote against Second Reading tonight.

9.25 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The debate has been fascinating and was enlivened by a range of distinguished contributions. I sat through nearly all the proceedings missing only, I think, the speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne). I found myself sympathising with many of the points made, not least—if I may say so without invidiousness—those by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg). There has been a leitmotif—I do not know why—that has cast the Opposition in the role of the bad guys because we have dared to move a reasoned amendment. The hon. Lady will appreciate that it is outwith my power to bestow a last minute change of heart, even at her blandishment. Perhaps the usual channels will reflect on the possibility that were we not to proceed with our reasoned amendment, they might drop their programme motion.

The implication is that we are not acting in good faith, yet the Government are requiring us to conclude the Bill's consideration in Committee by 5 April. I do not think that we can have a full discussion about the proper issues unless we put down a marker of dissent and then persist in that dissent by tabling amendments in Committee. Incidentally, that is the role of the Opposition and part of the democratic process. I will award a small prize—not, of course, a pecuniary one—to any Labour Member who is prepared to tell me when the Government have been defeated in the past four years as a result of an Opposition amendment on Second Reading. If they are as worried as they say, it makes me wonder whether they are beginning to run scared of the fate that they will shortly meet.

The debate has been good natured, for all the noises off. It has been informed by passion and commitment on both sides of the Chamber to the cause of special education in its widest sense. In general, hon. Members who contributed felt for children with special educational needs, their parents and—this was eloquently put—their teachers and those who resource them.

The Opposition approach the Bill with three general principles in mind. First, there

"is no substantial disagreement . . . with the broad objectives of the Bill."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 December 2000; Vol. 620, c. 645.]

Those were the words of my noble Friend Baroness Blatch on Second Reading. That has been our consistent position, and it remains so.

Secondly, I have no objection in principle to inclusion as such. There are plenty of excellent examples of inclusion in secondary schools and some rural primary schools in my constituency. I have also seen some good examples of what one might loosely call blended provision. For example, a primary school near my constituency, to which some of my constituents send their children, perfectly blends dedicated special provision with other provision. If we were really in the business of the third way, we could follow that example rather than others that I might suggest another time.

Looking at the legislative framework, I consider the Education Act 1996, which consolidated measures and is the basis on which the Bill amends provisions. It reflects legislation that I helped to pass through the House when I had just become a Minister late in 1992. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) will remember debating it. Looking back, I was surprised to find it is a little stronger on inclusion than I remembered it to be. We should say that there is no ideological objection to inclusion, nor is there any objection in principle to the extension of disability rights. Much has been said about why education was not incorporated in the 1996 Act. There were difficulties, including those with resources, which have cropped up in other areas, and the attitude of vice-chancellors, who might not have taken kindly to what they saw as an imposition on their territory and academic freedom.

Leaving aside the judgment that was made at that time, we can say that for a variety of reasons, such as good leadership in the Disability Rights Commission, which we also support, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has bedded down and shown that it can work without unduly disturbing consequences, so this is an appropriate time to extend it to education. However, enough has been said tonight to make it clear that even if the Bill is not party politically controversial, there is a good deal to discuss and argue about.

I, too, met the Gloucestershire parents and children from Alderman Knight school in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), and I realise that they feel very strongly. I understand that 32,000 people have signed a petition to the LEA in protest at what is being proposed for that school.

There is controversy, and the place to deal with it is here. Clearly, the Bill has already been improved by detailed scrutiny in another place. In fact, if I may mix my metaphors, the walls of Jericho fell without a shot having been fired because the Government withdrew the objectionable proposal to replace the word "specify" in the proposed code on statements with the words "set out". We felt that the original proposed change was unacceptable, and the Government withdrew the proposal before it was ever debated.

A good deal has been done by noble Lords from different parties to put the Bill right, but that does not absolve us—or, dare I say, with respect, Ministers—from the task of taking it through Committee in this place and considering it properly on its merits. It is in that spirit that we tabled the reasoned amendment on which we will invite the House to divide. Principally, it highlights our concern that the educational interests of the child should come first.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) said—I particularly noted this phrase—coercive social inclusion could be counter-productive. The principle of putting the child first is surely unexceptionable in all quarters of the House and

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

occasionally even begins to stray into the speech of Ministers; yet that principle or caveat is apparently being deleted because it is alleged, even by the Special Educational Consortium, to which we have talked, to have damaged the interests of children. The idea that removing a right makes it easier to uphold that right is counter-intuitive. Even if we are wrong, the matter needs to be properly debated. We have all heard flip political statements, notably from current Ministers, in which the phrase, "I have no intention of" means "I will". In all events, we need to consider the apparent mismatch between principle and practice.

Our second concern relates to the implied agenda for tilting the balance of special education towards inclusion only. We believe that if parents and children are to exercise an informed choice, they need a range of providers in which to exercise that choice. If, for example, an LEA has closed all its special schools—a case in London was cited—there is simply no choice. An LEA in a rural, dispersed shire such as my own may have special schools grouped in inconvenient places that might be as much as 30 or 40 miles away from the residence of the child concerned, so there is no effective choice.

If the local education authority fights consistently in principle against referring pupils out of area, whether to maintained or, if appropriate, independent special schools, there is at best a restricted choice. Alternatively, an LEA could be driven—possibly by tacit resource complaints—to opt for inclusion on the cheap, with a fanfare of trumpets to say how modern it is being, but without proper resourcing or teacher training in mainstream schools.

Having commented earlier on the schools access initiative, I must point out that it is not only the capital side that matters, as the report has shown. The back-up with current expenditure and the resourcing of teachers and curriculum access also matter. If that proper resourcing cannot be provided, the choice left to parents is an unappealing one.

I am particularly concerned about reviews. When counties such as Gloucestershire, about which we have heard a great deal today, or my own county of Northamptonshire, which has given rise to a little apprehension, review their provision, they might be doing so not out of a genuine concern to reappraise, improve or—dare I say—modernise the pattern of provision. They might be following a hidden agenda.

The problem with hidden agendas is that we never know what they are until it is too late to do anything about them. Such a hidden agenda as I have described could reflect the fact that either the accountants or the ideologues have been sent in to wipe out the special schools. It would be welcome if Ministers could calm our fears, but those points will need careful examination before we can go out and say that, after all, it is all clear and there is no danger. However, I fear that there is danger, in some cases.

Beyond those issues, there is still a great deal more in the Bill to talk about. A matter that I have already raised implicitly was also raised in another place by my noble Friend Lord Baker of Dorking, who said eloquently, with the authority of an ex-Secretary of State, that there was a problem with resources. It is self-evident that if inclusion is to be properly resourced, it will be an expensive matter. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) spoke eloquently about that earlier.

Mr. Willis *indicated assent.*

Mr. Boswell: I note that the hon. Gentleman is now nodding in agreement with what I have said.

It is incontestable that the number of children with statements has risen sharply as a proportion of total pupil numbers. There has been an increase of about 25 per cent. over five years, compared with an overall increase of only 5 per cent. in pupil numbers during that time. The cost directly attributable to statements—only a small proportion of the overall cost of special needs—rose in the comparable period from £290 million annually to £370 million.

On the wider expenditure front, the Audit Commission has estimated that 15 per cent. of the total spend on education is allocated to special educational needs. Dr. John Marks, working on a wider definition, has suggested a spend of roughly double that percentage. In any event, we need greater transparency in the delivery of provision. We also need to ensure that the resources earmarked for special educational needs go through and end up with the children, about whom we all say we care most.

I shall not let this occasion pass without referring to the comments in the brief provided by the National Union of Teachers, which states:

"The positive measures in the Bill will only be successful if they are backed by adequate funding. The SEN provisions in the Bill are not without significant resource implications. The Union believes that the Government should audit all the costs involved in implementing"

those provisions. The NUT has also expressed concern about the need to obtain an assurance in the House of Commons

"that special schools have a continuing role and future."

It has been suggested that opposition to the Bill has disappeared. However, I must say in all seriousness to Ministers that there are still concerns about many points. Those concerns need to be raised and to be answered. With respect to the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South, I should not like the disability clauses to pass without further comment. I am not a real lawyer but a lawyer manqué, and have always taken a certain interest in human rights and judicial review issues.

It is remarkable and a little disturbing that, in a different context, the Royal National Institute for the Blind has pointed out that many thousands of cases under part II of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 have already been taken to tribunals, which are the recourse under that provision, but the number of cases involving breaches or alleged breaches of part III duties, although they cannot quite be counted on the fingers of one hand, are under 50, as they have to go to court. Having a background in further and higher education, I am disturbed by the fact that such students, although they have the same nominal rights as school pupils, have to take their cases to court, not the tribunal, as school students do.

The point is made even more sharply if we consider the case of identical twins with identical special educational needs who are over 16, the statutory school-leaving age. One might remain in school and avail himself of rights

which he could press at a tribunal; the other, after leaving school, might go to further education college and would have to assert his rights in court. That amounts to a functional discrimination which, in turn, may well find its way to the courts, when decisions and situations are well traced by legal experts.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): What would the hon. Gentleman do?

Mr. Boswell: With respect, the hon. Lady is a member of the Government, and she and her colleagues need to decide what they are going to do about those legitimate issues. They might even spend a little time in Committee explaining to us what they propose to do.

All those matters give rise to genuine concern among parents and others.

Mr. Levitt: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, even when it has the right to do so, the Disability Rights Commission prides itself on not going all the way to court and resolving cases before they reach court?

Mr. Boswell: The hon. Gentleman graciously allowed me to intervene twice during his speech, so I am ready to allow him to participate, even though time is short. He is aware that I am in close touch with the Disability Rights Commission. I admire very much the good sense of Bert Massie and the way in which the commission has set about its business. I am sure that litigation should be the last, not the first, recourse. However, once one starts granting legal rights, litigation will not be confined to the commission; the odd barrack room lawyer, who may have nothing to do with the commission, may wish to take a case to court and create difficulties. All I am asking, quite reasonably, is that Ministers think about the possibility and come up with some answers.

In conclusion, those matters all give rise to genuine concerns among parents; they cannot simply be shrugged off. In a moment, we are going on to debate a motion on the handling of the Bill. I fear that the House will hear from me again on that subject and I do not intend to rehearse my remarks here. All that I would say is that we owe it to parents, children and special education providers in this most sensitive of educational sectors to give the Bill—whatever its objectives, aspirations, and highly acceptable aspects, and however improved by a helpful definition of how the Secretary of State will approach statementing and how local authorities are to tackle it—proper consideration. We need to explore the concerns which we have expressed in good faith and to which others have added.

We need to be sympathetic to the case and need to handle it sensitively. We need common sense; in fact, we might say that we need sound sense, rather than soundbites. The children, for whom we are all concerned, deserve no less.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): We have had a useful and wide-ranging debate on the Bill. Many right hon. and hon. Members have used their considerable experience of and interest in the subject to make important and well-argued contributions, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) and for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), who are doughty campaigners on these matters. The hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) and the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) made thoughtful contributions, drawing on their expertise as former Ministers. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) made good use of his family links, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), in a moving and thoughtful speech, used her personal experience to good effect. Other hon. Members made important contributions, to which I shall refer in my response.

I am pleased that there has been general support from Government Members for the broad thrust of the Bill. However, I am disappointed that the Opposition will vote against the Bill. The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) seemed to suggest that because it is not possible for the Opposition to muster enough votes to defeat the Government, it somehow does not matter that the Opposition intend to vote against Second Reading. People outside who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood pointed out, are keen to see the Bill get through, will note the attitude of the Opposition this evening.

Through the Bill, we will give our attention to the needs of pupils with special educational needs and the rights of disabled pupils, students and adult learners to access education. To put that in context, one in five pupils will be identified as having a special educational need at some point in his or her school career. There are more than 1 million young people aged 24 and under who meet the definition of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. In addition, there are more than 60,000 adult learners with disabilities. Those are the people whom the Bill will benefit directly.

The Bill in its present form reflects the changes that we made after considering representations made to us and amendments tabled in another place. We believe that the Bill is better for that. As regards the operation of the new duties in the Bill, we are not interested in a dogmatic or a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, we are concerned with what works in practice. We want an inclusive education system that offers excellence and choice.

Opposition Members made much of their concern to safeguard the needs and interests of children with special educational needs. It was implied by several Opposition Members that the Government were not concerned about those needs. In fact, as several Government Members pointed out, the entire SEN framework supports the best interests of children. Our concern is that the requirement to recognise the needs of the child as a caveat in the inclusion clause has been gravely misused.

For example, a boy with a physical and hearing impairment was successfully included in a mainstream nursery school. When the time came for him to transfer to primary school, the local education authority directed him to a special school, miles away. The LEA said that a mainstream school would never be able to cope. It never considered what could be done to facilitate his continuing inclusion.

[Jacqui Smith]

The child's parents had to battle to persuade the LEA that a mainstream school could cope. After an appeal to the SEN tribunal, the boy was welcomed into a mainstream school, where he is thriving. The parents should not have had to fight for their child's inclusion. The retention of the "needs of the child" caveat would mean that children who could and should benefit from inclusion would continue to be denied a mainstream place.

Mr. Boswell: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. For the record, can she tell us whether that was under the present regime, where the "rights of the child" caveat is embodied? If the decision had been left to the LEA exclusively, would there have been a change? Is it not the case that the rights of the child were embodied and were eventually enforced by the tribunal, and that that effected the change in provision?

Jacqui Smith: No. The point is that the parents had to fight for the child to get into a mainstream school. We want a positive commitment to inclusion. Clause 1 is supported by the Special Educational Consortium, an umbrella for 250 organisations. It is also supported by the Royal National Institute for the Blind, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, Mencap and the National Autistic Society, even if it is not supported by the Opposition. I know to which of those bodies I would rather listen.

The Opposition have also suggested that the Bill prevents LEAs from funding independent placements, but that is completely wrong. The abilities and duties of LEAs in respect of funding such placements, which are set out in section 348 of the Education Act 1996, are specifically preserved by proposed new section 316A(3), which is contained in clause 1. They also argued that clause 1 would make it harder for parents whose children have statements to gain special school places. Again, that is simply untrue. We have always argued that one size does not fit all, which is why we keep signalling an important and continuing role for special schools.

Clause 1 strengthens the right of children with statements to obtain mainstream places and fully preserves parents' rights to object to mainstream provision. It does not make it harder for parents to gain special school places for children with statements. The Bill underlines the fact that parents' wishes should be listened to.

It has also been argued that the Bill is an attack on special schools. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, we want mainstream and special schools to work together and we see an important and continuing role for them. The overall size of the specialist sector has not reduced. Since 1996, it has remained broadly static and has catered for about 1.2 per cent. of children, or about 97,000 of them. Changes will continue to be made to ensure that provision reflects local circumstances and needs, as has always been the case.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Will the Under-Secretary give way?

Jacqui Smith: No; I am short of time.

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) spoke about the special school in his constituency. I am sorry that he chose to attack Ministers personally for not turning up at his meeting. I must tell him that I received his invitation only this morning. My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford), who has lobbied hard, will confirm my willingness to meet those concerned. The delegation that she brought to me represented a special school in her constituency, and I was happy to meet its members and discuss their concerns. I told them that we are committed to a buoyant and vibrant specialist sector, which explains why funding per pupil for maintained special schools has increased by 20 per cent. in real terms under the current Government. It is also why we have made available to non-maintained special schools direct grants, the standards fund, information and communications technology training, devolved formula funding, funding for teachers to pass thresholds and laptops. All that provision was not available under the previous Government.

The hon. Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) rightly raised the issue of resources. Of course, not everything needs money to change. Much of the change that is needed will be brought about by shifting attitudes, but resources are important, which is why the £500 more per pupil that the Government have put into schools and the increase in the standards fund from £55 million this year to £82 million next year are so significant. It also explains why the schools access initiative has increased to £220 million over the next three years. That comes on top of the general increase in capital spend, which has risen threefold on the amount that we inherited from the previous Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) spoke passionately about her constituents and has lobbied hard for investment in her constituency, so I am pleased that children in special and mainstream schools will see the benefit. We have made money available for excess in further and higher education. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced £25 million more for early years. We learned today that the Conservatives are still unclear about whether they will match our funding for those purposes. The reality of their policies is that the money that LEAs currently spend on placements in independent schools would not be safeguarded under their spending plans. We have also heard that they are unclear about their free schools policy. Having said that all the money for special educational needs would go to schools, we now hear that it would stay in the local authority. Presumably the sign on the SEN officer's door would be changed from "local education authority" to "local authority". The Conservatives cannot have it both ways: they cannot promise more money to schools and then do U-turns such as tonight's.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak raised important issues about early years education and my hon. Friends the Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) and for Aberdeen, South discussed Scottish Executive responsibilities and particular issues for Scotland. As they said, I have written to the Scottish Executive because it is for Scottish Executive Ministers to decide how to respond to the disability rights taskforce recommendation on the statutory duty to plan to increase access. I am sure that their call for quick action has been heard.

The codes of practice were also mentioned. The Bill will confer powers on the Disability Rights Commission to produce either Great Britain-wide codes, separate codes for England and Wales and for Scotland or Great Britain-wide codes with Scottish chapters. Although the education and legal systems in which the new duties will apply differ, the duties themselves will be the same. When my hon. Friends met the Under–Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), she made it clear that we would be careful about using experts from Scotland on the drafting groups for the code. There will be a GB-wide consultation and we shall consider separate chapters for Scotland.

The Bill will strengthen the SEN framework to improve the education services provided to children with SEN and their parents, and it will put right the previous Government's omission by removing the unjust exemption of education under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. No longer will an education provider be able to discriminate against a disabled pupil, student or adult learner on the ground of disability.

Education is the key to ensuring that everyone, regardless of individual needs and whatever their background, has the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Attitudes have shifted a long way from the days when disabled children often had little choice but to attend special schools or institutions and were frequently separated from their families and friends. Schools, colleges and universities are increasingly inclusive, but we are determined to maintain that progress and to support good work such as that which I saw last week at George Green's school in Tower Hamlets, which is an excellent example of a school where inclusion and high standards work together.

The school is unfazed by the diverse needs of the pupils it serves, including six who use wheelchairs and several with limited mobility, complex medical needs, severe communication difficulties and learning difficulties. The school's belief in inclusive education, like that of the Government, comes first. Everything else is then a challenge that can be surmounted. When that can-do ethos is combined with a strong focus on teaching and learning, visionary leadership and, increasingly, financial support from a Government who share its vision and are willing to invest in it, the result is a successful and popular school that achieves despite difficult circumstances.

The Bill and the Government's investment will ensure that many more schools can develop like George Green's and that many more children can benefit from what schools like it have to offer. As we said in our recent Green Paper, inclusion and equality of opportunity are an important part of our drive to promote higher standards. They represent the start of lifelong learning opportunities open to all, regardless of disability.

The Bill, which the Opposition oppose, demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that pupils, students and adult learners have the opportunity to meet their potential. It will ensure that we move one step closer to a society in which all are valued for what they can do, rather than judged for what they cannot, and I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 130, Noes 332.

Division No. 160] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Dr William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. James Gray.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Bailey, Adrian
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul

Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on second or third reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]* (Programme)

10.14 pm

Jacqui Smith: I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]*:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day it meets.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 5th April.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The programme motion proposes that the Standing Committee be brought to a conclusion on 5 April. We consider that to be a reasonable time, and we hope that the motion meets the Opposition's reasonable expectations. Although the exact time in Committee will of course depend on the Programming Sub-Committee, I can say that the Government do not intend to table further amendments to the Bill. Even Conservative Members will agree that the programme proposed should give ample time to consider a Bill of this size—43 clauses and eight schedules.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the Under-Secretary give way?

Jacqui Smith: There will be ample time for debate after I have spoken to the motion.

Hon. Members: Give way!

Mr. Speaker: Order. I would appreciate it if hon. Members did not shout at the Minister; that is an instruction.

Jacqui Smith: The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has shown no interest in the Bill up until now.

Mr. Hogg: Will the Under-Secretary give way?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is not going to give way.

Jacqui Smith: The right hon. and learned Gentleman will have ample opportunity to make his points after I have finished.

[Jacqui Smith]

We believe that the motion proposes ample time to consider a Bill of this size, whose principles are generally supported by Members on all sides of the House—even if some vote against them—and by voluntary organisations.

I commend the motion to the House.

10.16 pm

Mr. Boswell: My immediate reaction to that speech was, frankly, "Oh dear." I must confess a certain liking for the late Frankie Howerd, a fine comedian—particularly on television. Some of the more mature of our colleagues may remember him appearing in what might loosely be called the Roman follies. He always built up the case in the forum and then, at a certain point, he would turn aside, remember himself and say, "And now, the prologue." Tonight, it was, "And now, the programme motion."

Frankly, this would all be a farce—it has been treated as such by the Under-Secretary—if it were not so serious.

Mr. Hogg: I am grateful that my hon. Friend gives way, when the Minister did not. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extraordinary that this House should be asked to approve a programme motion on the basis that there will be enough time to consider the Bill in Committee, when we have not been told when the Committee will meet, how often it will meet or the total length of time for which it will meet?

Mr. Boswell: Not for the first time, I find myself entirely in sympathy with my right hon. and learned Friend. He may not have been able to attend the whole of the previous debate—I understand the reasons for that—so I remind him that I made an offer. I said that we might consider withdrawing our opposition on the reasoned amendment if the Government took away their absurd programme motion tonight.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way, as it was obvious that the Minister was not prepared to do so. Will there be enough time to clarify one aspect of the Bill? In part 3, clause 43(12) says:

"Parts 2 and 3 do not extend to Northern Ireland."

By inference, one would suspect that part 1 does, yet I understood education to be a devolved matter in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Boswell: As I am no longer a Minister, I am not sure that I can give the hon. Member an authoritative and ministerial reply; the Minister clearly cannot. That point exemplifies the need for proper discussion of the Bill in a full Committee stage. That has nothing to do with subverting the Government, let alone subverting the intentions of the Bill, which may be admirable.

Mr. Clive Betts (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury): They are.

Mr. Boswell: Lots of people have fine intentions. The Government Whip alarms me by suggesting that his intentions are entirely honourable.

Even if the intentions are good, there are still points to be raised. Sadly, tonight's motion—moved so peremptorily by the Under-Secretary—suggests that the Government are exactly like the Bourbons; they have neither learned anything nor forgotten anything from recent events. Instead of adopting a wise course of action and taking on board the genuine sense of anger and grievance aroused by the Criminal Justice and Police Bill last week—it was almost a disaster—the Government have come back to the House all fresh faced as if nothing had happened. They pop up again as insouciant recidivists.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): My hon. Friend said that the Criminal Justice and Police Bill was almost a disaster, but I am sorry that I must take issue with him. It was not almost a disaster, it was a disaster. There were 50 clauses that were not examined in Committee. If that is not a disaster for the people of this country, I do not know what is.

Mr. Boswell: I am grateful for that reproof. My characteristic moderation got the better of me, as ever.

The Government offer no time for debate because, in their book, only soundbites matter. The Bill does not matter to them. I may be old fashioned—and I am mortified that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is not here tonight, as he would probably clash swords with me on the matter—but I think Bills are the core business of the House. We should debate them and get them right, but the Government persist in their belief that the Opposition are a nuisance to be crushed and not persuaded.

At all events, the only defence offered by the Government is that they will table no amendments in Committee. That is the triumph of hope over experience: I have never come across a Government who did not table amendments in Committee. If the Government have closed their mind to tabling amendments, it suggests that they will not take seriously what the Opposition have to say. I am sure that they will say that, although they understand the objective behind half of the amendments that we put forward, the wording is defective or not in order. However, it is not sufficient for them to say in advance, "Sorry, no dice: we're not going to change a thing, whatever you say."

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Government have said that they will not table any amendments. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if it turns out that they do table amendments, it would be logical for the Government to extend the period covered by the programme motion?

Mr. Boswell: I agree. I cannot speculate on the conduct of the Committee, but we could find ourselves in a real dilemma. We would not want the Government to break one of their pledges. If they produced an amendment—even if it were a good one that I might wish I had devised myself—the Committee would have to decide whether to vote against it so as to fulfil the Government's pledge not to introduce any amendments.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that precedent suggests that to suppose that the Government will not table amendments to the Bill would represent a triumph of optimism over reality and a victory for complacency over common sense? Even if the apologists for mediocrity that pepper the Government Benches choose not to table amendments to the Bill, Conservative Members and other

hon. Members might choose to do so. Should not those amendments be deliberated on comprehensively, enthusiastically, in detail and, if necessary, at length?

Mr. Boswell: I am fond of my hon. Friend, not least because he is a constituency neighbour, and we share the same newspapers. His intervention was a triumph of clarity and alliteration. I regard him as a one-person walking amendment himself. If we were to fail in Committee, I am sure that he would be able to remedy any deficiencies in the Bill when it returns to the House for further consideration. However, I know other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall make progress.

We need to remember the genesis of the Bill. It was promised in the Gracious Speech of 1999. The Bill is a promise from the last century that only now the Government are seeking to honour. Earlier, the Bill was, sadly, dropped from the legislative process, allegedly because of delays in consultation. One wonders what occasioned those delays in consultation. A draft Bill was promised last summer, but we never saw it; then this Bill was introduced in another place.

The Government seem to foster the no doubt agreeable myth that because the Bill is not party politically contentious, it contains nothing to talk about. They seem to believe that the Bill is absolutely straightforward, designed by central casting and that it should immediately be accepted and nominated for an Oscar. However, the Bill needed detailed analysis in another place, and unless the Prime Minister decides to alter the timetable—no doubt for purposes other than saving the Bill or the embarrassment of his Ministers—I strongly believe that it requires proper consideration in this place. The two Houses are complementary, not alternative.

The proposal that we heard tonight from the Under-Secretary, albeit briefly, is entirely of a piece with earlier events. The first of many Bills that I have considered in Committee during this Parliament was the very first Finance Bill. Indeed, the hon. Lady also served on that Committee. The sentence in those days was five days on the trot, guillotined to midnight every night. That was not a very good way of doing business, but the Government have learned nothing from it.

We are being offered, in practice, four days of sittings. The Whip will seek to establish reasonableness, but first let me remind him about the Learning and Skills Bill, which was not without its contentious aspects. That Bill was introduced in another place. Conservative Members tabled a reasoned amendment on Second Reading in this place, and we then spent two months and more than 20 sittings considering the Bill. It was a longer Bill than this one. If the Government Whip, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts), would like to make me a pro rata offer on the time required for this Bill, it would take us up to around 5 May, but I have not heard that offered so far.

A compressed timetable makes it impossible for organisations to consider the debates and the arguments put by Ministers and to lobby for changes. Indeed, in my experience, it is difficult for Ministers to brief themselves. I have always found that the most constructive dialogue on Bills is the one that no one ever hears—the part of the iceberg below the surface where Ministers are briefed by officials. They say, "What is he rabbiting on about that for?", or "Does he have a point about this?" All that will go by the board because the timetable will make this a simple exercise in speeding the Bill through the House.

It will be difficult for Back Benchers, and even Front Benchers, to meet any timetable of consecutive sittings. For example, I have certain obligations to my constituents, who are tearing their hair about the foot and mouth epidemic. I deal with a number of constituency cases every day. Frankly, even if we went into purdah for a fortnight, we would still have great difficulty in giving the Bill the consideration that the subject matter and its complexity require.

The situation is a perfect parable of new Labour. They care more for the soundbite than for sound sense. They would rather pursue another initiative than consider legislation sensibly. To them, dissent is the ultimate sin, yet we believe that democracy is about debate and debate will, from time to time, require consent.

In conclusion, the chances are that before too long—possibly even in conformity with the entirely inadequate timetable that the Government have set—democracy will speak, and I cannot wait. Those on the Treasury Bench may find that the boot is on the other foot. When we are in government, we will have to make sure that we do not abuse the trust that has been put in us.

10.29 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Once again, I rise to oppose a timetable motion, as I found myself doing last night. It is about the eighth or ninth time that I have spoken in such debates, and I shall carry on intervening in them for as long as we have to consider these timetable motions.

The motion is wholly inappropriate for the Bill. It is substantial: 57 pages, 43 clauses and nine schedules. The idea that such a Bill can be rattled through in four consecutive sittings is for the birds—the proposition is absurd. Apparently, we are to have the Bill out of Committee by 5 April. There will be five hours maximum for Report—perhaps much less—and one hour for Third Reading. That is complete nonsense, of course.

The House really must understand that in considering a Bill, it needs to perform at least two purposes. The first relates to policy and the second relates to the language in which that policy is framed. Both are equally important. I do not pretend to have followed the Bill with great particularity, so it may be that there is general agreement about the policy. That, however, is not conclusive of the issue.

We are, after all, talking about legislation. When we do that, we talk about burdens, obligations and penalties. We must ask what the authorities and the courts will make of legislation. The House must address those questions in the Standing Committee—that means proper scrutiny of the Bill.

The Committee has to undertake a further function which is not always recognised—the redress of grievances. In the context of any Bill—this one is no exception—particular cases, known to right hon. and hon. Members, may be highlighted. One of the ways hon. Members can do that is by tabling amendments directed at a particular grievance or abuse. If the Committee stage is so timetabled as to provide only four sittings, or whatever, hon. Members are prevented from pursuing their historical task—the redress of grievances.

We are told by the Government that they will not table amendments. I am prepared to accept that the Under-Secretary believes that as she stands at the Dispatch Box.

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

However, in my time I was responsible for the passage of 14 or 15 Bills through the House and I was never so imprudent as to say, "There are going to be no amendments". It is probable that someone—perhaps her legal advisers—will tell the Under-Secretary that she has got it wrong. If she does not table amendments in Committee, surely she will have to contemplate doing so on Report or she will be in considerable difficulty.

In any event, the idea that just because the hon. Lady does not want to table amendments the matter is concluded is arrogance of a high order. Many hon. Members may want to table amendments. Are we really to be told, on the say-so of some Under-Secretary, that we are to be shut out from that?

Mr. Boswell: My right hon. and learned Friend is a distinguished lawyer—I am not. Will he clarify, for my information, the importance of holding debates in Standing Committee? Since Pepper *v.* Hart, such debates may be taken into account by the courts in the interpretation of the intentions of legislation. Does that not presuppose that nice points and difficulties—for example, the application of section 316, or of 316A, on the provision of finance to independent special schools—need proper elucidation in Committee? That requires a Committee stage.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Under the ruling in Pepper *v.* Hart, the courts consider what is said in the House as an interpretation of a Bill's purpose. So it is important that in addressing the construction and interpretation of clauses, Ministers give themselves adequate time properly to explain what they mean, because those explanations are relevant to the interpretation subsequently put on the legislation. It is wrong artificially to compress the debate so that such interpretation cannot be given if requested.

All those are arguments against artificially compressing the debate in Committee, but the arguments against compressing the debate on Report are even more potent. We all know that but three or four Opposition Members will serve on the Committee; thus some of my right hon. and hon. Friends who wish to make a contribution will be unable to do so. Incidentally, it should be noted that the Opposition Benches are pretty densely populated tonight.

Mr. Bercow: Unlike the Government Benches.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend is right.

The first occasion when the whole House will have an opportunity to consider the Bill in detail is on Report. We have been told that five hours of debate will be sufficient, but there may be 30, 40 or 50 amendments in six, seven or eight groups. In the past few months during this Session, there have been countless occasions when Bills have passed that have been but partly discussed on Report. It is wrong that the debate on Report is so constructed that, in reality, Bills go undiscussed. We give those in the other place a role that they should not have.

Mr. Bercow: Of course what my right hon. and learned Friend says about the insufferable arrogance of the Leader of the House and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is beyond dispute among Conservative Members, but does he agree that it is entirely possible that, in the event of a statement after business questions on 5 April, we shall end up with under an hour to debate each clause? Is it not right that, even if few Members table amendments, every Member who wishes to contribute to the debate should have the opportunity to speak to the amendments?

Mr. Hogg: I entirely agree.

May I remind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that, perfectly rightly, Mr. Speaker allowed the discussion on today's foot and mouth disease statement, which was very important, to continue for an hour and 20 minutes? If there had been another statement of similar importance, about two hours or so would have been subtracted from the available time. That is simply not a proper way to address the manner in which the House conducts itself.

My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) also made an important point when he said that the process of compressing timetables shuts out external representation. He will have great difficulty in taking the opinion of outside interest groups as the Committee rattles through its consideration. Although I do not know whether this happens now in government, the Government will have difficulty in gathering the views of outside interests. Moreover, they will have difficulty in taking the views of their own officials.

I return to the plain fact that I have conducted through the House as many Bills as most Ministers have, and more than most, and I know that it is important to have regular and close briefings with officials to consider the points being made. The officials should not be shut out simply because the Government are rattling along. That would be very wrong indeed.

Mr. Bercow: The Ministers are chattering to each other.

Mr. Hogg: I am used to Ministers chattering to each other.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) should keep quiet when in a sedentary position.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend was helping me, and I am most grateful to him for doing so.

I want to make two further points. I am sorry to make a point that I have made on numerous previous occasions, but it goes to the root of parliamentary government. There is an implied bargain in a democracy between the electorate and Parliament. Parliament imposes obligations, liabilities and duties and requires the population as a whole to adhere to legislation. The electorate, in return, makes an assumption that the House properly performs its duties of scrutiny. If we are deprived of our ability to perform that duty, the elements in the bargain fail.

What happens when the public really begin to understand not just that the House is not performing its duty, but that it is being prevented from performing it? At that point the House and democracy itself will be seen to be a fraud. If we care about these things, we have to go on saying that it is the duty of the House properly to

scrutinise legislation. Those who prevent that and who chatter and giggle like little girls on the Front Bench are, in the end, denying democracy. Ultimately—thank God—they will be rumbled.

10.41 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I shall be brief. As I said in the debate on the programme motion last night, I am not in principle against programming. I want the House to use the time that is available to it to the very best advantage so that we ensure that the legislation that the Government of the day put through is properly scrutinised and that both sides of the House have an opportunity to participate in the debates.

Will the Under-Secretary, who moved the motion briefly, assure the House that, given the time that the Government have allocated to the Bill in Standing Committee, the Committee will have extra sittings if they are necessary? Will she assure us that the Government will not use their majority on the Committee to frustrate its having extra sittings that would be necessary to ensure that every part of the Bill is properly and fully discussed? Does the Minister wish to intervene to give that assurance to the House? I would be delighted to give way, but clearly she does not wish to intervene. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I say to the hon. Member for Buckingham that I have given him one warning and I do not expect to have to give him another. We are trying to conduct a debate.

Mr. Winterton: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan).

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is not much hope of obtaining from the Minister a reply guaranteeing extra time to scrutinise the Bill? Last week, the Committee considering the International Development Bill was deprived of seven minutes of scrutiny time because of the inadvertent absence of the Chairman. When the Government and the Chair were asked to reinstate that time so that the Bill could be scrutinised for the full time stipulated in the programme motion, the request was denied. What hope is there that the Minister will grant my hon. Friend's reasonable request when such a denial was made last week?

Mr. Winterton: My hon. Friend, who is an experienced Member of the House, makes a point that I hope those on the Government Front Bench will have taken on board.

I am a member of the Modernisation Committee, which sits under the distinguished chairmanship of the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons. Since the Committee published its first report, which made the proposal for programming, the House has discovered that the programming structure that was proposed has not properly worked. If this Parliament sits long enough—I doubt that it will—there is no doubt that the Modernisation Committee will table amendments to the way we currently deal with business. I think that it would take on board the concerns that are felt by Conservatives Members and shared by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who spoke eloquently and positively in the debate on the programme motion last night.

There is no doubt that hon. Members—including Labour Members who sometimes do not agree with aspects of the Government's policy—are not able to argue their case fully. Programme motions deny the House a proper opportunity to debate an issue. I have received many representations on special educational needs and disability, most of which I have passed on to the Minister. Those matters are of great importance to our constituents, especially to the parents of children who are affected by them. They are deeply worried.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred to the Report stage. Newer Members of the House, including some Ministers, may not understand that that is the only time when all Members have an opportunity to participate in a debate on a Bill. That is not possible on Second Reading because of the limited time and many of them are not appointed to the Standing Committee. The real opportunity to debate issues that deeply concern them and their constituents is on Report.

My right hon. and learned Friend told us how many clauses and schedules the Bill contains. The Government should reconsider the five hours that they have allocated, in particular the time for debate on Report. The Bill is important to many people. I do not think that the Minister is unsympathetic to my request to have additional sittings if that is necessary.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Although I arrived in the Chamber only five minutes ago, I am aware of the issues. Although there is a case for programme motions, I agree that it is important for the Opposition to have time for scrutiny. However, does the hon. Gentleman accept that, prior to such motions, our late night sittings were not appreciated by the public? If there is a willingness in the new Parliament for the Government and Opposition to reach a compromise, it will be possible to have some programme motions and to give the Opposition what they want without sitting late into the night. I hope that the business of late night sittings has gone for good.

Mr. Winterton: I gave way to the hon. Gentleman because I greatly respect his role and his immense experience in this place. Had he arrived at the beginning of my speech, he would have heard me say that, in principle, I am not against programming. In fact, I am in favour of it and want it to work. The House should use its time to the very best effect so that legislation is fully discussed. He has opposed some of his Government's policies and must realise that Opposition and Labour Members should have an opportunity to have a say on important Bills. We are old hands. He knows that we are sent here not to speed legislation on its way, but to ensure that it meets people's needs and is properly scrutinised.

The Minister has been effective in the four years that she has been in the House. She must appreciate the Opposition's valuable role as part of our democratic process. Although she has not responded to my challenge, I note that she indicated from a sedentary position that the Standing Committee could have additional sittings. Perhaps the Government will consider allocating

[Mr. Winterton]

additional time for the Report stage, which is the only time when all Back Benchers have a chance to participate in debates on important legislation.

10.50 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I agree with the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), except for his opening observation. My hon. Friend is extraordinarily sanguine in supposing that if the Government found in Committee that more time were needed to debate a clause or the whole Bill, they would ever have the slightest inclination to return to the House and change their programme motion to allow the Committee more time. I would literally eat my hat if the Government ever did such a thing.

We now come here night after night to debate these programme motions, and it is the most extraordinary state of affairs. It is now considered quite natural that the Government, who after all have a responsibility for drafting legislation and presenting it to Parliament, should systematically feel that they are able to assume in advance how long Parliament will take to do its share of the legislative work in examining a Bill. That is a fundamental contradiction. There should be a balance between the role of the Executive and that of the legislature—the Executive proposing and the legislature deliberating and agreeing or otherwise. The way in which the Government are conducting these matters with their enormous majority makes it obvious that they do not accept that.

The arguments this evening and on other occasions amount simply to the Government saying, "We can predict exactly what will happen in Committee and on Report. You have no surprises for us." There is a logical slippage into the next position, which is to say, "The parliamentary stage is a complete waste of time. It is just a ritual and a nuisance for us and it makes not the slightest difference to the legislation." To act in this way is not only to treat Parliament with contempt"—as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said in an extremely powerful speech, it is to treat the wider public with contempt, because their one opportunity to influence legislation is through Parliament. We are but the mouthpieces of those who send us here.

Back Benchers on a Committee play an important role in listening to representations from individuals or groups outside the House who may be affected by the legislation in question or who may be taking an entirely disinterested view of its consequences. Having considered the merits of those representations, Members must decide whether to take them up, perhaps in the form of amendments. That process, by definition, cannot be predicted in advance. The Government, by saying high-handedly that they know in advance how long proceedings will take, are essentially saying that no such process exists and that they are not open to representations made by the wider public. The Government are treating the whole country with contempt. This is an extremely worrying process because it is not far to the end of the road, which is saying that legislation is what the Government draft and nothing else. By definition, we will then have legislative despotism. I am not using hyperbole. This is government by fear, by bureaucracy and by Ministers for the four or five years for which the Government have a majority in the House and can continue to govern the country.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not because we have little time left for the debate. I hope that he will recognise that that is not my fault, and will make representations to his Front-Bench colleagues.

That is the direction in which the House is moving as the 21st century opens, and it is extremely worrying. At the moment, we speak entirely impotently, and the Government laugh at us and pay no attention at all. The two Ministers here this evening have studiously avoided listening to a single word that has been said on the subject by anybody during the debate. First, they may be personally embarrassed to hear the strictures of Conservative Members. Secondly, they know that those strictures do not matter anyway, because they trust their cannon fodder on the Back Benches to go into the Lobbies after the debate and override all those considerations and ensure that no account is taken of them. That is the situation that we face, and if the public seriously want it to continue, and seriously want to go further down the road that I have just described, they will soon have the opportunity to take that decision. I do not believe that they will take that road.

10.55 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I have not participated in one of these programme motion debates before. I come to the debate as a member of the all-party Select Committee on Education and Employment, which has reached consensus on the issue of special educational needs. It is a mystery to me that there is a need for any sort of programme motion when, broadly speaking, there is consensus about the need for new legislation and about the direction that policy is taking. Surely—given the enthusiasm and support that the Bill should be generating outside the House—the Government would not need a programme motion if they were confident about the Bill.

The conclusion that we must draw from the fact that we have a programme motion is that the Government are far from confident about the validity and strength of the Bill. They are far from confident that the Bill is free from the kind of flaws from which the Opposition fear it suffers. Indeed, we are not the only ones who fear the effects of the mistakes that the Government have made in the drafting of the Bill. I have received a letter from the National Union of Teachers, stating that the union has "particular concerns" about the Bill. I have also received a letter from the National Association of Head Teachers, stating:

> "We do have reservations . . . We hope that the Bill will not lead to a headlong rush".

We are worried that we are being led into a headlong rush by Ministers under this procedure.

In our experience, it is a far better approach to give a Bill such as this plenty of time to mature in Committee. I have known cases, on previous education Bills, of unions saying that they had not realised how the Bill would affect their representatives until it was in Committee. We wanted to table amendments but found that, because of the programme motions that were in place, it was too late to do so. Here we have a case of a Bill starting in another place. The Conservative spokesman there, Baroness Blatch, was most prescient in her comments. She said that she feared that the Bill would be

"severely guillotined in another place. We know that the plan in another place is for the Bill to be shoved through in a day."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 February 2001; Vol. 622, c. 774.]

She might well have said "in a day", because we do not even have a day's worth of time in which to debate the Bill in Committee.

Furthermore, in another place, the Committee met in the Moses Room, where procedure dictates that there shall be no Divisions. Anything remotely contentious could not, therefore, be put to a vote in another place, whereas in this House, there will not be time to put such matters to a vote. That is an example of how the Government are grossly distorting the role of the House, and denying us from acting in accordance with the sense of responsibility that we all feel towards our constituents to deliver a decent Bill for those with special educational needs.

That is why we must oppose the programme motion. That is also why those on the other side of the House who really care about special educational needs—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].*

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 122.

Division No. 161] **[10.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra

Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCrea, Dr William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. Douglas Hogg.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]*:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day it meets.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 5th April.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the provisions of that Act in the sums payable out of such money under any other Act.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

Church of England (General Synod) (Measure)

11.10 pm

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): I beg to move,

That the Churchwardens Measure, passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for Her Royal Assent in the form in which the said Measure was laid before Parliament.

Although the Measure is important for the life of the Church, I hope to introduce it fairly briefly. I should like to do so partly because of the lateness of the hour, and partly because I can assure the House that although concerns were expressed about a provision that was previously included in the Measure—I shall say more about that in a moment—it has now been deleted and the Ecclesiastical Committee has reported that the Measure is expedient in its present form.

The Measure contains a comprehensive set of rules about the appointment of churchwardens and their tenure of office. The office of churchwarden is an ancient and honourable one. I understand that it dates back to the early 12th century, but it is still very much alive. Churchwardens play a vital part in the life of the Church of England in parishes throughout the country. That is why the General Synod decided to remove some of the problems that had arisen in relation to the existing law, which was set out in a 1964 Measure. For example, the procedure in cases involving contested election for the office was not as clear as it should have been, and was therefore capable of causing a great deal of hurt and division among loyal church members.

The new Measure seeks to rectify that problem by providing a carefully thought-out and much clearer procedure. However, the choice of the churchwardens of the parish has never been a matter solely for the parish priest, minister or regular churchgoers. Everyone who is resident in a parish and whose name is on the register of local government electors is a parishioner and is entitled to take part. That principle is part of the unique relationship between Church and state in this country, and it is preserved by the Measure.

That provision, and almost all the others contained in the Measure—hon. Members will see that there are 16 clauses—cause no controversy. The one matter that caused particular concern when the Measure came before the General Synod was the principle that a churchwarden should serve without a break for only six years. That was included in the Measure because parishes and dioceses had asked for it. In some cases, however excellent the churchwardens, parishioners feel that it is time to give someone else an opportunity to serve, but find it difficult to say so tactfully and without hurting any feelings.

Other parishes have pointed out, however, that the office of churchwarden is onerous. In rural and inner-city parishes, often only a very limited number of people are willing and able to carry out the duties involved. There may be other reasons why a churchwarden should serve for more than six years. For example, the parish could be in a position in which experienced churchwardens are essential to keeping the show on the road. That is why the Synod decided that, although the rule about six-years' service should be the norm, it should be possible for the

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parishioners of any parish to decide for any reason that that rule should not apply to them, with the freedom to change their minds later if they want to do so. Thus, the parish will remain in control, which is how the Synod agreed it should be. In any case, the six years would not start to run until the Measure came into force, so there would be ample time for every parish to make up its mind.

The issue that caused the Ecclesiastical Committee a great deal of concern was different—namely, the power that the original Measure would have given to the bishops to suspend a churchwarden from exercising his or her duties. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members have received correspondence about that, and the Ecclesiastical Committee and the Synod have spent a great deal of time considering the matter.

All I need say tonight is that, first, the power was not included in the Measure at the request of the bishops. The bishops and everyone else in the Synod always anticipated that it would be used only on rare occasions. Secondly, there was a great deal of anxiety, which was strongly expressed in the Ecclesiastical Committee, that the power could be used in a way that would override the rights of the parishioners and be unfair to the churchwarden.

In the light of the Ecclesiastical Committee's concerns, the Synod finally decided to delete the power from the Measure in the hope that it would proceed without further controversy. I can therefore assure right hon. and hon. Members who have received anxious letters about the power of suspension that there is no trace of it in the Measure before the House.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not true that, had the power not been withdrawn, the Ecclesiastical Committee would almost certainly not have found the Measure expedient and would not have approved its coming before the House and the other place?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. He knows that the role of the Ecclesiastical Committee in the established Church and the relationship between Church and state were amply discussed at the time. The Ecclesiastical Committee, representing the House in the other place, rendered a signal service on behalf of parishioners.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): May I say, with all humility, that the Ecclesiastical Committee may have been wrong? The Committee and the House ought to say to the Synod, "We are very grateful for your tolerance of the fact that we took a view that may or may not have been right."

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman put that view forcefully in the Ecclesiastical Committee, and I was grateful that he did so. It might have been useful in particular circumstances for the bishop to have power over a churchwarden, but the overwhelming feeling in the Committee and among parishioners was that giving an unelected bishop power over an elected churchwarden would not be successful. The consequence was that the matter returned to the Synod, which gracefully yielded on that particular point, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. Therefore, the Measure is before the House.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I was one of those who lobbied long and hard, partly on behalf of my wife, who is a churchwarden and is worried about the Measure. I am concerned to read clause 10(1)(e), which states that the bishop shall have power

"in any case in which any difficulty arises, to give any directions which he may consider expedient for the purpose of removing the difficulty."

Can the hon. Gentleman advise us what that difficulty might be and what the bishop might have to do to remove it should it arise?

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman draws my attention to a particular clause, and I thank him for being so alert so late in the evening. I cannot give him the answer he requires, so I shall write to him. If my response is of sufficient importance, I shall put a copy in the Library so that those Members who are not here tonight can rush to the Library to read it in due course. I assure right hon. and hon. Members who received letters on the power of suspension that there is no trace of that in the Measure before the House.

I hope that the House will pass this Measure, and that the other place will be content, so that it can pass into law in the near future. However, Church authorities are well aware that parishes are about to hold their annual election of churchwardens. Indeed, a few have already done so. It would not be right to introduce the new rules at short notice in the middle of that process without giving parishes time to absorb them. Because of that, those who are responsible for advising the archbishops on when to exercise their power under clause 16(2) to bring the measure into force do not propose to do so until after the present annual round of meetings to choose churchwardens is over. It is equally important that those who will draw up guidance on the new rules for the parishes should be able to begin work as soon as possible. I urge the House to approve the Measure and to support the motion.

11.21 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I declare an interest, or at least a potential interest, as I am a deputy churchwarden by virtue of the fact that my parish has more than one parish church. Should I still be in that post when the Measure comes into effect, I may become a full-blown churchwarden and subject to its provisions.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell) has set out fully the circumstances behind the Measure, and I do not wish to detain the House, save to say that it is welcome. Particularly welcome is the flexibility that has been shown in response to numerous letters that were received about removing the bishop's right relating to suspension.

I noted with interest what my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) said. He was unsure whether the Committee had acted properly in this matter, or had come to the right decision. The Church is undoubtedly going through considerable changes. In particular, an increasing number of parishes are held by priests in charge, not by incumbents. Many parishes and parishioners feel that their independence is being progressively eroded.

I am quite convinced that, in the Measure's original form, the power of the bishop would have been invoked so sparingly and for such good and sufficient reasons that no one would ever have criticised its use. However, it was

received with hostility and awoke a sense of unease that the independence of parishes, which had previously been exemplified in the independence of the incumbent, was disappearing and that this Measure was yet another nail in the coffin.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the problems was the Synod's apparent inability to communicate exactly why it wanted the Measure? In my diocese, my parochial church council never once discussed this issue. People picked up innuendo and rumour.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman's comments sound familiar—I remember the discussion that we had in my parish. He highlights a matter that is for the Church to decide for itself. Many parishes tend to be rather detached from the process of governance in the Church. Beyond deanery Synod level, there is often a sense that what goes on has little relevance. People worry that higher powers constantly want to change accepted practices that work well for them.

The proposal seems sensible and has provided reassurance. Clearly, this Measure was badly needed. It clarifies many areas, and should be beneficial. After all, if it turns out that a mistake was made—as my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West suggests—and examples suddenly reach the tabloid press of churchwardens hideously misusing their office and bishops in a frenzy of anxiety that they can do nothing about it, I dare say that this matter will come back before the Synod, and probably before the House. Chances are, however, that the Measure will be invoked so rarely anyway that we may well succeed in lasting a century or two more without having to revisit it.

I am happy to welcome the Measure.

11.25 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I thank churchwardens throughout the Church of England for the way in which they fulfil their responsibilities. They are generally unthanked; they are unpaid; they have immense burdens to bear; and, almost without exception, they carry out their duties with fervour—if that is a proper term to use in a religious context—and with a great deal of practical common sense.

We are grateful to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell) for the way in which he represents the authority of the established Church in the House, and for the good humour with which—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bottomley: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to contradict what I am saying about his hon. Friend. I want to complete my tribute: I live in fear that I may at some stage be asked to carry out the responsibilities currently undertaken by his hon. Friend—in which event I would certainly say no, because I do not think I am half the person he is.

Now I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Taylor: Would the hon. Gentleman care to include in his tribute to churchwardens throughout the land—I declare an interest, as one of them—recognition of the increasing burden that they carry as a result of the greater number of longer interregnums that we have seen in Anglican parishes throughout the land?

Mr. Bottomley: I agree that there are difficulties. One way of approaching them is by recognising the non-stipendiary ministry.

I also think that perhaps the Church of England should copy what I believe to be the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, especially in Ireland. Many more people find and fulfil vocations by going into that Church as ordained priests or vicars when they are older. The idea that people should start training for ordination immediately after obtaining a theology degree implies a bias that is not necessarily justified. I believe that many people who had previously been police officers, teachers or social workers, or had worked in business, would be welcomed into the ministry.

I hope that we can reach a point at which bishops do not feel the need to "rotate" people around their parishes, planning a six-to-nine-month interregnum. That can destabilise both the families of incumbents and the parishes that those incumbents serve.

As has been said, the Measure is basically uncontroversial. I shall not dwell on the fuss about the parts that have now gone. If I ever wrote my memoirs it would make an interesting chapter, but for reasons of parliamentary as well as religious charity I think it best to leave aside my view on the collection of interests—most opposed to each other—that combined to make it expedient for the Synod, very kindly, to drop those sections.

I think the analysis given by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) of the number of times when the power involved would have been needed is slender. I trust that any churchwardens who fell into the category—hopefully as a result of error rather than on purpose—in which the power might have been useful would do the honourable thing and suspend themselves. In most cases, if there is a problem, churchwardens know their duty perfectly well and will fulfil it: they will park themselves while the matter is being resolved. I hope that, on the rare occasions on which they attempted to do otherwise, they would follow advice and do what might otherwise have been compulsory.

Finally, let me make a more general point. Although I agree with Robert Runcie, who said that using the Synod for the earlier stages of parliamentary Measures was not entirely satisfactory, it is probably more satisfactory than a system involving the two Houses dealing with Second Reading, Committee stage and Report. In practice, the Ecclesiastical Committee must bring a Measure that has gone through its earlier stages in the Synod to the House of Commons for what is, in effect, Third Reading. That is surely a better system than one involving fighting the whole thing through from the beginning. I hope that we can reach a stage at which those who might be described as traditionalists—I am not a traditionalist; I am more of an inclusive Christian and member of the Church of England—

Mr. Drew: An Anglo-Catholic.

Mr. Bottomley: I shall accept any compliment or criticism. However, I believe that the arrangements are better now than they were before the Synod dealt with the earlier stages.

[Mr. Bottomley]

Last week, in St. Margaret's, the Archbishop of Canterbury installed the new worldwide president of the Mothers Union. I wish that all hon. Members had been able to see how another part of the Church of England—not only from the United Kingdom, but from around the world—was able to come together in recognising the contribution of many people in our churches. Those people understand that the Church realises that it has a vibrant and responsible role to play, and that it plays that role with a fervour that could be commended to many people who are outside our churches.

I would like people outside our churches to know that, if they come to our churches, not only the churchwardens—or the Mothers Union, of which I am proud to be a member—will welcome them, but all the people in the pews will say, "There is plenty of room for more people here. You do not have to be particularly good to be a member of the Church of England."

11.31 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I should like first to apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell) that I was not in the Chamber for the beginning of the debate, as I was attending an event in my constituency. However, I have followed the story of the Measure—

Mr. Drew: The saga.

Mr. Hughes: Yes. As I have followed it for many years, I think that I am as well aware as anyone of the arguments and the history.

I join colleagues on both sides of the House in paying tribute to churchwardens. I specifically endorse the additional reason for paying tribute to them mentioned by the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor). The Church of England now has longer interregnums between incumbencies, not least to save money, and churchwardens effectively take responsibility for running the entire parish for quite long periods. Therefore, they perform not only all their other duties, but that extremely responsible work. The work certainly has its burdens, but it is very well done, and I think that all hon. Members respect churchwardens for doing it.

This Measure is the most controversial one that the Ecclesiastical Committee has considered perhaps in the 18 years in which I have been an hon. Member, but certainly in all the time that I have been a member of the Committee. Although there was controversy in our debates on the ordination of women Measure—which was the other big Measure that the Committee has considered—and the Legislative Committee invited the Archbishops of Canterbury and of York to meet us to discuss it, ultimately there was agreement on it between the Ecclesiastical Committee and the General Synod. We went through all those procedures on the Churchwardens Measure, but we still could agree on it.

As the hon. Member for Middlesbrough has said, and as hon. Members will be aware, through its representatives on the Ecclesiastical Committee this place took a view on the Churchwardens Measure, and I believe that we were right to do so. As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has often reminded the House, for as long as the United Kingdom constitution requires Parliament to have a say in Church of England matters—how long that arrangement should continue is a different debate—we have above all one job to do: to ensure that the normal principles of justice and fair treatment that apply in civic society apply also within the Church.

The Ecclesiastical Committee absolutely rightly said to the Church, "The powers that you were originally proposing to give to bishops to suspend people from office when they were under suspicion but nothing has been proven are not powers that should reside in bishops." We said that because of the simple premise on which churchwardens' authority rests. They are not only a bishop's appointees, but the people's choice. It is a very unusual position. Churchwardens have two masters—the people and the bishop. The Committee, which is composed almost entirely of lay people, made it clear that we wanted the principles of justice to apply in the Church as they apply in civil society. I am sure that we were right, and it is a good thing that the Church of England General Synod gave in to that.

There is for another day—perhaps another Parliament—the debate about whether it is right for us to go on in the new century with the present relationship. I have made my position clear. I speak for the Liberal Democrats on Church of England matters, and I am happy to do so. By baptism and confirmation, I am a member of the Anglican Church; coincidentally, I was confirmed into the Church in Wales. I believe in disestablishment, as does my party. We think that, as soon as it can happen, we should disestablish the Church of England, just as the Church in Wales has been disestablished, the Church in Ireland has been disestablished and—in a different way—the Anglican Church in Scotland has been partly disestablished.

Mr. Pike: The hon. Gentleman is trying to widen this debate. However, while we have the present system, the Ecclesiastical Committee in this House cannot just be a rubber stamp. If the Committee has a role to play, it must do it properly, as it has tried to do with this Measure.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman—who is also a friend of mine—and others who have played an entirely consistent, effective and observant role in the Committee over many years have always taken that view. For the time being, we have an established Church and certain matters have to come to Parliament. We will do our job properly for as long as that is the position.

Other colleagues may make a self-denying ordinance not to take part in such debates. They are entitled to do so; it is the same issue as whether one takes part in Scottish business if one is an English Member, or vice versa. Constitutionally, every Member of Parliament has a role. Nobody has to serve on the Ecclesiastical Committee, but those of us from both Houses who do serve on it take our job extremely seriously. Those who serve us as officers have always been extremely diligent. Those who come from the Church of England to brief us and to answer questions have been always been extremely courteous and entirely helpful in trying to deal with our concerns.

It is still worth reminding people that churchwardens are chosen annually by the parish meeting, but all parishioners are entitled to vote for them. One of the

things that still troubles me is that most churches do not invite all parishioners to choose their churchwardens. This is not just a token matter. There are many people who will admit to coming to church only on Christmas eve, for the carol service or for baptisms, marriages or funerals. One of the jobs of the Church of England—if it is to be the national Church—is to be available for people without lots of preconditions; for example, someone should not have to turn up so many times over so many weeks to take part.

One of the ways in which the Church of England can continue its links into each parish in the country is to make sure that everybody knows that, once a year, there is a meeting to which all parishioners can come. They do not have to have darkened the doors of the church between meetings and they will not be judged on their attendance, or on other things—it is their church. I would hope that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough can pass on to those in charge of the Church that they should make it their business to make sure it is not just the people on the electoral roll of the church or the normal congregation of the church who are invited to the meeting.

All adult parishioners should be told about the annual meeting, and invited to take part in the election of the people to represent the parish. I hope that we can get to that point because, at the moment, some churches find it more comfortable only to invite their own to the meeting. There is a great opportunity here, not just in terms of democracy but in terms of evangelisation and outreach from the church to the people.

Mr. David Taylor: Many church electoral rolls contain the names of people who live outside the parish. Would the hon. Gentleman expect that a by-product of a future move to disestablish the Church would be to remove what many see as an antiquated right for parishioners in general to contribute towards the selection of churchwardens?

Mr. Hughes: I do not want to get waylaid, but the debate is about churchwardens so the question is proper. The role of parish representatives in the Church would not continue after full disestablishment, but two sorts of disestablishment are on the table, in effect. One centres on whether members of the Church of England can be in Parliament, whether bishops should be in the House of Lords and whether the Prime Minister should appoint the bishops. In that model, there is an argument about whether the monarch should be both head of the Church and the head of state. The other sort of disestablishment centres on the arrangement of the parish structure. Disestablishment from Parliament—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman, who came late to the debate, is being extraordinarily discursive.

Mr. Hughes: I give way to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

Mr. Grieve: I do not want to widen the point, but it would place a considerable burden on parishes if they had to advertise their annual meeting as the hon. Gentleman proposes. In the parish where I worship, it is clearly stated on public notices that everyone can come to the meeting and vote. The meeting is split into two parts for that purpose. However, does the hon. Gentleman agree that his proposal is unrealistic in terms of cost?

Mr. Hughes: Any good parish communicates with all its parishioners on a regular basis. The message will therefore get pushed through doors and pinned on the notice boards in church and throughout the parish at no unusual or additional cost. Good churches tell people what is going on, and I hope that every Church of England church would want to do that and find the necessary resources.

There is unity on the issue because the Church accepted the advice of Parliament. The relationship therefore works, and the Measure will put churchwardens' relationship with the Church on a firmer and better footing. They, and we, will be grateful for that.

11.42 pm

Mr. Stuart Bell: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to some of the points that have been made.

I shall begin by thanking the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for his contribution. I shall follow your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and avoid the intricacies and interstices of the disestablishment argument: I hope that we will have that debate in the not-too-distant future.

The hon. Gentleman was right about the controversy surrounding the Measure, but, in the end, Church and state came together in the proper fashion. The House, in the shape of the Ecclesiastical Committee, exercised its judgment and responded to the concerns of churchwardens and parishioners. An expression of will went back to the Synod, which was sufficiently flexible and understanding to accept that the power of the bishops should be removed from the Measure.

The hon. Members for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey both referred to the role of churchwardens, and commended the people who do such a sterling job up and down the land. The House will know that Canon E1 provides that churchwardens are to be the officers of the bishop, and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey made the point about their dual capacity. It also states that they are to be foremost in representing the laity and co-operating with the incumbent. It states that they

"shall use their best endeavours by example and precept to encourage the parishioners in the practice of true religion and to promote unity and peace among them".

That shows the importance and significance of the role of the churchwarden. As the hon. Member for Worthing, West said, the nature of the sort of people who take on the role of churchwarden means that they might well step aside if a difficulty arose.

In a very important intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) pointed out that this House and the Ecclesiastical Committee are not rubber stamps and never can be in relation to the legislation that comes from the Synod on to the statute book via proceedings here.

I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) for his graceful encapsulation of what the Measure contains, for sharing with us his experiences as a

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churchwarden and for his support for the Measure. It is important that when the House deals with Church matters it reaches a consensus, without the sort of hostility and controversy seen elsewhere, so I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support.

The hon. Member for Worthing, West was extremely helpful in the Ecclesiastical Committee. His was a lone voice, sometimes, but he articulated a view that others might well have held. He was very graceful in his comments about me, and I am grateful to him for that. When I took on the role of the Second Church Estates Commissioner, Lord Dixon said that I was the Church's shop steward. As a fellow trade unionist, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand and appreciate that.

The hon. Gentleman said that he might write his memoirs one of these days and that there would be a chapter dealing with the Churchwardens Measure. He might, in the meantime, like to read "The Churchwarden's Handbook—A Practical Guide", written by Ven. Ian Russell, recently retired as the Archdeacon of Coventry, who was a member of the steering committee on churchwardens. The book has been so popular that the first edition has sold out. The second edition will remove the contentious issue of whether the bishops should have power over a churchwarden. It reads rather like a Jeffrey Archer novel, with the ending changed according to the audience.

Mr. David Taylor: Will the author be sent to prison?

Mr. Bell: We will not go into that particular controversy.

If the hon. Member for Worthing, West does get around to writing his memoirs, the practical guide to churchwardens will be a very sound base.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Churchwardens Measure, passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for Her Royal Assent in the form in which the said Measure was laid before Parliament.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Weights and Measures

That the draft Weights and Measures (Intoxicating Liquor) (Amendment) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

Postal Services

That the draft Postal Services Act 2000 (Determination of Turnover for Penalties) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

That the draft Postal Services Act 2000 (Consequential Modifications No. 1) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

Constitutional Law

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

Government Trading Funds

That the draft Defence Aviation Repair Agency Trading Fund Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 17th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Betts.]*.

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

South London Rail Services (GoVia)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

11.47 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome the opportunity for this debate on train services in the south of London. The Minister has expressed some surprise that we should be having yet another debate on this subject, but I assure him that things have moved on since the last debate a couple of months ago.

A new start for the south central rail franchise is very welcome. I am afraid that services have deteriorated over the past year. As we have had many debates on Connex South Central services, I do not think that it will be necessary to go over this old and rather stony ground again. However, a recent survey that I conducted at stations in my constituency shows that a substantial majority of respondents—no less than 78 per cent.—feel that services have deteriorated over the past year. No one who responded said that they had improved. This is the scale of the challenge faced by GoVia.

Before I discuss GoVia's proposals, I should like to know what efforts the Government are making to ensure that standards are maintained on existing services to stop further slippage. I draw the Minister's attention to one area of innovation—that of colourful excuses.

One of my constituents contacted Connex to ask why his train had been delayed, and was informed, in an e-mail, that a pheasant had been caught in the shoe gear of the train. That is certainly a radical departure from leaves on the line or the wrong kind of snow. Perhaps pheasants being caught in the shoe gear is a common problem in rural areas, but it is certainly not usual in urban areas.

Not all the problems of the train service are the sole responsibility of Connex—the current operator. Since privatisation, people have experienced horrendous problems with rail services everywhere—partly due to privatisation itself but also because of previous underinvestment in the rail infrastructure.

Local rail users want change and they want it soon, so a rapid and clean transition of the franchise from Connex to GoVia is desirable. If the Minister has any information as to when that transition might finally take place, I should welcome it. Such information will be of considerable interest to my constituents.

However, just because a franchise is being passed to a new company does not mean that my constituents or I will accept that any change is a change for the better. Recent public meetings in my constituency show that local commuters are extremely concerned about what will happen to their rail services. I should point out that GoVia was extremely co-operative in sending representatives to those meetings. To ensure that rail users get the service they deserve, it is important that the company keeps open the lines of communication to their customers to ensure that they remain part of the process. I am grateful to GoVia for that continued co-operation.

Unfortunately, my constituents are concerned about one particular change proposed by GoVia; I shall refer to that shortly. Many of GoVia's proposals are welcome. Over the 20-year franchise, the investment programme is valued at £1.5 billion. That planned investment includes £900 million for rolling stock; £325 million for infrastructure; £200 million for stations; and £50 million for depots.

There have also been encouraging signs in response to the 10-point plan proposed to GoVia by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and me. The plan is based on key concerns raised by our constituents and was the subject of a previous debate. GoVia has addressed seven of those 10 points and has expressed general enthusiasm for the plan.

I should still like solid progress to be made on three of those points. First, there should be a guarantee of clean trains and stations. Secondly, a plan should be published and displayed in stations, setting out the major works to be undertaken in the area and the date of their completion—so that when passengers suffer disruption, they can see a light at the end of the tunnel and know that there will be a solution at a given date. Finally, opportunities should be investigated for the provision of orbital rail services for direct services to places such as Bromley and Twickenham—an issue raised by my hon. Friend.

I do not want to be churlish about GoVia's proposals—they are promising. The company's eagerness to keep the paying passenger involved in the process is encouraging. For that reason, I do not want to jump to conclusions about the particular proposal that panicked me and my constituents, although it could disadvantage many local residents. As it is only a proposal, it is appropriate to raise it now—before it is set in stone.

It is proposed that direct trains to Victoria station would no longer run from Carshalton Beeches, Wallington and Waddon—three of the six stations used by my constituents. Under GoVia's proposals those trains would run direct only to London Bridge; people would have to change at West Croydon for a connection to Victoria.

I have some concern about the openness and clarity of the proposal. The matter has come to light only as a result of the public meetings organised by myself and my hon. Friend.

GoVia included a map outlining the proposals in its presentation document, but only by studying the map carefully can one get an indication that such changes are afoot. For instance, Carshalton Beeches, Wallington and Waddon stations are not even listed on the map, so it is difficult to determine what effect the proposals might have.

GoVia has sought to clarify matters in correspondence with me and has confirmed that, under its proposals, there would be four trains an hour to London Bridge station from places such as Carshalton Beeches station. The decision has apparently not yet been made and public discussions are continuing, which is a relief as there may be an opportunity for it to change its mind.

I am concerned that matters have been made worse by rail privatisation. It is difficult to find out about GoVia's proposals from the Strategic Rail Authority, because some of the proposals are commercially confidential. For example, it is impossible to find out whether the stations served by the different train operating companies come under the SRA's jurisdiction. Again, because of commercial confidentiality, the SRA was unable, or unwilling, to reveal whether that came within its remit, so we seem to have lost accountability in relation to the

[Mr. Tom Brake]

public railways. I wonder whether the Minister will tell us how he intends to ensure more open government in the franchise bidding process, so that the public can influence it.

We are certain from the proposals that GoVia will increase the frequency of train services, but, as I have said, it will do so at the expense of sending trains to two terminals in London. I wonder whether the SRA was aware that that was one of the implications of GoVia's proposals. I also wonder whether the SRA considers the bids in that detail and whether it considers the impact that such proposal can have on commuters. Certainly, the response that I have received to the proposals is one of great alarm. People have told me that they chose to live in a certain place because they want quick and relatively reliable access to Victoria station. People are worried about the impact on house prices and so on if the rail services alter.

I understand why GoVia has made those proposals: more slots are available at London Bridge station, so there are more opportunities to provide a greater number of trains. However, the local view is that people would prefer to forgo the advantages provided by a more frequent train service, preferring to keep the flexibility of travelling either to Victoria or London Bridge.

To remove the direct train service to Victoria station would constitute great inconvenience to local rail users and they would not accept that that would be offset by providing more frequent train services. We are not able to look at GoVia's planned timetable because we have not yet been given a copy, but it seems that the impact of its proposals, and this is being optimistic, would be an extra six minutes on the journey of passengers who wanted to go to Victoria station, and thus had to get out at West Croydon station.

Considering the fact that the survey results showed that 57 per cent. of commuters felt that current travelling conditions were poor or appalling, I suspect that many of them would prefer to wait on the platform for a less frequent train service, rather than have to endure a lengthier journey. A number of people have written to tell me that, if they want to change trains at Clapham Junction station, that would add yet another complication—yet another changing point—to their journey.

The proposals will not affect only a small number of my constituents. In the survey, Victoria station was the destination of 38 per cent. of customers, compared to 32 per cent. who travelled to London Bridge station, so there is clearly strong demand for trains to Victoria.

I do not believe that GoVia and the SRA have considered adequately the full implications of the proposals, so will the Minister tell us whether the SRA was aware of the implications of the proposed changes to the service? Does it take into account specific commuter needs when it makes its strategic decisions on train services?

Once upon a time our railways were a public service, not just a business. Privatisation has changed that, and we have seen the consequences. The nature of business means that GoVia wants to encourage the most customers to use its services, so that it can make the most profit. However, it has promised a "people first" culture that has given local rail users hope that they will have a real service for their money. That means that GoVia must embrace the needs of a minority and provide a service that caters for all. I urge it to live up to the hope that local people have placed in it and to be careful to weigh up all the options before it cuts off the direct services.

12.1 am

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this debate on an important issue that affects many of my constituents as well as his.

I want to put two issues to the Minister, and they both go to the heart of the services provided to my constituents. The first relates to the legacy of investment in the infrastructure at Sutton station and Cheam station by Connex, the current train operating company. The Minister will know that I have raised this issue on a number of occasions. Other Ministers have given welcome undertakings and the SRA has been monitoring that work.

The problem is that, at Sutton station, the work would have been finished last November if Connex had delivered on Ministers' undertakings. The work to upgrade Cheam station and to reopen the toilets and the waiting room should also have finished last year, but it has not even been started. I hope that the Minister will ask the SRA to chase Connex up on those matters, because we have not seen any improvements in the conditions at either station.

The work at Sutton station is now nearing completion, but it seems to be a matter of churlishness on the part of Connex—because it has lost the franchise—that it will not apply a lick of paint to the old fabric to bring it up to the standard of the new fabric that has been installed. I hope that that churlishness will be dealt with and that Sutton will have a decent station in the near future.

My second point deals with the experience that we have had from GoVia's running of the Thameslink franchise—the running times of Thameslink trains are truly appalling. GoVia is the worst provider of rail services in London. Out of the 10 train operating companies in London, it runs more trains late all day than any other company. More than half the trains do not arrive on time. Even at peak times, it is the ninth worst out of 10. That does not bode well if the company takes over the south central franchise and provides those services.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that Thameslink will soon be subject to the close attention of a refranchising process and that we will soon see the benefits of the trains running on time and that long-term investment will be made to improve the services. At present, services on the Wimbledon loop, which covers Sutton Common, Sutton West and Sutton stations, are not up to scratch. My constituents—including Sheila Bullock and Debbie Shepperd—write to me frequently about such matters and they make it clear to me that hundreds of my constituents suffer from an appalling service day in, day out. They do not want that when GoVia takes over the south central franchise nor do they want the current service on Thameslink to continue. I hope that the Minister will be able to give them some reassurance.

12.4 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this debate and providing the House with an opportunity to discuss GoVia's proposals for south London rail services. I was a little surprised that he has managed to obtain yet another Adjournment debate on fundamentally the same issue; he will have to tell me how he does it. If he tells other Back Benchers how he does it, he may find his style a little cramped.

The hon. Gentleman secured similar debates on 11 April and 15 November last year. Although there is little new to report since the announcements that were made when the south central franchise was awarded to GoVia, I welcome the opportunity to remind the House of what the deal represents in terms of investment and service improvements for passengers.

Before I speak about future proposals, I should like to mention current performance. The performance of Connex South Central services has improved over recent weeks. There was a serious decline in punctuality following the emergency speed restrictions that were imposed by Railtrack for safety reasons in the aftermath of the tragic accident at Hatfield. However, latest figures show that, in the four weeks to 6 January, there was a 9.3 per cent. improvement over the previous four-week period on the number of trains reaching their destination within five minutes of the timetable. I expect that upward trend to continue and very much hope that the industry continues to co-operate to improve services across the national rail network.

The hon. Gentleman is concerned about how passenger views are gauged. The Strategic Rail Authority carries out a national passenger survey twice a year. It asks for comments on punctuality, reliability and frequency of trains, on the standards of rolling stock, including comfort and seating, and on information about train times. He asked whether people were consulted during the refranchisement process. Consultation does take place in those circumstances. Local authorities, passenger committees and other stakeholders are encouraged to get involved. However, some aspect of the process will always be commercially confidential. It will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that in last autumn's national passenger survey, only 67 per cent. of Connex South Central passengers were satisfied with their journey and 17 per cent. were dissatisfied. Only 37 per cent. of Connex South Central passengers thought the company offered value for money, however.

It is evident from the previous debate on 15 November that the hon. Gentleman welcomed the chief executive's announcement on 24 October that the Strategic Rail Authority had signed heads of terms with GoVia and that the current operators of the Thameslink franchise were the preferred counterpart for the new replacement south central franchise. The aim of the franchise replacement is to secure a sustained improvement in performance and a step change in customer service through increased levels of investment. The proposals by GoVia and Connex Transport UK Ltd. offered substantial improvements over current standards of service. However, the chief executive decided that GoVia had demonstrated that it had the vision to bring about a step change in quality and the capacity to deliver, while offering better value for money.

As the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), reported to the House in the debate on 15 November, GoVia plans to brand the services that run to south London, Gatwick airport, Brighton and the south coast as the new southern railway. GoVia is expected to run the business for 20 years and over that period is expected to implement an investment programme valued at up to £1.5 billion. Of that investment, £900 million is for rolling stock, £325 million is for infrastructure, £200 million is for stations and £50 million is for depots.

My hon. Friend mentioned the early benefits that are expected from the new franchise, which I shall not repeat. However, GoVia has undertaken to support all forthcoming industry safety initiatives and comply with all relevant recommendations of current inquiries.

The company has undertaken to ensure that all new trains in service after December 2003 will be fitted with the train protection warning system and provision will be made for European rail traffic management systems. It plans to invest £1.2 million per year in training and development for staff, including, for train drivers, the use of simulators and other forms of improved training procedures.

The hon. Gentleman is concerned about future service levels, especially for services to and from London that serve stations in his constituency. At this stage GoVia can only work on the indicative timetable. The south London metro concept, which I will discuss in more detail later, will also have an affect on the current service pattern. However, GoVia is obligated to engage in formal consultation with consultees as the timetable develops.

The hon. Gentleman raised the concerns of many of his constituents about the fact that the desire to increase the frequency of trains into London appears to affect the company's ability to be flexible about which station those trains arrive at. I know that he has raised that matter at a public meeting. Consultation continues and no decision has yet been taken. I am told that there are operational problems in increasing the frequency and achieving the right mix of stations. The hon. Gentleman probably understands that better than I do, because of his meetings with the train company. No decision has been taken as to whether the trains would run into Victoria or London Bridge if their frequency were increased. Problems occur if they try to go to both, as the hon. Gentleman understands. I hope that he will continue to discuss that matter with the train company and consider carefully what is in his constituents' interests. I understand that change to their travel arrangements can be upsetting, but increased frequency might bring benefits that they do not fully appreciate at the moment.

Mr. Brake: It is important that I reflect my constituents' views, as well as talking to the train company. It is clear that the constituents who have contacted me are unhappy with the current proposals.

Mr. Ainsworth: That debate will obviously continue. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that service provision will be based on existing passenger service requirements, which provide a specified minimum service level. In some cases where new services on new routes have been introduced and become a valued part of the network, passenger service requirements will be extended to cover them.

[Mr. Ainsworth]

Where the passenger service requirement is currently augmented by higher levels of service, the Strategic Rail Authority requires the aggregate additional train mileage to be incorporated in the replacement franchise agreement as a separate contractual obligation. The Strategic Rail Authority will consult the relevant rail passengers committees and local authorities on any proposed changes to passenger service requirements.

I mentioned the south London metro, which is a concept jointly developed by the Strategic Rail Authority, train operating companies, Transport for London, Railtrack, the London Users Transport Committee, and the London borough-led partnerships, Seltrans and Sweltrac. Rail passengers can look forward to a "turn up and go" metro service similar to the London underground. Key features will be consistently high standards of station environment, information provision, passenger facilities, security and accessibility, with frequent, regular train services, including improvements to the level of service provision at weekends and in the evenings. The network will be branded and marketed as a single entity, even though services will be provided by a number of franchisees. A simplified fares and ticketing system, integrated with the tube and buses, is also an aspiration towards which progress is being made.

The emphasis on improving interchange with other modes of transport and the development of orbital routes will bring much needed relief to the London terminals. The south London metro concept will use sections of the existing Connex, South West Trains and Thameslink networks. Many of the features of the metro can be established within a three-year horizon, although achieving all the desired service improvements may take as long as 10 years where major infrastructure projects are required to relieve pressure on the network. Much of the financing will be provided through the Strategic Rail Authority's programme of franchise replacement, but significant contributions are also expected to come from the London boroughs, Railtrack and Transport for London.

The current Connex South Central franchise agreement is not due to expire until May 2003. However, it is expected that a date for formal change of control will be agreed shortly, to come into effect within the next few months. That will allow GoVia to assume control of and responsibility for south central services under the same terms as those presently provided by Connex. Final negotiation and signature of the new agreement with GoVia will then follow as soon as possible. Until the early transfer can be agreed, Connex is required to meet the terms of its existing franchise agreement, including service provision, performance regimes, station standards and customer satisfaction requirements. Failure to comply will result in a breach of its contract.

The Government are committed to delivering a better, bigger, safer railway with increased punctuality and reliability, reduced journey times and higher standards of customer services. Our 10-year transport plan provides £180 billion, which includes £60 billion for railways. The Strategic Rail Authority has recently published its strategic agenda, which will be followed by its more detailed strategic plan in the autumn. The agenda is essentially a situation report, describing the main issues that the industry faces and the actions that the Strategic Rail Authority has taken, to date, to tackle them.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman is reassured that passengers in and around his constituency, as well as in the rest of the country, will benefit from the improved rail services that these initiatives will generate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 21 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister was asked—

Ministerial Visit (Iran)

1. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If she will make a statement on her recent visit to Iran. [153300]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): My visit to Iran, at the invitation of the former Iranian ambassador in London, was to help to build partnerships for better co-operation between our countries to halt the flow of heroin from Afghanistan through Iran into Europe. That causes social problems on the way. This co-operation will benefit both the UK and Iran. While I was there, I signed a memorandum of understanding between Iran and the UK on drugs co-operation and pledged a further £78,000 from the UK to help Iranian drug demand reduction efforts.

Mr. Mackinlay: I fully endorse my right hon. Friend's endeavours to combat organised drug crime between here and Iran. Her visit was highly publicised, so can she tell us whether she had an opportunity to reinforce the United Kingdom's deep concerns about continued civil rights abuses in Iran, particularly bearing in mind the fact that her visit coincided with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's listing the Mujaheddin as a proscribed organisation? Were the right signals conveyed to Tehran during her visit for that important reason?

Marjorie Mowlam: I consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office before I left. The issue was raised with me and I explained what had been done. We, as a Government, are opposed to capital punishment and the kind of human rights violations that take place in Iran. However, if we are to make progress, it is better to work with countries for change; talking to people makes change a possibility. If we just ignore and condemn, that will not bring about change. Iran has a different culture, but while I was there I raised the issue of human rights with every Minister I met and referred, in particular, to the case of the folk who went to the conference in Berlin and were imprisoned for that.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has the right hon. Lady made of the uses to which the Iranians have put the £2.68 million contributed by the British Government to the anti-drugs effort? How does she expect the additional £78,000 to be allocated, and is she now able to throw any light on the real reasons for the sudden resignation of the head of that country's anti-drugs headquarters, General Mohammad Fallah?

Marjorie Mowlam: General Mohammad Fallah resigned and then took up his job again. I think the explanation of why he left now becomes a secondary issue.

The money allocated from this country goes with that from other countries to the United Nations, and the UN drugs team uses the money. I saw it being used to improve the systems for night vision on the border and to assist customs and excise. It is used to help to stop the drugs moving through.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Although I appreciate the need for the memorandum of understanding to prevent drugs from coming to Europe and to the United Kingdom in particular, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a need to strike up a dialogue with the country in which the drugs originate? Perhaps we could establish a European package so that farmers who currently grow poppies are encouraged to diversify into other crops. The poppy, which has caused so much misery, could be replaced by other crops.

Marjorie Mowlam: The United Nations drugs unit has a policy of co-operation between European countries to feed into the UN's efforts in Afghanistan. The Taliban are in discussion with the Iranians, so there is some communication between them on policy. My hon. Friend's suggestion that European Union countries should be involved is valid. We have just managed to do that elsewhere, and Spain is taking that approach in its relations with Colombia. The European Union has provided 105 million ecu to help to prevent the production of cocaine in Colombia. I am sure that, in time, we will begin to understand that such countries face problems partly because of the demand in Europe, so I hope that the policy that my hon. Friend described will be followed.

Regulatory Reform Bill

2. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): If she will make a statement on the impact of the provisions of the Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]* on the regulation of business. [153301]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): The Bill will enable Government to reform whole regulatory regimes originating in different pieces of legislation using a well tried and tested parliamentary procedure. That will simplify legislation and make it less burdensome for business while maintaining the necessary protections for both the consumer and the environment.

Mr. Healey: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. There is strong support for the Bill among businesses in south Yorkshire, including members of the Federation of Small Businesses whom I met on Friday night. Many will welcome the 51 reform proposals that are now in the pipeline under the Bill. However, will he explain how firms that want other outdated and overlapping regulations removed in the future can register their concerns, so that he can consider using the powers that he will have at his disposal under the Bill?

Mr. Stringer: My hon. Friend's experience in south Yorkshire reflects my discussions with businesses throughout the country. In addition to the 51 items that we listed, businesses are invited to use the Cabinet Office website to suggest proposals for regulatory reform. They can write directly to us at any time or inform us of their concerns in the many consultations that we hold with them, in which I will be delighted to tell them that although we want the reforms, the Opposition do not.

Public Appointments Commissioner

3. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If she will make a statement on the work of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. [153302]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): The Commissioner for Public Appointments, Dame Rennie Fritchie, regulates ministerial appointments to public bodies within her remit. Her work and advice are highly regarded and respected by the Government.

Mr. Brady: The Minister knows that it is a year since the Government faced swingeing criticism from the Commissioner for Public Appointments about the practice of stuffing national health service trust boards and health authorities with Labour crony appointments. In the 12 months since then, they have continued that practice in their appointments to the new primary care trust boards. Dame Rennie Fritchie has been—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That does not sound like a question. If the hon. Gentleman agrees to ask one quickly, I shall allow him to continue.

Mr. Brady: I shall indeed be quick. Dame Rennie Fritchie's inquiry into the practice as it relates to primary care trusts will be concluded at the end of the month. Will the Minister ensure that the report is produced very early in April, so that the Government cannot sweep it under the carpet?

Mr. Stringer: What an extraordinary statement from a party that appointed a three-times failed Conservative candidate as chairman of the Yorkshire health authority—that was its approach to public appointments. The Labour party has co-operated with the Commissioner for Public Appointments and accepted her recommendations. If the hon. Gentleman reads the text of the report, he will see that the Government's appointment of local councillors reflects the proportion of councillors on the ground.

Mr. Brady *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Stringer: That is what the report says, unlike when the Conservatives were in government and they put their friends and their friends' wives into every appointment going.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I think it is recognised that the Commissioner for Public Appointments is doing a good job and I hope that she will soon be reappointed. However, what matters is which public bodies are covered by her remit. Will my hon. Friend ensure that new public bodies automatically come under her remit unless there is a good reason why they should not?

Mr. Stringer: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Government have extended the number of appointments covered by the commissioner to more than 30,000. We always consider whether new bodies are appropriate for the Nolan process. However, bodies that are established quickly for specialist purposes and last for only two or three months are not appropriate for it.

Regulation

4. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If she will make a statement on her role in interdepartmental co-ordination of Government policy on regulation. [153303]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): I chair the panel for regulatory accountability that looks at new regulations in the pipeline. We have also appointed a regulatory reform Minister in each Department; and on Monday, the Regulatory Reform Bill, which was introduced in December, had its Second Reading in the House.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank the right hon. Lady for her answer. In her role as the regulator of Departments, is she aware that this morning—on top of everything else—the Foreign Secretary admitted that he had leaked documents to a BBC journalist, even though he had previously denied that? Is she further aware that, less than four years after being elected, the Government are characterised by hype, no delivery—and now sleaze?

Marjorie Mowlam: I am not sure that that has anything to do with the nature of the questions being asked today, and it shows how panicked the Conservative party is by the prospect of an election. It is trying to hide the previous Government's record of sleaze.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): In the co-ordination to which she has referred, will my right hon. Friend make it an absolute responsibility of all Departments to ensure that the public know that the Government are committed to better regulation, whereas the Conservative party is committed to deregulation, particularly if it erodes conditions for working people?

Marjorie Mowlam: That is a central aim of the Government, but we will not achieve it in the unbalanced

way the Conservatives did. The Regulatory Reform Bill is an example of balance in legislation. It aims to ensure that basic rights—unlike the Tories, we will not apologise for them or portray them as excessive and costly—are upheld. I am not going to apologise for the minimum wage, for improving maternity leave, for bringing in parental leave, for giving millions of employees the right to paid holiday for the first time, or for tackling discrimination against the disabled. We will be proud of those changes, but we will not forget the needs of business and never have done. This morning, five draft Bills were published which will make 51 improvements and save business £40 million. The Regulatory Reform Bill is balanced to protect workers' rights and to help business.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): In the course of her discussions on regulation with colleagues, what did the right hon. Lady discuss with the Foreign Secretary in relation to the Stockholm summit this weekend? What attitude will the Government take to the proposal from UNICE—the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe—and Eurochambres for introducing a rigorous programme of business impact assessments?

Marjorie Mowlam: We are working not only across Departments but with the Commission, the European Parliament and other member states to improve and simplify the European regulatory environment. As part of that we participate in the Mandelkern group on better regulation, which has produced a very good report on specific, practical recommendations. Last week, I talked to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office before his departure for Stockholm, and he addressed issues relating to the summit report. The development of a system in the Commission to assess the costs and benefits of all proposed European legislation is one of the key elements that we are working towards.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that reply, but I am afraid that I was looking for something more specific. Can she say that it will be the intention of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary at the Stockholm summit this weekend to secure a Council agreement requiring the Commission to undertake immediate discussions with business organisations on introducing an business impact assessment system, and to commit the Commission to do so within a maximum of 18 months?

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Given that the usual Tory reaction of approving a Bill in the other place and opposing it here was evident on Monday night when we debated the Regulatory Reform Bill, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that she will continue to make proposals that will deal with inconsistencies and anomalies in a whole raft of regulations in different areas, rather than the individual cases that can be dealt with under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994?

Marjorie Mowlam: I was as surprised and disappointed as my hon. Friend by Conservative Members' reaction to the Bill, given that the Opposition in another place supported it in principle. The Conservative party has a very poor record of regulatory reform in government, having introduced no fewer than 13 times as many regulations as were repealed under the deregulation initiative between 1994 and 1997. Conservative Members are now opposing legislation that could bring £40 million in benefits to business and the community in just five early reforms.

Modernising Government Programme

5. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): If she will make a statement on progress with the modernising government programme. [153304]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): We are making excellent progress, as illustrated in "Citizens First—Open All Hours", the modernising government annual report, which was published in September.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) should be aware of the strong consumer focus of the London borough of Hillingdon. For example, as part of the best value review, the council consulted residents widely to ensure that proposals are geared to local needs. Those proposals include more foster carers, action to tackle fly-tipping and a telephone call centre operating out of hours.

Mr. Wilkinson: May I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the aim of the modernising government programme was to involve public service users, not providers, more closely in matters affecting their lives? In that context, how can he justify the action of the NHS in ignoring so far the 100,000 petitioners who have urged that Harefield hospital be retained and built up? How is it that a vested interest, such as the Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority, which is a member of the regeneration partnership, can lead the consultation on the future of the hospital?

Mr. McCartney: I have no detailed knowledge of individual hospitals and shall write to the hon. Gentleman. However, there has been a 6.7 per cent. increase in the NHS allocation in his area; £184 million has been allocated for next year, compared with the previous allocation of £169 million. More than £500,000 has been invested in modernising an accident and emergency unit; there is £500,000 for a new cancer network; and tens of thousands of pounds have been allocated to reduce the area's long waiting lists.

The Government are modernising the health service; the Tories just want to privatise it.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress that has been made on developments in UK Online, especially the section on life events, which will provide a great service to the public at times of great need. May I suggest that one way of improving the site and monitoring its success would be to establish a link for Members of Parliament to feed in suggestions about how to develop it further?

Mr. McCartney: I am more than happy to offer every Member of Parliament the opportunity to express their

ideas. Indeed, one aim of the site is to seek information on a regular, daily basis from its users about how to improve both it and the services that it provides. As a consequence, we shall improve the site, based on customer feedback. If my hon. Friend wants to make suggestions, I will ensure that we try to incorporate them, so long as they are good.

Government Services (Accessibility)

6. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): If she will make a statement on making Government services more accessible to the public. [153306]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): We have appointed consumer champions in all the key central government services to find out and meet users' needs. I visited my hon. Friend's constituency on 15 March to launch the booklet "Citizens First—Open All Hours", which details progress to date on providing extended opening hours across the public services. We will provide electronic access to all relevant services by 2005. The UK Online citizens' portal went live on 4 December 2000.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply and welcome the Government's commitment to extending access to public services in health, education and employment. I was particularly pleased to welcome my right hon. Friend to the NHS walk-in centre in Slough—open 15 hours a day, 7 days a week—where he saw the work of Sally Patrick and her excellent team.

Can we look forward to other public services having an extended opening hours culture so that citizens who are at work—after all, there are many more of them under this Government than there used to be—can get access to public services?

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend is right, and I can give her a commitment that there will be a rolling programme for a range of services across the public sector, based on the "Open All Hours" document. Some of those services will be accessible 24 hours a day, some will be accessible at weekends, and there will be some early morning and late evening services. The basis of those changes will be feedback from consumers using local government and community services.

I ask my hon. Friend to pass on my best wishes to Sister Sally Patrick, who looked after us last week when I visited the Slough centre. It has already seen 10,000 patients in the first few months of operation and is now one of 40 NHS walk-in centres which provide a first-class health care service to people every day. Only four short years ago, such centres did not exist under the Tories. This Government, however, are modernising the health service.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has the right hon. Gentleman read either of the EURIM—European Information Society Group—reports on e-government and the modernisation of government? One of the working parties involved was chaired by the hon. Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran). Is he glad to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) has announced that it is Conservative party policy to proceed with suggestions such as those made in the reports? Will he make urgent representations regarding implementation of the Senior Salaries Review Body recommendations, to ensure that Members of Parliament have proper IT that links in with the Government system? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I ask the House to come to order. The noise is unfair to hon. Members who are interested in the question.

Mr. McCartney: It sounds just like home at the weekend, Mr. Speaker.

I am fully committed to IT provision over the next few years, not only in terms of modernising the House. That includes not only equipment, but training, in terms of services both in the House and at constituency level. If the hon. Gentleman has any views on the matter, I ask him to contact me, as he has a friend at court.

On the second issue, I have not read Conservative party proposals in detail, but if they have at last turned the tide away from the incompetence on IT that was demonstrated by the previous Government, progress will have been made. The current Government were left with a huge legacy of failure in virtually every IT system procured by the previous Government. That cost the taxpayers of Britain hundreds of millions of pounds and delivered few good services. We are at last turning that around and are at the leading edge in the delivery of e-commerce.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Will my right hon. Friend go a step further on public services and see whether we can get the public to elect the people who run those services—especially the quangos?

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend raises the issue of democratising quangos. That is exactly what this Government have done. We have removed Tory placemen and women and replaced them with local people. We have removed Tory business men and replaced them with people from ethnic minority communities. We have replaced Tory placemen with local women. We will continue to ensure that quangos and other public bodies represent the communities in which people live, not merely Tory placements.

Anti-drugs Strategy

7. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): What new steps are under consideration in the Government's national anti-drugs strategy. [153307]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): The Government are undertaking research to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of the UK and international drugs market, which will improve our intelligence on the class A drugs threat assessment. The national treatment agency and pooled treatment budgets will come into effect on 1 April 2001. We announced in the Budget significant additional investment for targeted action at local and regional level. That will provide an opportunity to build on the experience of initiatives such as parents against drug abuse in south-west Cheshire.

Mrs. Winterton: Studies show that one in 10 drivers under the age of 40 get behind the wheel having taken drugs ranging from cannabis to cocaine. Traces of drugs

are found in one in five people killed on the roads. Will the Minister therefore introduce a national anti-drug driving campaign, bearing in mind the fact that young people have, on the whole, learned the lesson about not drinking and driving?

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are researching the issue to which the hon. Lady refers. That is the best way of tackling the question of driving under the influence of drugs, legal or illegal, and of providing ways to help the police enforce existing legislation more effectively. It is now being developed alongside other initiatives.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Does the Minister for the Cabinet Office agree that the members of the Runciman commission were respected and knowledgeable people who undertook a detailed, independent, scientific study of the problems of drug use and abuse? If so, why have the Government rejected each of its recommendations out of hand?

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government implemented a large number of the Runciman recommendations. The few that we rejected included one on cannabis. Our approach is clear: the scientific evidence is insufficient to convince us that the law should be changed. However, that does not prevent discussion and debate. If the scientific evidence changes, we will reconsider the matter.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [153331] **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 21 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Winterton: Livestock is an important and substantial part of agriculture in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister assure hon. Members that farmers whose animals are slaughtered as a result of foot and mouth disease will receive compensation immediately, and that businesses that are affected by the restrictions will receive 100 per cent. relief from the business rate for six months? Will he also ensure that those who are dealing with the outbreak are allowed to use burial to get rid of the carcases that are currently lying on farms?

The Prime Minister: First, on compensation, I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that, yes, they will be paid 100 per cent. compensation. Indeed, we have already paid out £80 million-worth of compensation. We are trying to make sure that any compensation is paid within seven days.

In respect of the burial of animals, there have been difficulties over the issue of water tables, particularly up in the part of the world that the hon. Gentleman represents. We are making arrangements with the Environment Agency now to try to ensure that we get the necessary burial sites, because that is the best way of disposing of the animals quickly. We believe that we will have those in place very shortly.

Finally, in relation to those farms that have been affected not by the disease but by the restrictions on movement, yes of course they will be subject to the measures that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment announced yesterday in respect of relief from business rates.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): In a few days' time, a cynical, selfish international company will wreck irreparably some capacity in the British steel industry and destroy the lives of thousands of steelworkers. Yesterday, the Government gave unprecedented aid to tourism. Will the Prime Minister now consider a similar unprecedented package for those steelworkers, many of whom will never work again? The problems of tourism are serious but temporary; the devastation suffered by the steelworking communities is permanent.

The Prime Minister: Of course, we urge the company yet again to reconsider the proposals that mean that 6,000 people are made redundant by Corus. That is a very serious situation for those communities affected and for those individuals affected. In addition, we will be there, standing ready and willing to give whatever help we can to those people, should those plans go ahead. Of course, we are well aware of our obligation—and have the financial capacity—to stand behind those people. However, that is secondary to our first desire, which is to ensure that the plans for redundancy do not go ahead.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Yesterday's record number of new foot and mouth cases, and the 25 cases already announced at lunchtime today, show clearly that there is no immediate end in sight, not just for farmers but for huge numbers of rural businesses now facing ruin. May we welcome yesterday's announcements by the Government taskforce, but say to the Prime Minister that there is an urgent case for immediate help?

I wrote to the Prime Minister earlier today with a proposal for an emergency scheme that would give struggling rural businesses loans to help them through the crisis. I gave him notice that I would raise it with him this afternoon. Will he consider adopting the scheme?

The Prime Minister: First of all, as we announced in yesterday's statement, we are already considering with the Small Business Service and others ways in which we can ensure continuing credit for small businesses. That would include, for example, use of the small firms loan guarantee fund. It may in practice be quicker and easier to build on an existing scheme rather than to invent an entirely new one.

I should also say that we can give further details of the proposals on business rates. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will be providing more details of the help, but the scheme will cover all 118 rural local authorities and businesses in those areas with

rateable values of less than £12,000 will be able to apply if they are facing serious hardship as a result of foot and mouth disease. We estimate that this will cover about 75 per cent. of all businesses in rural areas. Depending on the take-up, up to 50,000 people could benefit.

Obviously, we shall also consider carefully the proposal that the right hon. Gentleman has just put forward. I would, however, say that, of course, Government help is important, but those rural businesses cannot exist on Government subsidy. What those businesses—particularly those in tourism—most need is custom, business, trade. They need people to come into the countryside and to realise that there is no reason why they should not go there and resume normal tourist activities. On the contrary, it is absolutely vital for the survival of those tourist industries that people do so.

Mr. Hague: I welcome the further details of the rate relief scheme from the Government. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have called for more details of that over the past week.

However, may I press the right hon. Gentleman to consider more quickly—given that he said that he would consider—the help that could be given to the cash flow of businesses through loans? The crisis for those businesses is now in its fifth week, whatever happens in the next few weeks. The biggest problem facing hotels, shops, tourist attractions and other small businesses is cash flow, even if those businesses were to turn up a little now. The proposal that we have put to the Prime Minister would offer those businesses emergency help in the form of a loan of up to £10,000, which they would not have to pay back until they were making a profit again. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot accept that scheme, or if he wants to build it on to a different one, will he come back to the House with an alternative to it, and do so as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will come back with the proposals that we are making. The relief that we are suggesting should be given to people in respect of tax, VAT and business rates will help those businesses.

In his letter to me, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the fact that, with a large budget surplus, we would be able to offer the £500 million fund that he was asking for, and that that fund would allow for emergency loans of up to £10,000 for a business. In all frankness, even a loan of up to £10,000 will not help a country hotel or a major tourist attraction through this problem.

That is why, in addition to whatever measures of relief we are offering, it is important to make it clear that, although people should obey the restrictions in place in the countryside, it is important for the tourist industry that we send out the clearest possible message that people should not be cancelling their bookings at hotels and tourist attractions. On the contrary, they should be going there and making the most of the tourist industry and trade in a responsible way.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister is right to say that £10,000 would not make a huge difference to a huge tourist attraction. But it would make a huge difference to tens of thousands of small rural businesses, and they are the ones at greatest risk.

On the question of dealing with the outbreak itself, the Prime Minister will be aware that since last Thursday the backlog of infected animals awaiting slaughter has gone up, from 64,000 to 108,000 yesterday. The backlog of dead animals awaiting disposal had doubled to 80,000 as of yesterday. We will not control this outbreak until we clear these backlogs. Will the right hon. Gentleman now agree to a far greater deployment of the Army, with its manpower and its engineering and logistics capabilities, on tasks such as the burial and disposal of carcases?

The Prime Minister: On the measures to control and eradicate the disease, I will deal with the point about the Army. There is a lot of confusion about this issue. The Army has made it quite clear—as the right hon. Gentleman will see from the detailed statement that the Ministry of Defence will issue later today—that there are three different aspects to ensuring that we control and eradicate the disease in the areas most affected. One is the issue of logistics; the second is the issue of slaughter; and the third is the issue of disposal. We have the slaughtermen there, and the contractors who can come in and carry out the disposal. There is no doubt that the principal problem is one of logistics, and of organising and administering those tasks in the areas most affected.

As the disease has progressed over the past few weeks, we have been able to see that it is increasingly concentrated in certain main areas. Indeed, more than half the 46 new cases announced yesterday were in Cumbria and Dumfries, with several more in Devon.

Now, what is important is to use the Army for what it says it will do best—that is, the logistics operations. There are now logistics operations from the Army in each of those main areas; there is a full control and operations centre in each of those areas. That really is, according to all the best advice we have, including that from the farmers' union on the ground, the best way to make sure that we can then organise the operation properly so that the animals are identified, slaughtered and disposed of properly.

Mr. Hague: I am sure that it is right that the main way in which the Army can be used successfully is in a logistical capacity, but this is an urgent, massive and growing problem and only a handful of personnel are being used in a logistical capacity. A Ministry of Defence spokesman said today that MAFF has asked for only 60 soldiers in Devon and the rest are on standby, waiting for word. There are large amounts of military resources on standby.

When there is a desperate shortage of people to help to deal with the crisis, no one in the countryside can understand why the Government are not making use of the thousands of soldiers and heavy machinery that they have at their disposal, and making use of them more urgently than has been done so far. Will the Prime Minister step up, as a matter of urgency, the deployment of the Army to the tasks of which he has spoken?

The Prime Minister: We now have in place the necessary people for the logistics. I repeat to the right hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* I simply ask Opposition Members to listen to this, because we have looked at it very carefully in line with the comments of people on the ground: there is not a shortage of slaughtermen; there is

not a shortage of contractors to dispose of the animals. It is necessary, however, to organise the operation properly. There are now the logistics teams in place.

The other problem is a shortage of vets. That also is very important. Let me tell the House what we have done. The daily rate for the vets has been increased from some £160 to £250 per day. There is a new call for private vets. I should say, however, that the normal State Veterinary Service of 220 is running at more than 1,100. However, we will bring in even more, particularly in Cumbria and Devon where they are urgently needed.

In addition, we are ensuring that burial arrangements are being agreed with the Environment Agency, because, as I said a moment ago, burial is preferable to burning. In addition to that, we shall have in place within the next week sufficient rendering capacity so that we will be able to dispose of some 250,000 sheep carcases per week. That is the best way to dispose of those animals—through burial and through rendering.

We have the capacity to do that now. What we need, I repeat, are the logistics teams in place. They are now in place. *[Interruption.]* I say to Opposition Members who are shouting at me that this has been a situation in which the people on the ground have suddenly had to upgrade the whole nature of their operations in the most extraordinary way. I ask people to spare a thought for the pressure that they have been under.

Now that we can see that the disease is concentrated in certain areas, we are able to concentrate more and more resources on those areas. I think that that is the best way to proceed. In addition, we have proceeded throughout not just according to the advice of the veterinary service, but, at each stage, with the National Farmers Union.

Mr. Hague: The people on the ground have done a magnificent job in upgrading their capability—sometimes they have upgraded their capability faster than the decision-making machinery of Her Majesty's Government has.

On a final point, a huge spectrum of people, ranging from the Liberal Democrat leader of Devon county council to the Cumbria tourist board to Labour Members of Parliament, have raised real questions about whether county council elections in certain areas—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] From all parties. Can elections possibly proceed—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must say to the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) that he had best be quiet.

Mr. Hague: Labour Members should listen to some of their colleagues. The hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) has said:

"I would be looking to have some kind of delay".

Is he meant to be frit? The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) has said:

"There is an argument for postponement".

The hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) has said:

"The Government is clueless about the scale of chaos in Cumbria".

Labour Members should listen to their colleagues.

Given that people from different political parties have raised those concerns and given that having the option to delay some local elections requires legislation quickly, is the Prime Minister absolutely sure that he will not regret later doing nothing now?

The Prime Minister: Voices are raised on both sides about this, but we are concentrating, as we should be, on controlling and eradicating the disease.

As for the elections, they are the elections set for 3 May. I understand the feelings of those who say "Let us postpone those elections", and I will of course listen carefully to their representations; I simply ask people to bear in mind two other factors to be weighed in the balance.

The first of those factors is the signal that we would send out to the country. If we sent out a message that, in effect, the democratic process had to go into suspension, that Britain was in a state of quarantine, that we were in some way closed for business—I worry about the effect that that would have on the tourist business. I do ask people to bear that in mind. Many interests need to be taken into account in rural areas.

Secondly, I simply ask the right hon. Gentleman this: postpone until when? For one month, two months, six months? In 1967, this disease went on for eight months. I simply believe that we should weigh these factors sensibly in the balance. Of course I will listen to the representations that are made, but what should be done ultimately is what is right in the interests not just of the countryside but of the whole country—people in the countryside, and people not in the countryside—and that is what we shall do.

Mr. Hague: Very briefly—*[Interruption.]* The Prime Minister has asked me a question.

May I say—very briefly, given the time—that the Prime Minister must weigh against that the fact that three weeks ago the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that coming to the House for three hours was a distraction from dealing with the crisis? He will have to be happy that for all the authorities in Devon and Cumbria, spending four weeks fighting an election is not a distraction from dealing with the crisis.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, of course I understand the representations of those who are making the case for postponing the elections, and will listen carefully to them. I simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman, if we are quoting individual Ministers or shadow Ministers: I think it was his own shadow Agriculture Minister who denounced the prospect of postponing the local elections just a couple of weeks ago.

Leaving all that aside, the question is, what is the right thing to do? I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that of course I will listen to those representations, but it is important to weigh in the balance the question of what signal we would send if we did indeed postpone the local elections.

I am acutely conscious—because the right hon. Gentleman raised it earlier—of the issue of the tourism industry and businesses in the countryside. What they need, even given the gravity of the situation, is for people to go about their business as normal, as far as is possible. We must send the message out to people that Britain is

not in a state of quarantine; on the contrary, provided that they obey the restrictions in the countryside, people should go and enjoy the countryside as they should.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): The head of tourism in the south-west told me today that the local elections must go ahead, because to delay them would send completely the wrong message to wider Britain and the wider world. Will the Prime Minister ensure, however, that the Government provide accurate and up-to-date information that makes it clear to people that, even in counties that are badly affected—such as Devon—many places are open for business as usual?

The Prime Minister: Of course it is important for us to send that message to people very clearly. *[Interruption.]* I hope that Opposition Members who are shouting at my hon. Friend realise that I think they have some responsibility to back up that message, and not say to people "Don't go into the countryside." What we should be saying to people is, "Obey the restrictions, but it is important for the tourism industry that people do enjoy the countryside".

There are businesses in Bath, in York, even in London, that are suffering as a result of the drop in the tourism trade. That is why it is so important that on the one hand we send the message that is necessary to control and eradicate the disease, and on the other hand we send the clear message that people should by all means go into the countryside, but they should obey the restrictions that are there.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that this is not the time for politicians to be talking about our livelihoods, in terms of elections, when other people are seeing their livelihoods literally going down the tubes, hour by hour and day by day. *[Interruption.]* I understand why some Conservative Members are worried about their livelihoods, but that is another story.

Does the Prime Minister share the concern, and, indeed, the view that it is unbelievable, of Ben Gill, president of the National Farmers Union, who has acknowledged today that, much to his dismay, half the abattoirs in this country are closed, despite the current scale of difficulty? Is that not an extraordinary state of affairs and what are the Government going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: Of course it is the case that there are abattoirs that are closed precisely because of the problems that we have had over the disease, but that is why we are seeking to ensure that we open the abattoirs that we can in order to process the animals that are being killed for the food chain now. It is perhaps worth saying to the House again, just to set some of this in context, that, at the moment, we are slaughtering about 250,000 animals a week for normal human consumption in the food chain. Outside the time of the disease, we would normally slaughter about 500,000 each week. It is worth setting that against the 400,000 that we have slaughtered for reasons of foot and mouth disease. We are having to balance making sure that we are getting animals to slaughter with making sure that the abattoirs themselves are clean and free from disease.

Mr. Kennedy: A couple of weeks ago, the Prime Minister properly, although four years too late, called for a serious searching debate in this country about the nature of our farming industry, the rural economy and the whole food chain. Does he acknowledge that one of the things that needs serious searching attention is the absence, all too often, of abattoirs in various parts of the country and the knock-on effect that that is having, not least in the present crisis, with the moving of animals and the traceability of the problem itself? Will the right hon. Gentleman give that urgent attention once we are through the immediate crisis?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the decline in the number of abattoirs—particularly small abattoirs—happened some time ago. I know that there is a serious debate as to whether the absence of sufficient numbers of small abattoirs is a contributory factor in disease spreading—not just foot and mouth, but any type of disease. Again, there are views on both sides of that argument.

As for the question of the long-term future and viability of the farming industry, of course, it is important that, once the immediate difficulties are out of the way, we sit down and look at that very carefully, but it is not a process in which nothing has happened in the past few years. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food reminds me that, last year, we conducted a series of debates and consultations with the farming industry over rural development regulation and over how to change the nature of the farming industry over the coming years. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman's party participated in those discussions—and very constructively, too. There will be an opportunity for us to consider some of those long-term questions. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, that will await the end of the immediate position which is one of eradicating and controlling the disease.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Whenever my right hon. Friend chooses to call the day, can he assure the House and indeed the country that he will lead a campaign to save the pounds: that is, £16 billion worth of cuts proposed by the Conservative party—cuts to schools, cuts to hospitals and cuts in the fight against crime? Does he agree that that will be a popular campaign and that it will not need a flat-backed lorry to get it off the ground?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the choices before the country will be very clear. There is a major dividing line between the two political parties. We are in favour of additional investment in our schools, hospitals, police and transport system and the Conservative party is committed to £16 billion worth of cuts in those vital services.

Q3. [153333] **Mr. Nick Hawkins** (Surrey Heath): Despite the Prime Minister's previous waffle about only needing logistical support, does he not realise that, with dying and dead beasts lying in fields and on farms for days, people in the country need support from the Army? Is not the real reason why the Army has not been fully

deployed the existence of an internal Whitehall turf war between the Treasury, MAFF and the MOD? Will the Prime Minister not recognise that he is held responsible by people in the countryside and must sort this out?

The Prime Minister: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is no: that is completely and totally untrue. We have made it clear that there are no resource restrictions on dealing with this disease at all. Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that this Government—in spite of the fact that the last Government paid out not a single penny piece in agrimonetary compensation—have pulled down some £600 million of agrimonetary compensation since we have been in office. We are deploying the Army as we are because that is the united view not simply of MAFF, but of the Ministry of Defence and the Army experts. The Army stands ready and willing to do whatever is necessary.

I repeat that there is not a shortage of slaughtermen, and there is not a shortage—at the moment, at any rate—of contractors to do the work. There is, however, a shortage of a proper logistical operation to tie the whole administration together in those areas where the disease is at its strongest. It is precisely that operation that the Army is now carrying out.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Would the Prime Minister care to comment on the activities of the steel company Corus which, on the day it was formed, handed over £700 million in sweeteners to its shareholders; it then appropriated £900 million from the workers' pension fund; it then wasted £135 million in buying up firms abroad; it then compensated an incompetent former chief executive to the tune of millions of pounds; and yet it has announced the closure of one of the most efficient steel plants in the world, in my constituency of Blaenau Gwent, for reasons that the company describes as financial?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely for that reason that we have asked the company to reconsider its decision. I pay tribute to the trade unions for the way in which they have assembled a package to save their jobs and their industry. It is a proper, commercial package that has been properly worked out and would make a profit for the company. It is exactly for those reasons that we have asked the company to reconsider. We still hope that it will hear that call and reconsider the decision that has caused such devastation in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Despite the Prime Minister's earlier comments, do not the figures speak for themselves? The rapidly lengthening list of animals awaiting slaughter shows that the time scale between diagnosis and slaughter is too long and is probably part of the cause of the increasing rate of outbreak of the disease. Does he agree that in light of the delays and the need for speed, now is not the time for any haggling over small aspects of valuation; for squabbling between different Departments; for waiting for the Environment Agency to look at every single aspect of the matter; and for political correctness about not using hunt servants as slaughtermen? Will the Prime Minister do everything he can to bang heads together and to make sure that those actions are carried out as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: Of course; that is precisely what we are doing. Before the hon. Gentleman shakes his head, he might at least listen to my answer. For example, there has been a problem—in certain parts of the country, at any rate—in agreeing the proper price for the slaughtered animal. We are agreeing a tariff that will quicken the valuation process. For example, we are slaughtering before valuation where necessary. For example, slaughter before lab tests—the point raised by the Leader of the Opposition last week—is now happening in 80 per cent. of the cases and is happening wherever necessary. In relation to the Environment Agency, there is an issue in respect of water tables. We cannot simply ignore that or pretend that it does not exist. However, we are working with the agency to clear any obstructions so that we can use burial, which is far more effective than burning.

In relation to any bureaucratic rules—for example, those which say that vets, having visited an inspected farm, cannot visit a new farm—we are changing all those rules and removing whatever bureaucratic obstacles we responsibly can on the advice of the chief veterinary officer. We are putting in place a process for checking all the flocks in non-infected areas so that they can be declared non-infected as soon as possible. All of that is being done.

In particular, the time for slaughter is being shortened considerably and, as a result of the logistical exercise that I have just described, we will be able, over the coming week, to shorten the time between slaughter and disposal. I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear in mind the fact that all of this has been required as we have seen how the disease has been concentrated in certain areas. The disease is in certain areas and not in others. Even though the situation is immensely grave, it is worth emphasising once again that, at present, less than 1 per cent. of the livestock of this country has been subject to slaughter.

What is important is that, as we see how the disease is concentrated, we put in a more and more intense effort into those areas, and that we are now doing. People at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and on the ground are spending every hour that they can working on the problem. It is right that we recognise the contribution that they have made.

Equal Pay (Audit)

3.30 pm

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require employers to carry out an audit of their pay structures' compliance with the provisions of the Equal Pay Act 1970—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order. Perhaps hon. Members would leave the Chamber quietly.

Mr. Coaker: I shall begin by publicly thanking the Equal Opportunities Commission for its help, and by congratulating it on its recently published report entitled "Just Pay".

In 1970, my noble Friend Baroness Castle, who was then First Secretary of State and Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, introduced the Second Reading of the Equal Pay (No. 2) Bill. I reread her inspirational speech, and found many moving quotes that set the scene for today's debate. She said:

"There can be no doubt that this afternoon we are witnessing another historic advance in the struggle against discrimination in our society, this time against discrimination on grounds of sex . . . While other people have talked—lots of people have talked—we intend to make equal pay for equal work a reality".

She went on to say:

"The concept of equal pay for equal work is so self-evidently right and just that it has been part of our national thinking for a very long time . . . Indeed, as far back as 1888, the TUC first endorsed the principle of the same wages for the same work.—[*Official Report*, 9 February 1970; Vol. 795, c. 914.]

Some 30 years after those remarks, what would Baroness Castle make of the progress that we have made? I think that there would be pride in the progress that has been made, but disappointment that equal pay is still not a reality. Thirty years after the 1970 Act, discrimination in pay is still a reality for many thousands of women. Equal pay for equal work may have been part of our national thinking for a long time, but it clearly still requires major national action. Our practice has often fallen far short of the ideal.

The pay gap between men and women has narrowed since the 1970 Act was passed. In 1970, the gap stood at 31 per cent. It is smaller in 2001, but women working full time still earn, on average, 18 per cent. less per hour than men. Women working part time earn 39 per cent. less per hour than male full-time workers. It is clear, therefore, that the initial progress made soon after the 1970 Act became law in 1975 has faltered and that the pay gap, especially for women part-timers remains stubbornly high.

That is as unacceptable as it has always been, but the differential is striking when we consider the accepted view of society today. We believe that we are a modern society, free of the prejudices and injustices of the past. In many respects, that is true: there is more equality of opportunity, and discrimination in all its forms is being dealt with, but so much more remains to be done.

Continuing with that work fits in well with the Government's agenda of bringing about social inclusion and delivering greater equality of opportunity. Eliminating the gender pay gap makes a statement about the sort of society that we all want—a society in which ability and talent are what count, and in which everyone's ability is utilised to the full.

The elimination of the gender pay gap would improve the quality of life of working women, both now and in the future, and help to tackle child poverty. However, there are also sound business reasons for tackling the pay gap, as many employers already recognise. Fair pay makes recruitment and retention easier and increases productivity.

So what are the reasons for the continuing existence of the gender pay gap? The "Just Pay" report identifies a number of key factors that need to be addressed. They include discrimination in pay and occupational segregation, as well as the unequal impact of women's family responsibilities. The cumbersome nature of the tribunal processes available to women seeking to tackle pay inequality also causes problems.

The Government have taken, or are about to take, action on some of these issues and a number of reforms are in place. Measures such as higher maternity pay, the working families tax credit, the children's tax credit, new rights for parental leave, trade union recognition, better child care and, of course, the minimum wage are making a huge difference to the position of women and families in our society. However, the challenge of equal pay remains, and neither the Government nor those outside who campaign for this must shirk it.

I know that the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), is to bring forward proposals to speed up the industrial tribunal system, under which women try to air their grievances. In 1998-99, it was taking an average of 19 months to go through the system. Other proposals will include continuing to improve child care and providing real choice for women.

Let us look at the impact of occupational segregation on the gender pay gap. The fundamental issue is the valuation of women's work in the labour market and, in particular, the work of part-timers. The low status in the labour market of part-timers—predominantly women—is a major problem that again highlights how crucial education and training are.

The part of the gap caused by pay discrimination is the focus of my Bill. The Equal Opportunities Commission estimates that that accounts for 25 to 50 per cent. of the pay gap. Such discrimination is not necessarily intentional, but can result from procedures and policies that unwittingly fail to give women equal pay. If employers are not required to audit their pay structures to ensure conformity with the Equal Pay Act 1970, how do we know what is going on?

The figures according to the new earnings survey in April 2000 show that in my region of the east midlands, in craft and related occupations, women's earnings are 62 per cent. of male earnings—nearly a third less. In sales occupations, the figure is 68 per cent. Overall, in all occupations in the east midlands, women earn 74 per cent.—roughly three quarters—of what men earn.

To quote a specific national example, the recent Bett report into higher education showed a number of examples of unequal pay. Females were paid less in almost all occupations and at all grades in universities. The earnings of female academics were, on average, £4,000 less than those of male academics. If it is happening in that field, among highly educated women, one can imagine some of the problems and difficulties

experienced elsewhere. I am pleased that the Government are starting to address the issue in the higher education sector.

The Equal Opportunities Commission conducted additional research, seeking evidence from employers about their pay practice. Some 301 employers were surveyed by National Opinion Poll. The key findings were that 11 per cent. of all respondents said that women progressed more slowly than men. Some 32 per cent. of public sector employees conceded that jobs done mainly by men had access to bonus or performance payments, whereas those done mainly by women did not. Twelve per cent. said that part-timers did not have access to occupational pensions.

It is for those reasons—the reality of life in our society—that my Bill is necessary. It would require an audit by employers of their pay structures to see whether they complied with the law. It is clear that without such a review, employers will not be able to judge whether they comply. According to the Equal Opportunities Commission survey, only a third of respondents had conducted any review of their pay system. In a more flexible job market, with more individual negotiation and considerable variety in the way in which people are paid, we must do more to ensure that such procedures are put in place. How much longer must we wait? I believe that most people would have expected us to win that challenge by now.

At the end of her speech in 1970, Baroness Castle said:

"There is just one thing I would like to say in conclusion. It is to pay a tribute to all those who have argued and striven over the past years for equal pay for women, and in particular to those hon. Members on both sides of the House who have championed the cause which is coming to such happy fruition today."—[*Official Report*, 9 February 1970; Vol. 795, c.929.]

I hope that my ten-minute Bill can play a small part in continuing the effort to make equal pay a reality and to finish the task begun by those who went before us.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Vernon Coaker, Gillian Merron, Liz Blackman, Ms Joan Ryan, Mr. Derek Twigg, Ann Keen, Angela Smith, Ms Julie Morgan, Mr. Chris Pond, Ms Ruth Kelly, Mr. Jonathan Shaw and Mr. John Heppell.

EQUAL PAY (AUDIT)

Mr. Vernon Coaker accordingly presented a Bill to require employers to carry out an audit of their pay structures' compliance with the provisions of the Equal Pay Act 1970: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 April, and to be printed [Bill 71].

Opposition Day

[7TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Foot and Mouth Disease

Mr. Speaker: I should inform the House that I have put a 12-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I have also selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I call Mr. Nick Brown to move the debate. *[Interruption.]* I apologise. I call Mr. Tim Yeo.

3.41 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its deep concern about the increasing extent of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, its appreciation of the work the vets and others involved in efforts to contain the disease and reduce its effects and its sympathy for farmers and those involved in other businesses in rural areas whose livelihoods are under such severe threat; supports the Government's objective of containing the outbreak and the measures it has announced so far; but regrets that the Government has not acted more swiftly and effectively in tackling the crisis; and urges the Government to take immediate and practical steps to help the worst affected areas of the country, including the adoption of a strengthened slaughter policy, an increased role for the army in disposing of carcases, the deployment of more veterinary resources and a business rate exemption for affected businesses.

You may be anticipating events, Mr. Speaker, in asking the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend (Mr. Brown) to move an Opposition debate.

Britain's livestock industry is in peril. The rural economy is haemorrhaging. There is visible evidence day by day that the gathering crisis is growing. As of last night, more than 100,000 animals were awaiting slaughter and more than 80,000 carcases were rotting in the open air. In the six days since the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food last came to the House to make a statement, the number of confirmed cases of foot and mouth disease has risen by more than two thirds, to 411, and the number of animals condemned for destruction has almost doubled to 350,000.

The crisis is spiralling out of control. The Prime Minister's bland words a few moments ago could have been spoken only by a man ignorant of what is happening in his own country, is contemptuous of those communities whose prosperity his policies have done so much to damage and is still refusing to devote the resources that the crisis requires for its resolution. *[Interruption.]*

Contrary to the politicking of which the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food accuses me from his sedentary position, let me make it clear that the Opposition will continue to give the Government full backing for measures that are necessary and effective if we are to get the disease under control. Even when they are unpopular, as with the large-scale cull proposed last week, we shall not shrink from giving our support if it is right to do so.

I pay tribute again to vets and others in the front line for their efforts to contain the disease. I offer my personal sympathy, too, to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and his departmental colleagues. They are carrying a heavy burden on behalf not just of Government, but of the nation. They are clearly working under enormous pressure.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is my hon. Friend aware that the divisional veterinary officer in Staffordshire faces a difficult situation? A constituent of mine, Christopher Jackson of Bagots Pigs, finds himself in breach of welfare regulations because his pigs have given birth to piglets, causing overcrowding, yet he has been told that he can neither slaughter nor move the pigs, and the divisional veterinary officer has said that he has had absolutely no guidance from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend raises an important point; the farmer whose position he describes so succinctly is by no means alone in facing such difficulties. The Minister will have paid careful attention to my hon. Friend's point and I hope that, in the course of the next 24 hours, someone in the Minister's office will be able to get a message to my hon. Friend's constituent to deal with that impossible situation.

Above all, our hearts must go out to farmers: working with livestock is not just a job—it is a way of life. The men, women and children who see the animals that they have reared prematurely destroyed are losing not only their livelihood but part of their family. I hope that the thoughts of every hon. Member are with them at this time of profound distress.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), one of my constituents is in a similar predicament. He has 2,500 sheep in Staffordshire; he wants to bring them back to Worcestershire but he cannot move them because of a D notice on the Worcestershire farm. Sadly, we have foot and mouth in Worcestershire. He, too, has an incredible animal welfare problem: his sheep are trying to graze in muddy fields where there is no grass and the ewes are lambing. In normal circumstances, he would be prosecuted on animal welfare grounds. Will my hon. Friend put to the Minister the case for such animals to be culled under the programme?

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend is right. She describes a problem that faces a large number of farmers. We have raised it with the Minister, and I know that he is very conscious of it. The solution is not easy. We do not want to weaken the measures that have been taken to try to curb the disease, but it is those measures that prevent many farmers from moving lambing ewes to the places where they want them to be. As a result, there are serious animal welfare consequences. I know that the Minister will have taken note of that point; I intend to return to it later and to suggest a way forward.

We are also concerned about the effect of the crisis on other industries. That is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition proposed a new scheme to give businesses in rural areas financial help in the form of a loan of up to £10,000, repayable, when they return to profitability, by a surcharge on future tax bills.

In the past half-hour, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) has returned from the British travel trade fair in Birmingham, where he met people from throughout the country who are charged with the difficult task of supporting the tourism industry. People are becoming frustrated and angry at the lack of positive action. They have received plenty of sympathy and warm words, but they want clarity and financial help to deal with a cash-flow problem that becomes more acute day by day.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): On financial packages, will my hon. Friend focus on national insurance contributions? Perhaps such contributions could be deferred in order to keep people in employment. Will he seek an assurance from the Government that no interest will be payable on deferred tax and VAT?

Mr. Yeo: My right hon. and learned Friend makes two important points. Like many Conservative Members, he was disappointed by the lack of tangible measures to help from the Minister for the Environment, who spoke yesterday after the second meeting of the taskforce. My right hon. and learned Friend has proposed an extremely practical way to help—relief from national insurance contributions—that, no doubt, could be introduced quickly.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): My hon. Friend will be aware that compensation for farmers whose livestock had to be killed as a result of foot and mouth is paid at today's market price and that that is well down on recent prices, which themselves were low enough. Will my hon. Friend press the Government to ensure that compensation for destroyed herds and flocks is paid at a reasonable rate and not at today's market price?

Mr. Yeo: The Minister will have heard that point. He was shaking his head as my hon. and learned Friend spoke—I believe that compensation is now being paid at pre-crisis levels. However, the point is important and the fact that my hon. and learned Friend felt it necessary to raise it shows that the message about the basis on which compensation is paid has not yet been effectively communicated to all the farmers in his constituency and in many other constituencies.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Minister has very clearly stated that no consequential loss payment will be made. Will my hon. Friend seek assistance from the Ministry to help those farmers who have received no income for the past five weeks and are facing severe hardship because their farms are covered by a form D, or are in an exclusion zone?

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend describes a problem faced by a large number of farmers. We have made it clear that given the severity of the problem on this occasion, we believe that it would be right to give help for consequential losses to a number of carefully defined farmers. Without such help, many farmers will find that survival is a matter of weeks, possibly even days, and unless the principle of providing help for consequential losses is accepted, a chilling message will be sent to them because there is no other prospect of their receiving any kind of relief.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): If the principle of help for consequential losses were accepted, where would the hon. Gentleman draw the line? My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food invited the hon. Gentleman to write to him a few weeks ago, but will he inform the House where the line would be drawn?

Mr. Yeo: We have already suggested a number of categories, one of which includes farmers whose cat

pass the age of 30 months, at which point the value of the cattle suffers an unrecoverable decrease. Movement restrictions can prevent farmers from realising the market value before cattle reach the age of 30 months. They are the sort of people to whom compensation should be paid for their consequential losses.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I certainly understand what my hon. Friend says, and there is no doubt that compensation and consequential loss are greatly exercising the minds of all those involved in this tragic crisis, but much greater than that is the spirit of fear that is engulfing agricultural communities, whether or not their areas are affected by foot and mouth disease. I have today been contacted by Jonathan Barber, eastern region secretary of the National Sheep Association. He has two main areas of concern: first, the speed at which the virus is spreading is, in his view, completely out of control and, secondly, there are not enough people to deal with the problem. That is the fear engaging the minds of people in East Anglia and all over the country, even in those areas fortunate enough, at the moment, not to be affected directly by foot and mouth.

Mr. Yeo: My right hon. Friend speaks with great experience of the industry. The same fear exists in my constituency, as the disease appears to be spreading, despite comments from the Prime Minister. A case was confirmed in a constituency neighbouring mine, just the other side of the county boundary in north Essex, so the disease is getting closer to Suffolk and Norfolk. A real feeling of fear exists in farming communities there, and it is increased by what appears to be the lack of urgency in the measures being taken in some parts of the country to get on top of the problem.

We have backed the main steps that the Government have taken to date. We want to continue a bipartisan approach, so far as we can, to what is clearly a major national crisis, but it is our duty, as the Opposition, to speak out when we believe things are going wrong and the Government's response is inadequate. Since we last debated foot and mouth, there have been worrying signs of dither and confusion inside the Government. To claim, as the Minister regularly does, that the situation is under control may please the Prime Minister, as he ponders his election timetable, but it is in stark contrast to the facts on the ground.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that, even now, we are getting mixed messages from the Government and different Departments? I have just received by fax a copy of a leaflet that Derbyshire county council is issuing in the Peak district, which receives more than 20 million visitors a year. It urges:

"Help us to protect our countryside—don't visit unless you have to."

How does that compare with what was said yesterday by the Minister for the Environment, who told people to visit the countryside?

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I was going to come to it shortly. Conflicting messages are now coming out of different branches of government. Indeed, I sympathise particularly with the position of county councils, which simply do not know what instructions they should give people who want to visit their areas.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): The Conservative party has had five weeks to propose the swifter and more effective policies described in the Opposition motion. I scoured the records this morning and could find no trace of any such policies from the Conservative party. Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has introduced the policies, including the pre-emptive slaughter policy, to deal with the crisis? Are not the Opposition jumping on the back of a national crisis to make political capital? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal to hon. Members not to shout. The farmers and the families about whom we are worried might misunderstand hon. Members if they shout across the Chamber.

Mr. Yeo: The intervention of the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) does him little credit. He has in the past taken part in some of these debates in a rather better informed and constructive manner. Had he attended any one of the five previous occasions on which the subject was discussed in the House, he would have heard me and my hon. Friends suggest specific and constructive measures, and I shall do so again today. Now that he has forced me to do it, I shall remind the House of how many days ago we said that certain things should be done.

Let me go back to Sunday 11 March, a pivotal day in the crisis. The Minister said on television that the situation was under control but, on the same day, I called for the Army to be brought in to tackle the backlog of unburied carcases and unslaughtered animals. In the 10 days since, the number of confirmed cases of foot and mouth disease has trebled; the number of unburied carcases is rising by 16,000 a day; and, in the last six days, the number of animals awaiting slaughter has risen by two thirds to well over 100,000.

If the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh had been paying attention, he would have seen that the policy that we were recommending would have addressed the situation. Indeed, instead of making complacent and unfounded claims, the Minister would have served farmers and the whole country better if he had acted on the constructive suggestions that I made on 11 March, which were repeated on a wider front two days later by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

It is now 10 days since we called for the Army to be given a hands-on role in carcase disposal; it is seven days since we called for vets to be given discretion to order and carry out slaughter on suspicion; and it is five days since we called for on-farm burial to take place wherever it is environmentally safe to do so. Not one of those common-sense steps has been taken. As a direct result, the crisis today is far worse than it need have been. Farming today is in dire peril and it deserves a far more urgent response from Ministers than it is now receiving.

Let me call once again for the Government to announce this afternoon that, first, the Army will be deployed more comprehensively than at present. It is no disrespect to the

[Mr. Yeo]

service men and women who were sent yesterday to Devon to point out that it is a ludicrously feeble use of a major national resource. The Government must make the full engineering and logistic assets of the Army available at once. With the number of unburied carcases mounting at the rate of 16,000 a day, it is grossly irresponsible not to allow the Army to engage directly in a task that is plainly beyond the capacity of those now addressing it.

Secondly, vets must be given authority to order the immediate slaughter of animals when there is clinical evidence to justify it and to ensure that the slaughter is carried out at once. That policy was successfully pursued in 1967, and the delays that are occurring are extremely dangerous. There is growing evidence that the disease is spreading from farm to farm, and leaving 100,000 animals wandering around in the open air while they await slaughter is simply folly.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My understanding is that a vet has only to make a telephone call to obtain permission to go ahead with slaughter on clinical grounds. Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that not even that call is necessary when we know that many vets in the field are fresh to this problem?

Mr. Yeo: We are receiving reports from all over the country of several days' delay from when vets want to carry out the slaughter to when it takes place. If the hon. Gentleman listens to what is happening outside the House instead of reading out Labour party press releases, he might be better informed before he intervenes.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): My hon. Friend is probably not aware that, in the Select Committee on Agriculture this morning, the chief veterinary officer acknowledged that there were problems in getting animals slaughtered quickly enough. He recommended that, instead of using pistols as in 1967, vets use two drugs, Expirol or Euthatal, and he said that he would look into it.

Mr. Yeo: I am glad to hear that the Government are belatedly considering assisting vets to carry out an extremely urgent task. I hope that no more time will be lost before the problem is addressed. Whatever the message from central Government, we know that delays are occurring and we run the risk of inspection spreading still further.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): I am glad that my hon. Friend makes that point. I was in Worcestershire yesterday talking to a friend of mine whose pedigree longhorn herd was put down on Monday. There has been no cattle or livestock movement on or off that farm for three months. It is clear that the disease spread from another farm where the animals were not slaughtered sufficiently quickly.

Mr. Yeo: I am afraid that that is not an isolated case. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Although there is ground for criticism, does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in Cumbria, the time between clinical diagnosis and slaughter has been reduced to between 24 and 36 hours in most cases?

Mr. Yeo: The fact remains that even on the Ministry's figures, the number of animals awaiting slaughter is growing rapidly. It is 108,000 today and was about 60,000 a week ago. The problem is getting out of control. The Government are behind the game.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): My hon. Friend will know that Mr. Huntbach, who suffered the second outbreak in Cheshire, which was seriously devastated in 1967, attempted last Friday night to call the Ministry, as did the local vet. There was no answer and no answering machine, so the telephones are not being manned 24 hours. Having failed to contact the Stafford office, he tried Worcester, which told him to call Stafford again. Eventually, he was given a fax number, but it took 24 hours before contact was made. That is where the delay is occurring. The offices need to be fully staffed now.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I should make it clear that the Opposition's quarrel is not with Ministry officials at the sharp end, who are working under enormous pressure and are clearly overstretched, but with Ministers and Labour Members, who claim that the situation is under control when plainly it is not. They say that delays are not occurring when they obviously are. It is not the fault of officials that they are not available to answer the telephone 24 hours a day; it is obviously beyond their capacity to do so.

The Minister must know about the countless delays. The Government's claims are absurd. Farmers and hon. Friends call me six or seven times an hour every day with examples similar to the case outlined by my hon. Friend. If I am getting those calls, the Minister's office must be receiving ten times as many. It is not helpful to make claims that are plainly unfounded.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): On a related matter, the disease was diagnosed at Higham Lane in my constituency on Sunday. Some heifers with blisters were shot on Monday, but 250 cows were still alive yesterday. The Atherstone hunt kennels are across the road. The hunt's servants are qualified as slaughtermen and could be deployed to kill the animals. Does my hon. Friend agree that political correctness is preventing those people from being used to assist in the crisis?

Mr. Yeo: I shall address the problem of resources to carry out the slaughter in a moment. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

The third policy is the need for the immediate introduction of on-farm burial, which was used widely in 1967. On Monday, the chief veterinary officer described burial as the ideal option. The Environment Agency should already have indicated where the water table makes burial unsafe for human health reasons. Piles of rotting carcases are themselves a serious environmental and health hazard, and I find it hard to believe that there are no areas where on-farm burial can safely be used.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about on-farm burial, but is not the difference

between 1967 and now the fact that we have BSE in our cattle, and we do not want to turn an animal disease into a human problem?

Mr. Yeo: There are a number of differences between the 1967 outbreak and the present one. However, it is over four weeks since we first learned of the problem, and the Environment Agency should by now be able to advise on those parts of the country where on-farm burial would be a safe alternative to other disposal methods, and I am disappointed that it is still not being used to a significant extent.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Does my hon. Friend accept that most farmers know exactly where on their land they could bury animals, whether or not there is a high water table? Will he acknowledge that in 1967, when the problem was tackled within 24 hours at most, stock was buried on farms and there was no adverse reaction whatever from that process?

Mr. Yeo: The fact that no damage appears to have been done by the widespread use of on-farm burial is important. As my hon. Friend says, farmers will usually know what parts of their land are suitable. They should be able to establish, perhaps just by a phone call to the regional office of the Environment Agency, whether approval can be given straight away. Regional offices will also have information about the location of aquifers and so on, so there should be no difficulty getting an immediate answer. It is hard to understand why that quick, simple disposal method is not being more widely used.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Will my hon. Friend press the Minister for an immediate decision, and not just a general assurance that he will look into the matter? Certainly in Worcestershire, with the rendering situation as it is, thousands of carcases will be lying around not for days but for weeks. This matter needs immediate attention.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend is right. It is clear from the figures that I have quoted that, far from being kept under control, the problem is getting worse day by day. As I said, between Monday and Tuesday, the number of unburied carcases rose by 16,000. If that is to continue for any length of time, it is an alarming prospect.

The country cannot understand why the simple, common-sense measures that we are calling for are not being implemented immediately. On wider policy issues, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) mentioned, the Government must stop sending out conflicting messages. Even within the Ministry last Thursday there was confusion about whether the proposed new large-scale cull in Cumbria included cattle. That caused alarm in the region, and the position was later clarified, but it underlines the need for an accurate presentation of any new Government measures.

Now we are told that the cull, which last week was said to be a necessary tactic to curb the spread of foot and mouth disease, may be postponed. On what basis was the original decision taken? What has happened to make the policy less urgent? Some of the questions that I faxed to the Minister's office last night are relevant. In particular, what is the scientific advice for selecting a 3 km radius for the clean-ring strategy, and for excluding cattle from the clean-ring strategy cull?

Confusion has also emerged because of contradictory statements about the countryside. The Minister has, quite properly, issued warnings about not visiting livestock areas. He has been consistent in that and we support him, although it is becoming harder now to judge which farmland is a livestock area because clearly a lot of it does not have livestock. We should err on the side of caution. However, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which seem to be unrepresented here, are telling a very different story. Indeed, it might have been helpful if Ministers who are supposed to be responsible for the taskforce had taken the trouble to attend the debate. Given the lack of understanding shown by the taskforce of the scale and urgency of the problem, they might have benefited from being here because they would have learned a bit more about the problem.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Everybody has noted what my hon. Friend has just said. Given the importance of the national crisis, the urgent need for steps to tackle it and the constructive measures suggested by my hon. Friend, can he explain why, of more than 300 Labour Back Benchers, fewer that two dozen are present?

Mr. Yeo: I am afraid that I cannot shed any light on that but, as my hon. Friend knows, it is part of a pattern. When the crisis in the countryside is debated, the Government Benches tend to be thinly populated.

Last week, the Minister for the Environment spoke about what he called "safe" areas. Can the Minister of Agriculture enlighten us about how a safe area can be identified, given that the lengthy incubation period means that even areas that do not have the disease may be about to suffer an outbreak? Yesterday, the Minister for the Environment told us that the countryside was open for business. That statement has confused the public because it suggests that there are differences of view inside the Government. It creates the problems that my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire described in relation to Derbyshire county council, which must decide whether to reopen rights of way and footpaths.

The right approach is to say that getting foot and mouth disease under control is the overriding aim. Nothing should be done that might jeopardise progress towards that goal. Even non-farming businesses that are suffering, such as tourism, will benefit most if foot and mouth is contained and exterminated. That is the only permanent solution to the problem. Timely action along the lines that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and I have been suggesting for some time will help to achieve that solution, curb the spread of foot and mouth disease and rebuild confidence in the countryside. Further delay by the Government will raise fears that they are still not ready to respond on the necessary scale.

The subject of timely action brings me to a further point. The Minister will be aware that, for some days, rumours have been circulating that his Ministry was making specific preparations to deal with an outbreak of foot and mouth disease some weeks before the first case was confirmed. I have no means of knowing whether those rumours are true. If they are, the implications are very profound indeed.

Will the Minister make clear to the House at the earliest opportunity—this afternoon, I hope—exactly when the Ministry was notified of any suspected cases of foot and

[Mr. Yeo]

mouth disease? Will he also explain the basis on which the Ministry makes contingency plans to deal with foot and mouth? Are those plans regularly updated? If so, in what way? Is there an explanation for the fact that someone who has been approached to supply timber sleepers in case incineration is required has told broadcasters that she had not been contacted by the Ministry since the 1967 outbreak? If the contingency plans involve regular contact in the normal course of events, I hope that the Minister can explain why that person has suddenly reappeared on the list in that rather unusual way.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): My hon. Friend may like to point out to the Minister that, as I understand it, underwriters at Lloyd's received inquiries from the German equivalent of the NFU about getting exceptional insurance for foot and mouth before Christmas.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend suggests another important line of inquiry, which reminds me to ask the Minister whether any officials in the British Government had contact with officials in other Governments and European Union institutions prior to the confirmation of the outbreak in Britain on 19 February. As I said, there are persistent rumours relating to several different aspects of the outbreak. At the very least, there were suspicions in the Ministry about the possibility of an outbreak occurring. Even if the Minister was unaware of such suspicions, I am sure that he will want to make inquiries among his officials to find out at what level and in which offices they might have arisen.

Let me return to the resources that are available for curbing the spread of the disease. I understand that there is now a shortage of vets. Is the Minister satisfied that the private sector is being used as much as necessary? I hope that resource constraints are not preventing more use of vets from private practice. Are retired vets being returned to the state veterinary service, or are there obstacles to prevent that from happening? Some retired vets may have invaluable inexperience of foot and mouth.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will my hon. Friend also seek to discover whether any positive attempt has been made to recruit members of the veterinary profession? I understand that it is relatively easy to pick up additional veterinary resources from abroad, but it has been reported to me that, for whatever reason, a lack of attention has been paid to options such as approaching private veterinary practitioners in this country to see whether they have spare vets who could help to deal with the outbreak.

Mr. Yeo: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion. He has a great deal of experience in the industry and, like others, he shares my concern that there may be a repository of expertise that is still not being fully utilised. Earlier in the week, we heard from the chief vet that he was concerned about the shortage of vets and about overstretch among those who work in the state veterinary service.

Where slaughter is delayed, is full use being made of the slaughtermen attached to hunts? That issue has already been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick). I understand that the Countryside Alliance is ready to make additional slaughtermen available at very short notice. I hope, therefore, that whatever the reasons for the mounting numbers of unslaughtered animals, the figures are not increasing because of any reluctance on the part of officials. Such officials will not necessarily be in London; they could be in the regions. Will the Minister confirm that appropriate instructions have been given to regional offices to ensure that they take advantage of that resource? Furthermore, can slaughtermen employed in abattoirs that are currently closed because of the outbreak also be deployed?

Now that we are four weeks into the outbreak, clear regional differences are emerging. Of course, the overriding aim is to contain the disease and to prevent it from spreading, and no risks must be run that would jeopardise progress towards that goal. The Minister has previously acknowledged the problems raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) with regard to ewes in the lambing season. These problems are now acute in a number of areas. I recognise the difficulty of trying to alleviate them without running unacceptable risks such as those that I have mentioned. However, is it possible on a short-term basis to authorise vets in private practice to license limited movements of sheep over short distances? Could vets issue such authorisation when they, in conjunction with farmers and any other local people who are directly concerned, are satisfied that it is safe to do so?

I should like to mention two further questions that I faxed to the Minister last night. Why are only sheep traced from markets to be destroyed, and not pigs or cattle on the farm where the sheep are now located? What is the scientific advice concerning infectivity of dead animals, not least with regard to attacks by foxes or other vermin, and how does that relate to the ban on meat imports from foot and mouth countries?

I should like to speak about many other detailed matters, but I know that many hon. Members want to raise important constituency matters and I must leave time for them to do so. This is a crisis that is getting worse, not better, and which needs to be at the top not only of the Minister's agenda, but of that of the Prime Minister. More than one industry is now suffering serious damage and time is of the essence in the response. The Opposition are ready to back any emergency measures that are needed to tackle the problem. The Government should now act with greater urgency and on a bigger scale than hitherto. I commend our motion to the House.

4.19 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"expresses grave concern about the very serious effect of the current foot and mouth outbreak on farmers, the livestock industry and the wider rural economy; supports the firm and rapid action taken by the Government to control the spread of the disease, identify outbreaks and slaughter and dispose of animals that are infected or 'at risk'; pays tribute to all those who are continuing to work around the clock to combat this devastating disease; endorses the Government's policy of intensifying disease control measures in areas of high infectivity and working towards modifying controls in areas that have remained free of the disease; expresses deepest sympathy to those farmers whose herds and flocks have been slaughtered in order to control the disease; and welcomes the Government's provision of financial support to farmers including

£156 million in extra agrimonetary compensation and a preliminary package of measures to assist the wider rural economy including temporary business rate relief for affected businesses."

Hon. Members will notice that the amendment is not very different from the motion. I hope that we can continue to deal with matters in a relatively bipartisan manner.

I wish to take the opportunity to update hon. Members on the latest position on the foot and mouth disease outbreak, and then set out the Government's response to the matters that the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) perfectly properly raised.

At 1 pm today, there were 410 confirmed cases in Great Britain and one case in Northern Ireland. Out of a total United Kingdom cattle, sheep and pig population of more than 55 million, 390,000 animals have been authorised for slaughter, and 262,000 have already been slaughtered.

There are two confirmed cases in cattle on farms in east Holland, and two suspected cases. The link appears to be a slaughterhouse in Holland where sheep imported from France were slaughtered. A European Commission decision to block exports is expected later today.

The Dutch Government have declared an intention to use ring vaccination. The Commission is applying strict conditions, including the early slaughter of vaccinated animals. An emergency meeting of the European Union Standing Veterinary Committee will take place on Friday.

Out of 160,000 livestock farms in the UK, 1,937 have been placed under restriction because of a confirmed or suspected case of the disease. We have been able to lift restrictions on more than 1,077 of those farms, leaving 860 still restricted.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Outside the worst affected areas, there are restrictions on movement. One of my constituents, who has a sheep farm, wanted to move his sheep for lambing. He was told that he could not. He wanted to move them so that they could have some grass because they were running out of food and needed attention. In 48 hours, he got four different versions of what he could do in the ensuing week. Will Ministers look into that urgently, and provide strong, clear and consistent guidance so that farmers who are worried to death know what they can do within the rules?

Mr. Brown: As other Conservative Members can tell the right hon. Gentleman, those matters have been much discussed in the House over the past few weeks. The whole of Great Britain is a controlled zone. There are no unauthorised, unlicensed movements of livestock—at least, there are not supposed to be. A range of schemes has been designed to help the trade and animal welfare. I will say more about that later.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Following on from the point of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), on Thursday, the Minister announced a voluntary welfare disposal scheme, which, we believed, would affect sheep and pigs. On that day, I asked the Minister when it would start, and whether it could begin within 48 hours because people were desperate. Nearly a week later, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food office in Leicester has received no communication from MAFF to explain the way in which the scheme will work. Mr. Stevens in my constituency is absolutely desperate. Will the Minister apply his ministerial toecap to the posterior of his officials to ensure that they communicate with people on the ground? Mr. Stevens can then get on with slaughtering his fattened sheep within 24 or 48 hours.

Mr. Brown: As the person who devised the scheme over the long, hot summer last year for the classical swine fever outbreak, I am as keen on it as anyone.

Mr. Duncan: What is the delay?

Mr. Brown: It all sounds so easy, but there are special problems in the sheep sector. A small part of the market—approximately 37 per cent.—is working normally, but the market price for the product that people want to move has collapsed. There is a question about the rate one would pay under the welfare scheme for animals that are coming into it without disrupting the part of the market that is working normally. The Intervention Board is considering that with the industry.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Delay, delay, delay.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman may shout, "Delay, delay, delay", but people will not willingly offer their animals for a scheme without knowing what they will be paid. Frankly, I do not blame them. If hon. Members will allow me, perhaps I can make some progress.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I always give way to hon. Members, and I shall, but I wish to make some progress first.

The development of the disease in the United Kingdom continues to reflect the pattern that we identified from the start. The continuing rise in outbreaks largely reflects the spread of infection before the first outbreak was confirmed. The spread mostly occurred in sheep, which do not always show clear symptoms. As a result, further waves of outbreaks have occurred because of local spread.

We still cannot know how many outbreaks there will be. However, leading epidemiologists are working on predictions which I will, of course, share with the House. We expect the rising trend to continue and new cases to occur for a considerable time. As I have said before, this is a devastating disease for farming and for the rural communities affected by it. I have on a number of occasions expressed my sympathy to all those suffering at a time of uncertainty and distress. I do so again today, and I know that that is an expression that unites the whole House.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The Minister will know that two of my constituents spoke on the radio today on the timing of the notification of the outbreak. One of the people, Mr. Mike Littlehales, said that he had been called up by a lady in MAFF who wished know how it could update its records in case of a further outbreak of foot and mouth. Mrs. Fran Talbot had a similar point to make.

If we do not know exactly when the outbreak began—it having started and first been notified in Essex, but having apparently originated in Northumberland—and if it turns out that there was notification at an earlier stage, that

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would be very serious. Will the Minister be good enough to ensure that we have full published transcripts and details of the operational plans, so that the suspicion that the outbreak started at an earlier stage will now be made clear?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a speech.

Mr. Brown: If I misled the House in the way in which the BBC misled the country this morning, I would have to come here and resign. I shall make that point to Mr. John Humphrys when I next see him.

The first case of foot and mouth disease in this country of which I was aware was that in the Essex abattoir, and the case on the farm adjacent to it. I was notified on the Tuesday night during our week's recess that there was a suspected case. I understand that my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Hayman had also been notified. The following morning—the Wednesday morning—that case was confirmed to me. On the Thursday night of that same week, I was told that there was a suspected case in Northumberland, at Heddon-on-the-Wall. That case was confirmed on that Friday. I telephoned the Prime Minister, who was in the United States of America, and later on that Friday we imposed complete and absolute movement restrictions by declaring the whole of Great Britain a controlled area by 5 o'clock that same day. That is the sequence of events. Officials in my Department, and Ministers, were not aware that the infectivity was present in the country for an earlier time period for the simple reason that it was not.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: Perhaps it will be easier, Mr. Speaker, if I deal with this urban legend at the appropriate point in my speech, because urban legend it is.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: There are times, Mr. Speaker, when I think that I am talking to myself. What I said was: perhaps it would be easier if I dealt with this in the appropriate passage of my speech. I will then take interventions on the point, if anybody wishes to perpetuate the myth, or, indeed, raise another one. Perhaps the Martians have visited us, or something like that. But for the minute, I will make some progress because I want to deal with the perfectly proper points that have been raised by the Leader of the Opposition and by the hon. Member for South Suffolk. I would like to consider the way in which the Government are dealing with the disease, and I will take interventions that arise from what I say. However, I ask the House to let me say it first.

From the outset, we rapidly put in place firm disease control measures.

Mr. McLoughlin *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister has said that he wants some time before he gives way.

Mr. Brown: That action, and every action since then, has been taken on professional advice, and, in particular, on the advice of the chief veterinary officer, Mr. Jim Scudamore.

I want to deal with that famous urban legend—the question of MAFF having known about the outbreak in January on the basis of inquiries made by MAFF staff about supplies of railway sleepers. I understand that there is a similar legend about disinfectant supplies from another supplier company, and the answer is the same. The rumours that we knew in January are completely untrue. The Government first learned about a possible outbreak on 20 February. The first case was confirmed on 21 February.

I understand that, in January, my Department's animal health office in Staffordshire carried out a regular foot and mouth disease contingency planning exercise. This is conducted every year; there is nothing unusual about it. Staff were contacting vets, slaughtermen, disinfectant suppliers and suppliers of railway sleepers for incineration. It is sheer coincidence that the exercise took place a month before a genuine outbreak, but coincidence it is. If the question is why we rang that particular supplier after other suppliers had been rung—I understand that that is a caveat to this urban legend—the answer is that the Department was checking prices.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way because I want to talk to him about that exact point. I quote not a Martian, but a MAFF spokesman who said today:

"From time to time we do emergency planning exercises. We are not aware if this was one of those cases."

Can the right hon. Gentleman understand that it is deeply worrying when MAFF officials say that there may be a planning exercise going on, but they are not sure? The very person they approached about railway sleepers says that the last time he was approached was 1967. That raises suspicions and mere abuse about Martians does not answer them.

Mr. Brown: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the sentence I uttered before he intervened, he would understand that that particular supplier was contacted because the local office was checking prices. In other words, it was getting the competitive rate. That is the answer and that is all there is to it. The exercise—the local area offices' update—is conducted annually region by region. There is nothing unusual in it. We check the availability of a range of items that we might need to procure from time to time. The exercise is not an invention of the Labour Government—exactly the same procedure was carried out under the previous Government, and perfectly properly.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I want to make a procedural point. A number of people in business, whether they be farmers or those associated with tourism, or the trout farmer in my constituency who cannot move any of his fish, are affected by the crisis. Members of Parliament are receiving an increasing number of telephone calls from concerned constituents, so it might be useful if the Minister elaborated on policy. Are such people able to claim compensation? Can they get some restrictions lifted? I have been telephoning his Department, the staff of which have been diligent and courteous, but can Members have a dedicated helpline so they can get action taken on requests that they make?

Mr. Brown: I have written to all Members setting out the helplines and contact lines and a regular daily update

is provided for Members of Parliament, which I place in the Library of the House, the Government Whips Office, the Opposition Whips Office and the Whips Offices of the other parties. That front-line information is available.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I thank the Minister for giving way. He has just given the House the serious news that his Department's epidemiologists predict many more cases and that the crisis will go on for a considerable time. In those circumstances, it would be grossly irresponsible of the Government not to put in hand measures to bring in the Army to deal with the crisis. What measures are in hand to do that?

Mr. McLoughlin *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I am torn between explaining what we are about to do, which includes dealing with the point made by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown), and taking interventions. I shall take the interventions. Then, if the House will allow me, I shall make progress.

Mr. McLoughlin: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. My point follows on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold said. The Minister says that he expects a number of outbreaks to occur for some time. Obviously there is concern in the countryside—not just in agriculture, but in the tourism industry, which has added significance—so, although I realise that it is difficult, can he give any indication of the time scale that he has in mind?

Mr. Brown: Perhaps I did not make clear enough what I intend to do. Once I have the result of the epidemiologists' work, I intend to put it in the public domain. It is currently being "peer-group assessed", but I understand that it will reach me very soon—within days rather than weeks. When I have seen it, I will share it with everyone else here, and we can make our own assessments. As those who are familiar with such exercises will know, it will not give a detailed timetable, but it will include a range of possible times, so it will give us all something to work towards.

I intend to share the information with the House rather than keeping it to myself, just as I have done in the case of every other piece of information that has come to me.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Neither my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown) nor my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) quoted the Minister correctly. Did I not hear him say that he expected the rising trend to continue for a considerable time? Is that really the case?

Mr. Brown: I am afraid that it is. May I explain why in summary now, and deal with the issue in more detail later?

It is clear now, as it would not have been clear a fortnight ago, that in Devon, Cumbria and southern Scotland, and potentially in the midlands and on the Welsh-English border, there are concentrations of infectivity in such amounts that we are no longer dealing with the emergence of the original spread of the disease in animals. We are now dealing with animal-to-animal infection. There is sheep-to-sheep infection in Cumbria, and I regret to say that we are certain that there is cattle-to-cattle spread there as well. Those circumstances underpin the need for more rigorous action in pursuit of the existing policy in Cumbria and southern Scotland.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman after I have explained the proposals for the area that he represents. I think that that would be fairer.

Before I finish the business about urban legends, there is one about the Antec disinfectant company. It is effectively the same as the railway sleeper issue. Antec's chief executive officer has claimed on the radio that MAFF must have known about the presence of foot and mouth disease, because we contacted the company in November to discuss supplies. The procurements and contracts division has confirmed that it did speak to the company in November, but that was part of a normal contractual discussion, and we have a normal supply-chain relationship with the company. I must say that I am very tempted to look into that! Anyway, all this is urban legend.

Mr. Luff *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I know that the hon. Gentleman's constituency is affected, and I have something to say about it. If he will let me deal with that first, he can intervene later. I know that more needs to be done in his area, and I want to say what that "more" is.

Mr. Luff *rose—*

Mr. Brown: Patience!

Since 23 February, all animal movements have been at a standstill. Since 2 March, tightly controlled arrangements have operated for animals outside the infected areas to be transported directly to slaughter for human consumption. I understand from the Meat and Livestock Commission—I know that Members will be interested by this—that the pig sector is back to 85 per cent. of normal production, and that the figures for beef and lamb are 60 per cent. and 38 per cent. respectively.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): As the Minister knows, I have written to him about that. My constituency contains a major abattoir, to which livestock is brought from as far away as Wales, travelling through highly infected areas of Devon. That is causing enormous concern in the greater part of Cornwall that currently contains no infection. Farmers are saying that there is surely some risk in bringing cattle such a long way through highly infected areas, and I think they would appreciate some response from the Minister.

Mr. Brown: The risks involved in the licensed movements are extremely low, although I understand the nervousness and concern. The question that is usually raised concerns the spread of the virus by air—the plume from the animals. I am giving a presentation in the Department on Friday to discuss questions relating to the disease and how it is spread, and also to vaccination. However, as I told the Select Committee on Agriculture

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this morning—the chief vet has confirmed this—the dangers of a spread of the virus by a plume are essentially associated with pigs. The risk of animals in transit such as cattle and sheep spreading the virus by that means is vanishingly small. That is the veterinary advice to me.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: I give way. I do not want to be discourteous to the House, but, at the same time, I want to make some progress.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The Minister is being helpful. He is answering all the interventions with great courtesy and as clearly as he can. I am grateful that he is putting information in the Library, but may we please have presentations such as the one to which he just referred; can there be presentations specifically for Members of Parliament? Many hon. Members' constituencies on both sides of the House are now affected. It would be helpful if we had some clear presentations from his officials and others on the points that he has touched on.

Mr. Brown: Yes. I want to meet the hon. Gentleman's request in two ways. If there are hon. Members here on Friday—I know it is not a convenient time for hon. Members—who would like to come to the presentation at 10 o'clock at the Department, which has been arranged primarily for journalists and broadcasters, they may do so. I extend an invitation to any hon. Member who would like to come to that presentation to ring my private office. I will arrange for a seat to be reserved for them. They can see the same presentation is being given to the journalists.

I shall also arrange to have the entire presentation repeated midweek at a time that is convenient for hon. Members, so that there will be a second chance to see it. More than that, at the second presentation, I will arrange for the epidemiology to be presented by someone who is qualified to do so, so that hon. Members can have an insight into that, too.

Mr. Luff: Will the Minister give way? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Brown: I give way.

Mr. Luff: I am sorry that Labour Members do not want the House to be properly informed, but I wish to raise with the Minister the question of the adequacy of information. The website is not up to date. The maps are not detailed enough to establish where outbreaks are occurring. When I rang a ministerial office today about the MPs hotline, the staff thought that there was some sort of hotline and said that they would come back to me with a number, but they have not done so yet.

The information that the Minister says is in the Whips Office is not there; I have just been to ask for it. We have not had that information, but it would help enormously if more information could be provided more systematically.

Mr. Brown: The daily update that is intended for Members of Parliament is in the House Library. I am sorry if it has not got through the usual channels. It was supposed to, but the usual channels do not always work as well as they should, and I can say that from personal experience. I had guessed that things had improved since my day, but perhaps they have not. My intention is that the information be available for all Members of Parliament, which is why I put it in the Library. It is supposed to be more regularly available.

I should like to deal with the point that was properly raised about animals that are trapped by the movement restrictions. It is a serious problem. The whole country is under movement controls at the minute. I recognise that we have created considerable animal welfare difficulties for farmers, particularly in respect of lambing, calving and farrowing. On 9 March, we introduced arrangements for limited local movements of animals. As of yesterday, we had issued 6,400 licences under those arrangements in England. In addition, this week, we are bringing in arrangements to allow animals to be moved on longer journeys, subject to strict controls on the cleansing and disinfection of vehicles. I know that that sounds arduous, but it is vital as a disease control measure.

Mr. Bob Bradshaw (Exeter): My right hon. Friend may have been planning to address this point anyway, but I would be grateful if he addressed reports that Devon trading standards office has received reports of more than 200 illegal animal movements in the past few weeks. Is there any substance in those reports? If so, is that not extremely worrying?

Mr. Brown: I cannot comment on the volume. There have been reports of illegal movements of animals and where people are caught, they will be prosecuted. I beg people not to do it. There is no easier way of keeping the disease outbreak going than illegally moving the animals without licence. We all have common cause in this.

If the animal welfare problems cannot be addressed on the spot or by licensed movements, animals can be entered into a new voluntary welfare disposal scheme. Payments will be made. It is the intractable nature of the sheep sector that is causing the delay.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I questioned the Minister about this matter last Thursday. This afternoon, he has given an explanation of the delay, but he assured me last week that a voluntary animal welfare disposal scheme would be introduced within a matter of days. I cannot stress enough to the Minister how important that is; it is dreadfully important. We hope such a scheme will be introduced within 24 hours. Will he assure the House that the level of compensation will be reasonable, at market value and will reflect the many weeks in which cash has been paid out to feed animals well beyond the date at which they otherwise would have to be fed?

Mr. Brown: If I paid the market value now, I would be paying less than what I am trying to pay the farmers. Unlike the pork and beef sectors, part of the sheep sector has collapsed. There are a range of reasons for that which I am happy to discuss, but it is probably better for me to set out how I am trying to solve the problem. I am trying to solve it by getting a price for the welfare scheme that is—of necessity, to some extent—artificial. I want to set it at such a rate so that it is the best possible compensation I can get to the farmers in these appallingly difficult

circumstances without destroying that 38 per cent. of the market that is still moving. There is nothing I can do that, in the long term, would be a substitute for getting the market back to working normally.

If that sounds insufficient, let me say also that I am looking carefully at what can be done in the short term to help sheep farmers; they are not the only people who have been hit, but they have been hit the hardest. In the medium term, we are looking at what we can do to help the industry to get back on its feet. In the long term, we are looking at what sort of industry we want in this country; in other words, how we get the industry closer to the marketplace, how we make it more sustainable and how we make sure that the support payments impact on the farmer's income, rather than on the number of sheep.

To do that, I am looking hard at proposals for genotyping the national flock to make it resistant to scrapie and BSE. I am looking closely at the work of the hill farm taskforce to see how we deal with the medium-term questions involved in the hill farm allowance and what better use can be made of rural development regulation to underpin hill farmers' incomes. I have opened discussions, in general terms, with Franz Fischler and the Commission to examine the issues around the sheep premium review, which is due now in any event.

I am looking at whether the Government might want to do other things specifically to help those people caught by this terrible outbreak of the disease. Among those are whether we should offer extra help to those who want to take their agrimonetary payment, their premium payments—which we have managed to get protected by the Commission—and perhaps something else, as part, potentially, of something like an early retirement package for those who, frankly, have had enough and wish to retire. We will look at what we can do to help those who wish to be on-goers in the industry and at whether a restructuring of the whole support package might be the right way forward.

I will not be imposing anything from above. This will all require careful thought and discussion, not least with farmers' leaders and with individual farmers on the ground. These issues are under active consideration in Government. We are discussing what can be done now, what can be done in the medium term and, above all, what is the long-term prospect for the industry and how we best structure the support package. I intend to share those ideas with others and not impose them from the Government; I would like to get a consensus on them. We all realise that some things have to be done in the sheep sector. We would want those to be done in any case, even without this disease outbreak.

Miss Kirkbride: I thank the Minister for the way in which he is treating the House on this matter. He will have heard my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) about the sheep farmer who has 2,500 sheep in Staffordshire that he is unable to move. What can I tell the farmer about the measures that the Minister has mentioned concerning applying, on animal welfare grounds, for the sheep to be culled, with some compensation? Whom does he apply to? What time scale is the Minister looking at? Can that farmer apply now? Under what time scale can the Minister possibly offer a compensation price?

Mr. Brown: I am trying to get the scheme open very quickly, and by that I mean in a matter of days. I am trying to get the price to a level that is as decent as possible, but it will not please people who refer back to what the market price was before the outbreak. I would advise the hon. Lady's constituent, if the animals are not yet infected, to look first at whether it is possible under the new licensing arrangements to move them from clean area to clean area. The second option or route would be to try and manage the problem on the site, or on a neighbouring site. However, from her description, the fact that the forage has gone means that that route is probably not possible.

The third route is intended to be the route of last resort. The Government are not offering a convenient, state-sponsored market. I must state that as firmly I can, because I know what people would really like in these circumstances, and I cannot provide it.

Mr. Townend: The drop in the number of animals going to abattoirs would lead one to expect a rise in prices, but that has not happened. Is that due to a big increase in imports? Secondly, have the Government made progress in finding the source of the outbreak? I understand that the strain of the disease indicates that it was brought in from abroad. Is not it about time that we banned imports from countries that have had any incidence of foot and mouth in the past for year or so—especially South Africa, which might be the source of the disease?

Mr. Brown: The South African bit is another red herring. In fact, we ban meat and other products that carry infectivity from all the regions around the world that have foot and mouth disease. However, it is no good for the hon. Gentleman on the one hand to call for bans on countries rather than regions, then for other hon. Members to say that they hope that I will be able regionalise the problem in the United Kingdom later. We can approach the problem in one way, or the other. I have high hopes that we will be able to regionalise the problem, as the extermination measures begin to bite.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Will my right hon. Friend clarify the question of movement of animals over distances of more than 10 km? The MAFF website invites farmers to apply for licences, but I understand that the Ministry's Leeds office has not issued any licences to farmers who want to move animals. There is an important animal welfare problem, especially for ewes in lamb and cows in calf. Those animals are going to give birth imminently, and many farmers in my constituency will have to move animals distances of up to 15 miles. They want clarification about what they can do to speed up the process.

Mr. Brown: A welfare scheme is in place that should facilitate the movement of clean animals from uninfected areas that are subject to movement restrictions but nothing else. The scheme provides for a single journey to the holding—either the animals' home farm, or elsewhere if other arrangements have been made—where they are to

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lamb. If that is not happening for the farmers in her constituency, I will pursue the matter for her. The Ministry's preferred route with regard to dealing with animals moving from areas that are subject to movement restrictions but in which there is no infectivity is that, on welfare grounds, the animals should be moved under licence. The journeys to the home farm will be strictly controlled and probably escorted, and completed in a single run. If my hon. Friend will draw the difficulties being experienced in her area to my attention, I will have the matter pursued by my private office, either later on today or tomorrow.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The Minister has explained the difficulties with the voluntary welfare scheme with regard to sheep, but may I urge him to consider opening the scheme for pigs tomorrow? I telephoned his private office last Wednesday about the case of Mr. Richard Webber. Last Wednesday, he had 400 pigs that could not lie down. That is a very serious welfare problem. The Minister had a pig welfare scheme in place last year, and I urge him to open a similar scheme tomorrow.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Lady is right, and makes a perfectly fair comment. I want to open the pig scheme as quickly as I can, to cover exactly those circumstances that she has described. The preferred route for disposal of pigs is to get the chain working normally. Much of it is working normally but, as we found out from the classical swine fever outbreak in East Anglia, problems emerge very quickly when the chain is not working properly. Such problems require decisive action, and the hon. Lady is right to press me on the point. I will get on with the matter.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): May I tell my right hon. Friend how much the whole House appreciates the manner in which he is handling this debate and all the issues that are being raised?

I wish to ask about travellers with regard to containment and contamination. Where a travelling group arrives at an infected area, is the advice to the police that they should be asked to stay there or should they be moved on, as many people want? My fear is that if travellers are moved on, they simply become another vector for transmission. I do not know whether MAFF has issued guidance and advice on that issue.

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. The House seems to like me so much that it keeps calling me back here. I am not sure whether to take that as a compliment.

My hon. Friend invites me to give either one piece of unpopular advice or another piece of unpopular advice. Travellers, like everyone else, should stay away from farmed livestock. If they have been in contact with farmed livestock, they should take exactly the same precautionary measures that everyone else has to take before moving. My advice to everyone is to stay away from farmed livestock.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I will take a few more interventions but then I really would like to make some progress, because there are some things that I know right hon. and hon. Members want to hear—even if they pretend not to.

Mr. Livsey: I thank the Minister for his generosity in giving way. As he will know, there are nearly 1 million sheep in Powys. In the 1967 outbreak, it was very common to put a calf in with the sheep because they show early warning signs of the disease. I gather from what was said in the Select Committee this morning that this is exceedingly difficult. Only 5 per cent. of sheep actually show signs of the disease. Will the Minister consider this practice and also the use of cull cows, which are of very low value?

Mr. Brown: That is a perfectly sensible livestock management practice, and I commend it. Cattle can act as markers for sheep flocks.

Mr. Duncan: Will the Minister contemplate, in extremis, allowing slaughter under the welfare disposal scheme first and sorting out the payment and compensation afterwards, if need be?

Mr. Brown: I understand the sensible thinking that underpins the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. However, this is a voluntary scheme and it is difficult to ask people to deliver animals to a voluntary scheme and then argue about the money afterwards. If the hon. Gentleman reflects on his time in business, does he think that he would have done the deal first and haggled about the payment afterwards? Frankly, I think not.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): I had a meeting with five farmers in my constituency on Monday. In Wales, in the Vale of Clwyd, we have many small farms, which send only two or three animals to slaughter at a time. Those farmers asked whether it would be possible to send their two or three animals to a central location if their vehicles were disinfected when they left the farm and got to the central location so that the animals could be collected by a large wagon and taken off to slaughter.

Mr. Brown: That is a perfectly fair point. At the beginning of the outbreak we were considering whether collection centres might be a viable route. I am advised that at the moment they are not, because of the risk and the need for intensive management of some centres. As the situation progresses, I hope that it will be possible to put such arrangements in place. I hold out the prospect of such an option in the future, but I cannot announce it now.

I should like to make some progress, because I know that the House will be interested in what I have to say next. As the disease has incubated and revealed itself, our understanding of the outbreak has increased and we have been able to refine the disease control strategy. On 15 March I set out our safety-first strategy of intensified efforts in the areas of the country where the disease has spread and, provided that other areas remain disease-free, modification of restrictions in those unaffected areas.

Outside the infected areas of the country, the rest of Great Britain remains a controlled area. Movements are allowed only under strict, licensed conditions. We are

aiming to protect those parts of the country so far free of the disease. The precise geographical definition is still subject to epidemiological advice, but, broadly speaking, it is Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde valley, much of eastern England, part of the south coast and south-west Wales. We shall not permit welfare movements into those currently disease-free areas.

In his statement to the House yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment reported on the work of the rural taskforce. I reinforce his message by urging the public to continue to stay away from farmed livestock and to take special precautions in infected areas. At the same time, however, I want to make it clear that a range of country activities can be safely undertaken, particularly in unaffected areas. That is the best way to help rural businesses, which depend on visitors and tourism.

In the areas in which we are intensifying our efforts, the greatest concentration of infection is in the adjoining counties of Cumbria and Dumfries and Galloway. Those two counties account for more than 40 per cent. of all confirmed cases, and substantially more of those confirmed recently.

Mr. Hogg: I sense that the Minister will soon come to the extended cull. If so, will he help the House on one point? In dealing with the killing of healthy animals, what steps will he take to safeguard the blood lines of specialist flocks? Several specialist groups of cattle, pigs and sheep could effectively be eliminated if a whole flock were to be destroyed under the extended cull scheme. What does the Minister have in mind?

Mr. Brown: A later passage of my speech will deal with that point, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman is on to a perfectly proper point.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: I should like to make a little progress before returning to specialist breeds at the relevant point in my speech.

The infection has mainly been concentrated in the sheep flock, although there is now cattle-to-cattle spread in Cumbria. The potential for rapid spread in that area makes it necessary to destroy sheep and pigs within 3 km of the infected farms, as I announced last Thursday. The chief veterinary officer, Jim Scudamore, visited Cumbria on Monday to speak to local farmers and their representatives, as well as veterinarians. He explained the reasons for the slaughter of sheep and pigs within the 3 km zones.

In carrying out the programme of destroying animals within those zones in Cumbria and south-west Scotland, we shall look sympathetically at the scope for protecting rare breeds, wherever possible. We are discussing how best to achieve that with representatives of farmers of rare breeds.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): The Minister's point is of great concern to my constituents and those of all right hon. and hon. Members who represent Cumbria. He said that he would seek to preserve specialist herds. If those herds are wiped out, there will be no question of replacements being purchasable from off some other shelf. If they are gone, they are gone for good, and the farmers concerned will face no possibility of rebuilding their businesses and livelihoods.

The Minister said that he would seek "wherever possible" to protect those herds from the effects of the wider cull. Earlier today, he also said that the Dutch were considering a ring vaccination scheme around the area in which foot and mouth has broken out in the Netherlands. Vaccination is a highly complicated and sensitive issue, but if that is the only mechanism by which we may keep some rare herds in existence, will the Minister consider it?

May I extend to the Minister a repeat of the invitation that many people in Cumbria have offered him? I know that he is busy, but if he could come to the county, an awful lot of people would like to see him.

Mr. Brown: What the hon. Gentleman says is true. My earlier outline plan would have taken me to Cumbria this afternoon. I said previously that I would tell all the county's Members of Parliament when I would visit Cumbria so that we could meet on a bipartisan basis with, at least, farmers' leaders and representatives of the veterinary profession to discuss what is being done, and why and how. I know that there is much interest in all those points. I should also want to look to the future and discuss a recovery plan and the future shape of the industry once we have defeated the disease.

I have never ruled out vaccination. I am not an enthusiast, and I should take a lot of persuading before agreeing to it. The professional advice that I have had goes against it, for all the reasons that we have previously debated here. I have not ruled out vaccination in the context of rare breeds, although I am not certain that it would achieve the result that the hon. Gentleman anticipates.

We are taking specific interest in rare breeds and shall do whatever is necessary to protect them. However, if animals get the disease, they must be destroyed. There is nothing that I, or any Minister in my position, can do about that.

Let me make some further progress. I want to say something about the situation in Devon, which is also very serious. As I explained to the House last Thursday, our policy in Devon is to carry out intensive patrols—veterinary inspections—every 48 hours on all farms within a 3 km radius of an infected farm. That work is intensive and must be undertaken by people with veterinary knowledge. Its purpose is to ensure that cases of foot and mouth disease are identified as soon as possible and dealt with, by quarantine and slaughter.

Like all our actions, that measure is under constant review, but it is designed to try to prevent mass culling in the peculiar circumstances of Devon farms—where the farm structure is relatively small and the farms are close together. Everyone in the House will understand what that means with regard to the risk of spreading infectivity. I appeal to everyone to co-operate with the authorities in Devon over that intensive and focused disease-control strategy, designed to defeat the disease before it spreads further and necessitates more widespread culling.

As we have already discussed, and as the hon. Member for South Suffolk emphasised, there are serious logistical issues in Cumbria and in Devon in relation to slaughtering and disposing of infected animals. There is much interest

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in that matter in the House. In essence, the House is saying to me, "Why can't it all be gotten on with quicker? Why can't the animals be killed and removed immediately? Don't you need to do all this faster?" I want to set out exactly what we are doing to try to increase the rate of all that and of the disposal of carcases. We are acutely aware of the need to reduce the time between confirmation and slaughter and the time between slaughter and disposal.

Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition made a number of suggestions for action to help speed up our response to the disease, and they are reflected in today's Opposition motion. They are all helpful suggestions and I shall address each in turn.

The first is to allow vets to slaughter on suspicion of foot and mouth disease. Following the early cases of the disease, the Government's policy has been that vets can authorise slaughter on the basis of their clinical judgment. For some time, more than 90 per cent. of all cases have been slaughtered without the need for laboratory tests. The reason is obvious: we now know that we have foot and mouth disease in this country, so it is not necessary to confirm each case. In almost all cases, the judgment of the individual veterinarian is enough.

The second proposal—also perfectly sensible—is that the Government make an appeal to vets from abroad to come and help in the fight against the disease. Probably our largest bottleneck in the control of this extended outbreak is veterinary resource—we need vets. In the first week of the outbreak, we made such an appeal, and 70 foreign vets are already in the country, seven are arriving today and up to 30 will arrive next week.

The third proposal is that the Government bring final-year veterinary students into the front line against the disease. We have already done so. More than 100 have been appointed to work alongside the state veterinary service, and we hope that a further 70 will join soon.

It was also suggested that we employ retired vets. We are recalling retired vets to the colours—making use of their skills and services. We are increasing still further the number of vets involved in fighting the disease. More than 1,000 vets have already been appointed to the SVS; that compares with the 220 who would normally be employed as fieldworkers. In Cumbria, we have increased the number of Government vets from 14—the number on 28 February—to 64 on 7 March and, as of Monday this week, the number is 101. The extra numbers are being drafted into Cumbria because it is necessary to do so.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Has the right hon. Gentleman discussed the possibilities with the president of the British Veterinary Association? I was speaking to him at lunchtime and got the distinct impression that no such discussions had taken place and that the private sector could probably help a great deal if it was asked to do so.

Mr. Brown: The private sector has been asked to help. The communications take place between the chief vet and the president of the association, so the chief vet, not I myself, would conduct those discussions. However, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister told the House earlier today, the rates of pay offered for the work have been increased, and I hope that the new rates will be attractive to some vets in the private sector.

Many of this country's approximately 22,000 vets are in private practice, especially in small animal practices that they have built up themselves over many years, and it is not easy for them to put their private work to one side and suddenly work temporarily for the Government and then return to private practice. I appeal to those vets who can help to do so. We have upped the rates of pay to try to make the work more attractive, and I hope that that helps.

The Leader of the Opposition's fourth suggestion was to make more use of burial to dispose of carcases. We already use burial, but, admittedly, in a small number of cases. We are in favour of using burial where appropriate, but I should tell the House about the constraints on doing so. There are geological factors, such as the risk of contaminating water sources and, especially in the Cumbrian hills—as those who know the area will readily accept—there is shallow top soil with granite underneath, which makes burial not such an attractive option. Herds and flocks are much larger compared with 1967, so much larger burial sites would be needed. We are working closely with the Environment Agency to identify and use suitable landfill sites for the burial of carcases.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Is it true that the divisional veterinary officer for Cumbria has sought for weeks to assure Ministers that everything was under control and that resources were available when, in fact, it now turns out that what he was saying was simply untrue and was misleading Ministers?

Mr. Brown: That is not a fair picture of events. If my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall spell out what we are doing to reinforce the normal state veterinary service presence in Cumbria, so that we have a veterinary and a non-veterinary team sufficient to tackle the growing task there.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: I shall deal with the disposal routes before taking an intervention.

Burning and burial are not the only disposal routes; we are also using rendering plants. Four plants are already operating, and we intend to have six in use by the end of the week. We also plan to use dedicated slaughterhouses and rendering for at-risk animals that do not have the clinical symptoms of foot and mouth, but those abattoirs will, of course, have to be specifically dedicated to the task.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for all that he is doing to deal with the situation, but can he assure the House that he is now able to make an order to ban the spreading of liquid condensate, which relates to rendering plants? I understand that the consultation period finished on 5 March, and that nothing now prevents him from making that order.

Mr. Brown: That is a slightly separate issue. My hon. Friend has long and tirelessly pressed Ministers on that matter. I am not certain about the condensate issue because I have been fully engaged in the disease control

operation. I think that an order is due soon, but if my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall write to her setting out the position.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Minister has described the problem of finding enough vets, and we appreciate the efforts that he is making, but earlier this afternoon the Prime Minister said that there was no shortage of slaughtermen. I assume that the Minister endorses that statement, so can he explain why the list of animals awaiting slaughter is increasing? By virtue of the fact that they are on that list, a vet has already seen them and diagnosed the disease. If there are sufficient slaughtermen, why cannot they go in almost straight behind the vet?

Mr Brown: That is a fair question; I intend to deal with it once I have finished with the points made by the Leader of the Opposition. This is at the heart of the debate: how can we provide a better service, get the affected animals killed quickly, proceed with the proactive culling of animals that are at risk, and remove the carcases expeditiously?

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the rendering plant at Halton means that transport travelling south to north and from north Wales comes close to my constituency. Is he satisfied that the vehicles used are sealed properly, or is another urban myth going around given the stories in the local press suggesting that animals legs are sticking out of the trucks?

Mr. Brown: If anyone sees an arrangement that he believes to be unauthorised or wrong, he should note it and note the licence plate of the vehicle involved. I promise that I will have the matter checked. The whole disease control situation is now awash with urban legends. I understand how they arise, but they do not help. I am satisfied that the transport protocols are sufficiently robust to keep the risk of spreading the disease to an absolute minimum.

The real risks of spreading the disease are the movements of people and vehicles from sites of infectivity and the unauthorised movement of animals. Even if people think that no risks are involved because the animals look healthy, they may not be. If they are incubating the virus, moving them will cause it to spread. I urge people not to do that.

Sir Michael Spicer: Does the Minister accept that the facilities for rendering are quite inadequate? I know about the position in Worcestershire—the nearest rendering plant is in Exeter, which is three to four hours away. Two lorries are trying to deal with thousands of carcases, but it will take several weeks to clear the area. The Minister must give an absolute assurance that he will take a specific decision within 24 hours to deal with the problem by burial. Rendering is simply not sufficient to cope with the problems in Worcestershire.

Mr. Brown: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about disposal routes. A range of alternatives is available, and when burial can be used, it will be. However, I shall say a little more later in my speech about how we intend to manage the intensified outbreak in the area that the hon. Gentleman represents and the areas linked to it. I might have something new to say to him.

I wish to deal with the point that the Leader of the Opposition perfectly properly raised about bringing in soldiers to help with the slaughter of animals and the disposal of carcases. As of yesterday, Army logistic support teams have been deployed at MAFF's request in Cumbria and Devon. More than 70 members of the 1st Battalion, Prince of Wales Own Regiment have been deployed to Carlisle and up to 130 members of the Royal Military Police, contributing logistical expertise, will be available to deploy to Exeter. Their role is to enhance command and control and to provide supervision of the disposal process. They will get it better organised and that will free up veterinary time.

The soldiers will supplement MAFF's regional staff in the co-ordination of contractor teams already involved in disposing of carcases. That will speed up the disposal process and release vets to tackle the spread of the disease. We are keeping the position under review, and I must stress again that any Government resource that can help will be used.

I also wish to deal with the Leader of the Opposition's proposal for a business rate holiday for rural businesses. I am pleased, as I know that most Members are, that yesterday my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment was able to announce a preliminary package of measures—I stress that it is a preliminary package—to help affected rural businesses, including three months relief from business rates.

We are taking further action to speed up the Government's response to the disease. Incidentally, I take no personal affront at the hon. Member for South Suffolk chiding me on these matters. Yes, we need to do better, and that is what we are setting out to do. We are doing all that we can to free up vets so that they can concentrate solely on veterinary matters; we are looking to take on more veterinary surgeons as temporary veterinary inspectors; and revised remuneration arrangements have now been finalised and are being announced later today.

We have put in place two senior officials as directors of operations—one in Cumbria and the other in Devon—and they are able officials drawn from the heart of the Ministry. I can also tell the House that the permanent secretary agreed this morning to appoint a director of operations for the west of England. We are creating the post with immediate effect and it will be located at the Worcester office. The role will be exactly the same as that carried out in Cumbria and in Exeter, and it will be at grade 5 level. We will keep under review the need to reproduce that arrangement elsewhere.

To contain the problem in areas other than Devon and Cumbria, we are acting on a recommendation of the chief vet and negotiating with the Ministry of Defence to secure Army support in Gloucester, Worcester and Stafford. With our colleagues in the devolved authority, we are urgently considering the need to do that in Dumfries and Lanarkshire. Follow-up action is being taken with the Ministry of Defence. That is the latest position.

Some hon. Members will know that I was in the Agriculture Committee all morning, so I am not as fully briefed as usual. However, I knew that the House would want to know that the new logistical structures are being put in place where the permanent secretary believes that to be necessary. I wholeheartedly support what he is doing. The reason for the new arrangements is to ensure that the slaughtermen, of whom we believe we have

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enough, get to the task as soon as it is required to be carried out. The contractors can come in behind them and either remove the carcases or bury or burn them on site.

We have taken measures to ensure that the valuation of animals before they are slaughtered does not cause unnecessary delay. Again, later today I plan to introduce arrangements to make it possible for animals that are subject to compulsory slaughter to be valued according to a standard valuation tariff. As it is a generous tariff, people will be tempted to accept it rather than go to valuation and arbitration. That will speed up the system and, frankly, put more cash in hard-hit sheep farmers' pockets. That is my intention.

Mr. Paterson: On burial, who decides where flocks will be disposed of? As I told the right hon. Gentleman in the Select Committee this morning, the Environment Agency says that burial is the least preferred option, which is in direct contravention of the recommendations of the 1969 report. Someone in the agency is making a decision on a constituency case of mine today. Will the Minister ensure that hon. Members are able to telephone a senior official of the agency to ensure that burial takes place, because that is the preferred option in my area?

Mr. Brown: Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis on the advice of local officials. Our officials make the decision and we consult the Environment Agency. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the anomaly. Of course burial is an attractive option for people who wish to dispose of carcases for disease control purposes. However, for those whose responsibility it is to protect the environment—including the water table—it is less attractive. We are looking at what can be done. Essentially, our approach is pragmatic, but we cannot poison the water table, and I am sure that no one is asking us to. The decision is made locally by the officials in charge. In the areas that are subject to the new control structures, that is by the appointed Ministry official. We consult the Environment Agency but, ultimately, it is for the Ministry to make the decision on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is being extremely generous.

Mr. Sean Jackman, a self-employed farming contractor in Winslow in my constituency, has not been able to work for three weeks. On the assumption—at which I am not cavilling—that the Government will continue to resist calls for compensation for lost earnings, and further to what the Prime Minister said at Question Time about building on the loan guarantee scheme, will the Minister explain the time scale for that extension?

Mr. Brown: I have been candid with the House and said that I cannot promise that we will consider all contingent losses. No Minister could. It is a difficult issue. If the hon. Gentleman compiles a list of the contingent losses that he thinks the Government could accept, he will face the same problem. I am not trying to make a party political point. The problem is intractable. I cannot make a statement today in response to the issue that he is pressing because it is not necessarily within my Ministry's gift. However, the Government are considering what more can be done and an announcement will be made shortly.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman quickly covered areas such as mine that have no cases of foot and mouth. Will he consider sending out good information—perhaps in the form of advertising—to tell people where they can go in rural areas, such as the seaside? The Government have £30 million of television advertising booked for an election that I suspect the Prime Minister will want to delay. Perhaps those slots could be used for that information campaign.

Mr. Brown: The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), who represents the Ministry on the taskforce, tells me that the matter is under examination, and we hope to be able to put something into the public domain shortly. As well as being authoritative, that information has to be crisp and accurate. That is being considered, and the work that the hon. Gentleman properly asks for is under way.

I turn now to the compensatory arrangements. Our overriding priority is to bear down on the disease and eliminate it as quickly as possible. That is not a matter that divides the House. We are also doing a lot to help farmers financially. We have agreed to pay £156 million in extra agrimonetary compensation. To the average beef farmer that is worth £450 on beef special premium and £650 on suckler cow premium. To the average dairy farmer it is worth £2,300 and to the average sheep farmer it is worth £650. We have made special arrangements to make the payments over March, April and May.

We are fully compensating for animals that have to be slaughtered because of infection or exposure to infection, and that includes the value of common agricultural policy subsidies that would have been claimed on the animal. So far, committed compensation for compulsory slaughter stands at £80 million, and it will rise further in the weeks ahead.

We have taken steps to safeguard subsidy payments to farmers whose claims might otherwise have been put at risk by animal movement restrictions. Assistance is being given to the Meat Hygiene Service so that abattoirs, including small ones, do not bear all the increased costs that arise from the exceptional measures being imposed at present. We are working to do more. I recognise, for instance, the concern of beef producers whose animals are subject to movement restrictions that push them over the 30-month age limit. The Opposition have been pressing me on that point, and I am considering what I can do. As hon. Members would expect, I know the arguments in favour of pump-priming the pig industry development scheme levy, and I am considering whether that will be possible.

I also have to look to the longer term. I want to consider the effect on disease control of movement of sheep across large distances and through livestock markets. I want to examine the risks to animal health of illegal imports of meat products. I want to look at the role that swill feeding might have played in the disease outbreak. I want to look in particular at the sheep sector, as I explained briefly to the House earlier, and consider how the rebuilding of the flock should be handled. We are working on improving

traceability in the sheep sector and at how to progress existing plans for scrapie eradication. I intend to pay special attention to how the various options under the rural development plan can be deployed to help.

Some of the problems of the livestock sector are deep seated. Many result from a long history of production-based subsidies under the common agricultural policy. We need to take the long view and work with industry to create a sustainable future for the livestock farmers in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. The more that we can do that in a bipartisan spirit, the better. There is not much disagreement between us about the need to reshape the common agricultural policy or to provide enduring, sustainable support measures for livestock farmers, so I hope that we can take a relatively politics-neutral approach to the matter.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The Minister mentioned the cause of the outbreak and he spoke earlier about urban myths. Is he aware of the rumour circulating in certain elements of the press that animal rights activists are claiming that they stole a phial of foot and mouth disease from a MAFF centre at Pirbright and that they were the initiators of the outbreak? Will he state, once and for all, that that is not the case, and put that myth to bed?

Mr. Brown: We should all take a deep breath. My strongest suspicion is that there will be a far more prosaic explanation. That does not mean that we should not concentrate on finding out why our country has had two viral disease outbreaks in animals in a short time. It is right to focus on what has made us more vulnerable. But I have to say that animal rights activists are at the far end of a scale of suspects. The Ministry are working on the matter, and I am afraid that I must tell the House that the outcome is likely to be far more prosaic. The remedy is likely to be pretty prosaic as well, which is something that we can discuss together. Again, I would wish to consult the House before putting any further measures in place. However, if further measures are required, they will be introduced.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; he has been tremendously generous in doing so in this debate. Does he accept that an outbreak of foot and mouth is an extreme psychological blow to the farmer concerned? Compensation can never bring back the animals, but even if it is an amount on account, will the right hon. Gentleman personally ensure that it is paid as quickly as possible with minimum bureaucracy?

Mr. Brown: I hope to do better than that. I am looking at further support that can be provided immediately and at what can be done to provide a medium and long-term future for the livestock sector. In particular, I am looking at the relationship between measures necessary for recovery immediately after the disease and those which, for a range of reasons with which the hon. Gentleman and many other hon. Members are familiar, are necessary in the longer term. If we can pull all those strands together, perhaps some good may come out of a great evil. If that can be achieved, preferably with some consensus between us, it will be a good thing.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would you be kind enough to tell the House whether this is a question and answer session or whether we are taking part in a debate in which Members of Parliament are being asked to speak only for 12 minutes? A number of people have attempted to get in two or three times.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): May I tell the right hon. Gentleman, who is an experienced member of the House, that whether hon. Members seek to intervene on the Minister is entirely a matter for them? Whether the Minister gives way is entirely a matter for him.

Mr. Brown: I am trying to be courteous to the House. If I sense that the mood is that I should now make progress with my speech, no one would be happier than me, except possibly the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery).

I should like to deal with the question of vaccination of animals. I have arranged for a presentation for journalists who are covering the issue on 10 o'clock on Friday. Again, I extend an invitation to hon. Members to come to that presentation in my Ministry; they are all welcome. However, I will repeat the presentation and mount another on the epidemiology next week or later, depending on when the epidemiology is available for presentation. I believe that many hon. Members have an interest in that.

Of course vaccination remains an option, but the current veterinary advice to me is that that is not the way that we should proceed at the moment. I must not rule it out, but I do not intend to use it in the near future. My position has the full support of the Agriculture Council, to which I gave a report in Brussels on Monday. The other member states are in agreement with our disease control measures. Commissioner Byrne is planning to write to all European Union Agriculture Ministers, setting out the Commission's approach to vaccination. When I receive his letter, I shall put it in the Library so that all Members can see what the Commission is telling member states.

I have been keeping everyone informed, not just the Council of Ministers. In addition to my statements to the House and my appearance before the Select Committee on Agriculture this morning, all Members of Parliament have been written to with advice on relevant sources of information, including the helpline and website. A daily update on the disease situation is being placed in the Libraries of the House and a mechanism has been put in place to ensure that Members are informed directly as soon as a case is confirmed in their constituencies.

The disease is a tragedy for all those affected, whether directly or indirectly. I am enormously grateful for the work of the state veterinary service and local authorities, and for the support of the farming organisations, many other organisations and the general public. I appeal to everyone to continue to work together. I am grateful for the consensual bipartisan approach that the House has taken so far. Working together, we can succeed in bearing down on the disease, which should not divide us. In so doing, we can achieve the Government's objective of regaining our disease-free status and, once we have done so, keeping it.

5.34 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I applaud the Minister of Agriculture for the rational way in which he has again addressed the House.

During the unfolding tragedy of foot and mouth disease, which has had incalculable effects on the agriculture industry and so many other rural businesses, we must bear in mind that dissention, whether it occurs on political grounds, within the farming industry or among those trying to deal with the outbreak, is the enemy of effective progress. We must not fall into that trap. Equally, however, it is right for all hon. Members to express our constituents' concerns. We often speak in the House about fear of crime being as bad as crime itself. In this instance, fear of the disease is almost as bad as the disease itself, because of its effects on members of the rural community. They feel that the sword of Damocles is hanging over their heads and are not sure whether, the next day or week, their business will be for ever ruined by the disease.

The Government should have four clear objectives in dealing with the crisis. First, the obvious primary objective is containment and eradication of the disease. I hope that nothing is done in any sphere of central or local government to jeopardise that objective. Secondly, we must deal with the welfare not only of livestock, but of people who are involved in rural industries, which is equally important and concerns all of us. Thirdly, we must in the short term establish the viability of as many businesses as possible, whether or not they are farm businesses. Effective short-term measures are needed to improve cash flow and to provide security. Finally, we must work on reconstruction, about which the Minister made some significant points. I do not believe that this is the right time to speak in detail about the reconstructive measures that are needed within the agriculture industry, but we must realise that that is our next port of call.

May I express yet again my support for some of the difficult decisions that the Minister has made during the past few weeks? I should like also to express gratitude and recognition—I hope that I do so on behalf of all hon. Members—in respect of the extraordinary efforts that are being made by so many MAFF officials and veterinary surgeons, as well as by people in the farming community and elsewhere who are trying to deal with the situation.

Mr. Burnett: While the Minister of Agriculture is in the House, I should like to ask my hon. Friend whether he is aware of how marvellous a job is being done by MAFF's vets and other employees on the ground. I heard this morning from a constituent whose animals have been slaughtered and to whom the vet and MAFF officials were very helpful. The vet, a Mr. Bud Boyd, came from Texas. He was not only incredibly sympathetic, but was immensely supportive of the farming family, who were enormously grateful to him.

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend represents one of the foci of infection and knows at first hand how difficult the matter is, so his testimony is valuable.

Having expressed our support for what local people and the ministerial team are doing, we must now turn to the deficiencies in the arrangements. Although we support the objectives and, to a large extent, the strategy, we are aware that there have been holes in the implementation. Indeed, the Minister was good enough to recognise the existence of such holes. It is right for us to try to address some of those problems so that they can be improved in the short term and to enable us to learn in the longer term.

First, let me deal with the disease itself. We have had some discussion about contingency planning and the possibility of local arrangements for annual contingency plans or exercises.

A substantial amount of evidence suggests that the contingency planning was not equal to the task. That is a criticism not of those who are trying to implement the plans, but of long-term emergency planning arrangements between MAFF, other Departments and non-governmental departments. Ample evidence shows that those arrangements were inadequate or not in place.

Mr. Nick Brown: That is not unfair criticism. I had hoped to have new directors in place in Government regional offices to improve co-ordination between the Ministry and other departments in the regions. Without the outbreak of the disease, we could have moved seamlessly to establish the arrangements. We had recognised the problem, and we are acting to put it right.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful for that intervention, and for the Minister's recognition that my criticism was not unfair; I never make unfair criticisms. I am trying to make constructive criticisms to improve matters for the future.

Elements of the basic planning give slight cause for concern, for example, the difficulty of sourcing disinfectant in the first week of the outbreak, and the sudden realisation of the existence of a wider range of appropriate disinfectant products than the original list contained. The annual updating of contingency plans might have avoided the problem. There was a failure to use community pharmacies as a potential source of disinfectant. Pharmacological authorities brought to the Government's attention the fact that, when the agricultural suppliers had run out of advice and materials, other sources existed in many rural areas.

Hauliers reported to me that, in the first week of the outbreak, they drove to and from the continent and there were no disinfectant wheel baths at Folkestone or Dover. We therefore had the potential to export the disease to continental Europe.

For a long time, local authorities were unclear about their powers to close rights of way, bridleways and open areas. There is a further anxiety, which I would put to the Minister for the Environment if he were present. During consideration of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, I tabled amendments that would have allowed closure to deal with zoonoses. The Government rejected them and substituted an amendment that covered only human health. I hope that the Minister will reconsider that provision before the next epidemic so that we do not suddenly find that we have no means of closing areas that are open under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I make no apology for heaping praise on local government officers again. Trading standards officers as well as those in charge of rights of way have borne much of the pressure. If my county is typical, those officers have met almost daily to

make decisions and to work with MAFF officials, vets, valuers and others in the private sector. That shows how emergency planning can work, despite some difficulties.

Mr. Heath: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. However, I hope that he agrees that there are great differences between local authorities in the extent of emergency planning and the environmental health advice that they are offered. Relatively few county councils have a scientific department, which could provide the sort of advice that elected representatives need to deal with such a crisis.

We are trying to deal with a veterinary crisis without many of the Government vets who should be in place. That is a criticism not of the right hon. Gentleman who is now the Minister, but of decisions that were taken earlier to halve the number of vets in the Government service. That has greatly weakened our ability to respond to this crisis.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, at the beginning of this outbreak, we had half the vets that we had at the time of the 1967 outbreak? That reflects what has been happening to the Government's veterinary service. We need to consider that matter—after we have got rid of the disease, obviously—in terms of contingency planning for the future and of co-ordinating these issues at a European level. We now have partners in Europe that we did not have in 1967.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is obviously right. That was the point that I was making. We are less able to deal with a crisis of this kind because of some very foolish decisions that were taken some years ago to reduce our effective barriers to epidemic. That has been exacerbated by the closure of abattoirs, especially small abattoirs, and by the fact that we now move animals over much greater distances on a more regular basis.

On the action being taken, I suspect that the Minister's tactics for dealing with the epidemic are absolutely right. They certainly accord with the veterinary advice that he has received. I shall not enter into the discussion about inoculation as a means of fighting the disease, although I would be interested to know what contrary advice the Dutch Government received that brought them to a different decision. In my constituency, a gentleman is electioneering on the basis that he would introduce immediate inoculation and vaccination as a means of dealing with the problem. I think that he is entirely wrong-headed in that view and that, if he were to put it to farmers, they would show him the error of his ways.

We have already touched on the problem of the time lag between diagnosis and slaughter. The Minister said that he had been dealing with that. I can only say to him that it is not before time. That was a matter of great concern to many farmers who recognised that their flocks or herds were potentially diseased, but who had to wait for the diagnosis to be confirmed before anything could be done about it, knowing that all the time their animals were breathing out a plume of virus that could infect other animals on their farm or a neighbouring one.

Local management has been a major issue. I do not say that to criticise the regional veterinary officers. I am simply saying that they were overloaded with the logistical demands that were placed on them to deal with the veterinary side of their work and with everything else that they were being asked to do. It should have been obvious from the time when it became clear that we had two foci of infection—or three, if we include the Welsh borders, the Marches—that there needed to be a single person in charge. That is a matter of management, and a matter for the civil service, but I commend the decision that has now been made to put such a person in place. That is exactly the right decision.

On disposal, I believed from day one that burial was a better option, particularly for the relatively small number of carcases that we were dealing with in the early stage of the epidemic. I am disappointed that that option was rejected so early, that the Minister is still, apparently, fighting battles with other Departments about the ways of dealing with carcases, and that that method has not been made available.

On the use of the Army, I have received messages from, and had direct contact with, people involved with the Army who cannot understand why the relevant units are not being used. Let us remember that four Royal Engineers units and five Territorial Army regiments are stationed in the UK. They have 140 devices known as combat engineer tractors, which are not tractors at all, but are similar to the JCBs that one finds in civilian life, except that they have tracks on them. Those devices have not been brought into use, and neither has the Royal Logistic Corps. I find it difficult to understand why it is considered preferable for support to be provided by a few military policemen, however eminently qualified they may be, rather than by Royal Engineers with diggers, who could do the job.

Mr. Keetch: Does my hon. Friend agree that bringing in the Army would further emphasise that this is truly a serious national crisis?

Mr. Heath: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The key point is that, in a crisis that is overwhelming rural areas to such an extent, every single part of Government should have been mobilised from day one. There is sufficient evidence that that was not the case and that MAFF tried to fight a lone battle without the support of other Departments. Indeed, some decisions seem inexplicable.

The Agricultural Development and Advisory Service was effectively laid off from day one because it could not go on to farms. An agriculture advisory service that cannot get on to farms is no good and it had to sit around at home, waiting. Although it was put at the Minister's disposal, no staff were deployed to assist the Ministry in dealing with the epidemic until two or three weeks later. That is a scandalous waste of a human resources.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that a consequence of that waste is concern among the farming community that it has not heard enough about the rationale for the culls? Does he also agree that the Government could and should, as a matter of urgency and to ensure that the partnership between farmers and the Ministry continues, outline a clear justification for these dramatic measures? I am sure that they have to be taken, but their logic has not always been clear to people who have to suffer the consequences.

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend is right. He is referring to the clarity of the information provided and I shall come to that.

[Mr. Heath]

On resources, clearly there have not been enough vets in the field. Part of the problem has been the rate of pay, which the Minister has increased from £160 to £250. That is welcome, and I hope that the increase goes some way to meeting needs, but it has been reported to me that valuers are being paid £500 a day plus commission. Perhaps he can confirm that. Our sense of priorities seems topsy-turvy: we pay vets less than half what we pay valuers to value carcases after diagnosis. That is nonsensical and I hope that the Minister will consider it.

Mr. Drew: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: I must be careful, because other Members want to speak, but I shall give way once more.

Mr. Drew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving way a second time.

I have talked to valuers and we must be fair to them. They make two points: first, they need to value when the animal is alive, so they need to be on the scene quickly. Secondly, they face the same problems as vets in being unable to go on to farms. It is important to understand that there is a difference between clean and dirty vets, and valuers, and how that delays the process.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I am not convinced that valuers have to value while the animal is alive. If the Ministry changed its specifications, they would not have to do so. I suggest in the gentlest way possible that vets also have to examine animals while they are alive and they have the same restrictions placed on them. Perhaps there is an equivalence that he is not addressing.

I wholeheartedly welcome the Minister's offer to give Members of Parliament information on the epidemiology and other matters through a presentation. That is extremely helpful. However, on the provision of information to farmers and concerned people, I have serious worries about the extent of readiness. There is huge reliance on the internet, but it is a foreign country to an awful lot of farmers and they simply are not using it to get advice. They simply do not know what is put on the internet for their benefit and the amount of information sent to them on paper is nugatory. In fact, they have received practically none, which does not help them to deal effectively with the disease.

Information will not have been received by many people who keep animals on smallholdings. A few years ago, I would have counted myself as one, as I bred Tamworth pigs and kept a few breeding sows. As I had only a small herd, I would not have been on any list of farmers and it would have been difficult to find out what to do and what precautions to take. Those who think that that is not important should remember that the closure of Exmoor resulted from an outbreak in a flock of eight sheep. A small amount of infectivity in a tiny herd can cause a real problem.

More information should be made available and the Ministry could valuably have used intermediaries. That takes us back to the point about the use of ADAS officials, because there is also a case for using farmers themselves as intermediaries. They have offered their services as liaison officers and they could talk to their colleagues. Surely we should take them up on that offer and use them effectively.

The clarity of the information provided leaves much to be desired. Partly because of the structure of government, there have been apparent mismatches between information and advice from MAFF and from other Departments. That does not always happen in the devolved Administrations, however, and the guidance from the National Assembly for Wales, whose Minister for Rural Affairs is overseeing those matters, is immeasurably better than any so far produced in England, and I commend it to the House. It shows the advantages of genuinely joined-up government.

Welfare disposal schemes have been discussed and it is a great shame that the pig scheme at least is not yet in place. I understand the difficulties with sheep, but there is a real problem with pigs because weaners cannot be moved on for finishing and the older pigs are still hanging around. The welfare problem needs to be dealt with and we need clarity as to the welfare disposal schemes. We also need the potential for on-farm slaughter to assist the process.

On ewes, I have a story to tell from Mr. Guy Thomas-Everard, who farms in west Somerset. He has ewes in lamb that he wants to move to lambing sheds just across the A396. However, he needs a movement order and he got in touch with the Ministry two or three days ago to request one. He rang me this morning to say that he had been told that there was a licence sitting on a desk at the MAFF regional office in Bristol, but it could not be issued because there was no executive officer there to sign it. That is not satisfactory, as bureaucracy is overriding common sense. The matter needs to be considered.

Maureen Prince, who I believe lives in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the leader of the Conservative party, and her colleagues arranged to produce a disposal mechanism by cremating carcases on their property to stop piles of animals building up. The vets agreed, but the Ministry said no. Officials do not have to say yes or no on every single case; we should use common sense to fight the disease.

On welfare of people, I commend the Farm Crisis Network, which has been doing a marvellous job. Farmers are concerned about whether they can pay their taxes; they are worried about Lady day; they are worried about their rent; they are worried about how to make ends meet. That is the main problem, and the point has been repeatedly made that it goes well beyond farming.

Shopkeepers in my constituency in towns well away from farming and tourist areas all say that their businesses are being decimated, mainly because a lot of them depend on people visiting out of season, perhaps at this time of year. Such people are generally fairly well off. They read *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, which tell them that they must not go to country areas. Being socially aware and responsible, they do not—and do not spend their money. As a result, the newsagent, the butcher and the food shop, for instance, experience cash flow problems.

Although I welcomed the announcement made by the Minister for the Environment, serious questions remain to be asked. Many measures are still being considered, rather than being introduced. Moreover, it appears from what we

heard from the Prime Minister today that the relief is going only to communities identified as being rural—communities of fewer than 3,000. Many of the problems exist in market towns with populations of more than 3,000, and if they are left out the help will not reach those whom it needs to reach. We need much more clarity about the arrangements relating to value-added and other tax.

Mr. Guy Thomas-Everard, to whom I am indebted for his contribution, says that he was in touch with the Taunton Inland Revenue office today. After a delay, he was told to ring a special helpline number. When he did so, he was told to ring the Taunton tax office, which then said that it had no information about the Government's plans and could not help. We can do without lack of co-ordination of that kind.

Let me say something about the financial position of farmers specifically. It would help us enormously to know what is to be done about cattle aged over 30 months, and cattle going through the over-30-months barrier, while they are in a restricted area. It would also help us enormously to know what will happen to lambs that would normally be taken to market but which, by the time the restrictions end, will unfortunately be mutton.

Mr. Livsey: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Heath: Yes, for the last time.

Mr. Livsey: Is it not extraordinary that people with lambs that are ready for marketing and—in my constituency, certainly—are within 10 miles of a slaughterhouse cannot market them, because they are in a restricted area? This morning the Minister told the Select Committee that sending animals directly to the slaughterhouse was the option carrying the least risk. Would it not improve farmers' cashflow and get the meat to the supermarkets?

Mr. Heath: That is self-evident, and I hope that the Minister will consider it.

I understand that there has been an almost automatic derogation to allow grazing of agri-environmental scheme land under the current emergency. That is very welcome, but will the Minister also consider delaying the 31 May deadline for new applications for the countryside stewardship scheme? At present, no application can properly be made because no one can go on to the land—and once the deadline has been missed, a whole year will pass before assistance is received.

Let me ask a more fundamental question. Will the Minister look at commodity prices? We hoped that the dairy industry had finally secured an uplift in milk prices over the past month or so, but that now seems a forlorn hope. We also hoped that there might be an improvement in meat prices, but there is now a very variable situation throughout the country, and the lack of an effective market—because of the lack of literal markets—means that prices are depressed, especially in certain sectors. Will the Minister consider the National Beef Association's proposals for a price-fixing mechanism as a temporary measure? That would restore at least some common sense while no genuine market exists.

As a great many Members wish to speak, I shall draw my remarks to a close. I hope that the Minister has not ruled out the possibility of a degree of consequential-loss compensation, for which we have argued from day one. I am thinking particularly of those who are directly affected by Government decisions over which they have no control: they cannot make alternative arrangements, and meanwhile they are experiencing substantial losses.

Will the Minister ensure that the strongest possible case is put to the Government for proper use of contingency funds? If this is not a crisis of the kind for which such funds are intended, I do not know what is. The Ministry should ensure that other Departments are mobilised as well, because we are fighting a war against this disease, and if we are to continue to do so we must ensure that all available resources are deployed effectively. I am afraid that many people in rural areas, while applauding some of the Minister's actions, say that not enough has been done so far.

6.5 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): There is a lot of anguish in my constituency today. That was demonstrated this morning, when a number of my constituents from the inner Lakeland area, in particular, the town of Keswick—under the flag of the Cumbria crisis alliance, which was set up recently—spoke of their concern. I have also had meetings with representatives of the tourism industry over the last couple of weeks, most recently at my home last weekend. A number of people attended, including representatives of all the tradesmen in my constituency and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

There are problems, and there is a feeling that many of them are not being addressed. It is not just a question of a Government response. So far, 193 businesses have told the Cumbria tourist board that they are in trouble. For example, 17 of Cumbria's 24 youth hostels have closed. In fact, however, the Lake district is effectively still open, because many of our towns and villages are still providing the facilities that they have historically provided. The problem exists on the fells and at the access points. They are closed, but there are still many parts of Cumbria that warrant visits by tourists. Keswick is still open; our attractions are still open.

Before reaching the centrepiece of my speech, I want to say something about the measures introduced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment yesterday. They are welcome as a first stage, but it is important to keep a close eye on developments over the coming weeks. There will be further problems despite the introduction of those measures, and dramatic action may be needed to resolve them.

Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) advocated a subsidy for hoteliers and other operators in the Lake district national park to help them with their advertising bills, so that they can decide where to advertise in the national media. I support that idea, and also ask my hon. Friends to keep in mind the suggestion that I made yesterday—that attractions in the county should be subsidised. Honeypot attractions may well be the best way of bringing people back. The county contains more than 100 such attractions, many of which are still open. There are lake cruises, sports centres and environmental attractions, all of which could well be supported with taxpayers' money.

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

I think that the county's car parks should be free. I also think that, as the crisis develops, we should seriously consider introducing a system of free public transport, enabling people to travel throughout the Lake district easily and without expense.

I turn to what I believe to be an important issue. There are problems within MAFF in Cumbria. I believe that they will be addressed, but I think that my constituents and certainly the farmers are entitled to know that we know what they are.

The work that the vets have been doing is wonderful; they are much appreciated by the farmers. In my office, we have had repeated calls from farmers saying how pleased they are with the service that is being provided. However, the problem in the county is in MAFF's management structure. Indeed, the director—the local officer responsible for operations—has not proved competent in dealing with the crisis. The machine has been desperately slow. There has been a lack of lateral thinking. That local officer has not got things in Cumbria under control, despite the information that he has been giving Ministers and the private office to the effect that things are under control: they are not.

There has been too much sticking to protocol. As far as I can see, there has been a complete breakdown in communication between Cumbria and MAFF officers in London. Information has not been getting through on the failure of resources to deal with the escalating crisis, but I am assured by Ministers that the financial resources are there. That is not the problem; it is a logistical problem. Indeed, I welcome the most recent initiatives that have been taken by the Government in that area.

One very informed person told me that the management insisted on every box being ticked. That perhaps indicates the nature of the problem. Others have said that the local machine has been an old dinosaur at work, and that decisions were taking too long.

More control is needed at local vet level so that fast action can be taken and all the necessary arrangements introduced. The six-day delay from notification to disposal has been unacceptable. That has been exploited by the media in the county, reasonably, in my view, because it is a matter of legitimate concern. To this day, I cannot understand why the MAFF representative in Cumbria was not relaying to the Department his particular concerns in that area. I do not think that, in 22 years, I have ever criticised a civil servant from the Floor of the House of Commons, but the way the situation has been managed by senior management has been such a disaster that I have to say it; this is the forum in which to say it.

Another constituent said that we were not getting on top of the problem. We are still dealing only with reported cases, not with potentially traceable cases. I understand that the water board and a number of contractors have offered heavy equipment. I am told that they have been turned down. Where are the Royal Engineers? Why was there a shortage early on of slaughterers? Why was the centre told that everything was in order when there was a shortage of slaughterers? Why were we not told nationally that there was a shortage of vets? Every hon. Member in the county was picking that up, but the last people to admit it were those in the Department itself.

The other day, when a MAFF official was being interviewed on camera by Border Television, I had to intervene to protest at the way in which the questions were being answered. Even as late as our meeting in Kendal last Thursday, officials were not prepared to spell out what the deficiencies were in the county. It was only after I had intervened that I noticed a change in the approach of that interviewee. I am told that there is no shortage of money; I am satisfied that it is simply a matter of organisation.

May I say how much I welcome the appointment of the new controller of operations, Mrs. Jane Brown, a grade five civil servant who in the past day has gone up from London? Let her be fully aware of the fact that I will unreservedly support her, as I hope other hon. Members will, in some of the difficult decisions that she will have to take. If we are going to wipe the problem out, we must adopt a fresh, almost ruthless approach. We cannot afford the delays that have characterised the approach up to now; delays have certainly characterised the approach in Cumbria.

I congratulate Ben Gill on the courageous way in which he has led the NFU during this difficult period. He has had to stand up to complaints in Cumbria from local NFU representatives, who are under pressure from local communities. He has stood by a principle that he believes in—the idea that real action was necessary.

I refer to the future. My view is that the way the disease has been managed in Cumbria has been so unsatisfactory—I have mentioned a civil servant who has been responsible for the programme—that the National Audit Office will inevitably have to hold an inquiry. It will be as a result of that inquiry that the truth will unfold.

What worries me—I will be frank—is that the Government will be blamed for deficiencies at local level that were not fully revealed to Government. *[Interruption.]* Oh, yes. Ministers are certainly responsible for what has happened. I understand that, but I am worried about the fact that a lot of the information was not getting through to them. We expect our civil servants to reveal to Ministers in times of crisis precisely what is happening on the ground. In this case, it did not happen.

6.16 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): In the 18 years I have been privileged to be a Member of Parliament representing a wonderful part of Cumbria, we have faced various threats: the possibility of Sellafield closing or losing jobs, of the north-west railway line going into decline and not being repaired, and of Carlisle not getting a new hospital. All have been major issues, but I have never before seen or faced the complete meltdown of our county. The danger we face in Cumbria is that we will suffer such losses in the rural sector, in tourism and in other industries that it will take us years and years to recover.

I say to colleagues on both sides of the House who have two or three cases of foot and mouth in their constituencies, to those who have 48 or 45 cases in their constituencies—they can appreciate the extent of the damage—or to those who have 12 or 15 cases: I pray to God that they do not get 130 cases in their constituency. I pray to God that it does not get into their cattle herds and cut a swathe through their area, as it is doing through my constituency tonight.

Foot and mouth is now hitting farms in my constituency at the rate of more than 1 an hour: there have been 29 cases in the past 24 hours. I cannot count the number of sheep that have been slaughtered: it must be between 5,000 and 10,000. I give the numbers of cattle that have been slaughtered on individual farms: 152, 100, 184, 225, 320, 154, 150, 160, 157, 467, 425, 400, 205 and 870. Can colleagues imagine the cremation pyre for 870 prime cattle? What is happening in that part of north Cumbria tonight is almost unimaginable.

There will have to be a mega-inquiry after this. Today is not the day for recriminations. I could fill volumes with the stories that I have heard in the past few weeks on how the problem has been handled, but I wish to flag up a few issues. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) has been right to say that the whole issue has been a shambles at times, but he should not put the blame solely on one official in Cumbria. It was on 5 March that I called for the Royal Engineers and Royal Logistic Corps to be called in to help. The help arrived only this week, 15 days later. On 8 March, I called for more resources and said that the situation was out of control in Cumbria. Two days later, the Minister said that everything was under control.

On 10 March, I called for more vets from around the world to be called in. I know the MAFF contingency plan—call up Commonwealth vets and some others through the vets network—but I thought that we needed more. On 11 March, I called for veterinary students to be mobilised and vets to be permitted to authorise killing without waiting for lab results. We are still sending 10 per cent. of tests for results. That is not necessary.

One Labour Member said that the vets had to make only one phone call, but one phone call to whom? Should they phone someone in Carlisle, or someone in London—someone who is not looking at the cattle and the sheep with the blisters? Why should a qualified vet have to phone anyone to say, "I have found cattle with blisters; it is foot and mouth," and then seek permission to authorise killing? It may only involve a matter of minutes for the vet to pick up the phone, but I suggest that the decision may take slightly longer.

On 13 March, I sent the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food a ten-point plan. I say to the hon. Member for Workington that I sent it not to Carlisle, but directly to the Minister's office. In point 1, I said:

"We are desperately short of vets, particularly in Cumbria."

I urged the Minister to call the colleges as they, the universities and the schools would be going on holiday soon. Hundreds of student vets would be available, and we should get them in now.

I asked for the five-day quarantine ban on vets to be lifted; I referred to that as recycling dirty vets more quickly. I also said:

"When the new 'suspect' farm is contiguous to or near a confirmed farm then the 5 day ban is now totally unnecessary. Of course contaminated vets should not go near a likely clean farm of a suspect miles away."

I understand that that is now under consideration, but I called for it on 13 March.

In point 2, I said that vets must be

"given the authority to order a kill as soon as they see Foot and Mouth on a farm."

I asked the Minister to let Ministry vets

"slaughter herds if they honestly believe, from the clinical signs, that it is foot and mouth."

In point 3, I said:

"Valuation and slaughter teams must go in immediately after a vet confirms Foot and Mouth.

There are plenty of valuers around . . . We have cases in Cumbria of animals waiting up to 10 days to be slaughtered after a farmer and a vet suspect Foot and Mouth disease."

That was a week ago and the length of time has come down considerably. It is now down to two or three days, but that is still far too long.

In point 4, I said:

"Burial must now be included as an option.

Please intervene with the Environment Agency and insist that burial can be a safe option especially for sheep. You do not need to bury everything and with vast quantities of lime it is a safe option when the water table is low."

I asked the Minister to give himself

"three options—burning, rendering and burial, and that would give MAFF a chance to get ahead of the game."

In point 5, I called for the power to seal off minor roads; in point 6, I called for disinfectant zones to be created on major roads. In point 8, I said that all unnecessary activity in the heavily infected areas of the country should be stopped. In point 9, I called for the setting up of

"a national MAFF advisory telephone bank with lots of staff to tell farmers what to do about Form D restrictions.

I have lots of evidence of farmers being given a Form D and no-one then contacts them again. I am told that one farmer, in Cumbria, in ignorance, has moved silage from one farm to the other and spread Foot and Mouth disease."

Finally, I said that massive television and radio advertising should be used to warn and advise the public. Apparently, that will now happen, but I called for it on 13 March. On 14 March, I wrote to the Minister to beg him to grant Cumbria county council the power to close minor roads.

On 15 March—the famous Ides of March—we had the mistake of the Minister, when he included cattle. It is trendy these days for people to sue because of stress experienced for minor things. Last Thursday night in Cumbria, I could have found 10,000 farmers who would have sued for millions because of the stress that they suffered before the Minister had the decency, correctly, to go back on television and apologise for the mistake that had been made.

On 17 March, in desperation, I wrote to the Minister again. I said that there were now two things to do. The first was to appoint a supremo to take command in Cumbria. A team of experts should be sent there and control should be devolved. I believe that Jane Brown has arrived there today. I am grateful to the Government for listening to my suggestion.

I also called for the Army, the Royal Engineers and the Royal Logistic Corps to organise things. I said that there were plenty of civil contractors and that we did not need troops digging trenches; civil engineers could do that. In Cumbria, there are dozens of firms that are not allowed on to farms; agricultural drainage engineers and contractors cannot go near farms. Their plant is sitting idle and they desperately want to help. I concluded by saying that the appalling delay in Cumbria had been caused by a failure of the whole logistical back-up system to kill and to dispose of animals quickly enough.

[Mr. David Maclean]

What we do not have in Cumbria—despite the Prime Minister's words today, I suspect that we will not have it by the end of the week—is the situation that I called for in my letter to the Minister. I said:

"You must get to the situation that when a farmer calls with a suspect case, a MAFF vet can be there within two hours at most. If he or she, from a clinical examination, believes there is foot and mouth then that vet must have the authority to authorise the slaughter and make one telephone call to the Emergency Command Centre who will then dispatch completely self contained teams to deal with it. That team would have an auctioneer to do the valuation, a slaughter group to conduct humane slaughter with proper captive bolt pistols and they would be followed on to the site immediately by a big team of private contractors and/or aided by Army Engineers to dig the holes necessary, build the pyres and get the carcases onto them. That team should not come off the farm until the fires are out and a decontamination unit has decontaminated the farm along with all the vehicles, personnel and equipment of those who carried out the burn or burial."

Is that wrong? Have I got that plan wrong? From my experience as a MAFF Minister; from my lay experience as an appointee, by this Government, to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons; and from my knowledge as a junior officer in the Territorial Army, I know that there is a simple logistical task for the military to do. That task, understandably, was not for MAFF's qualified vets, who have their own speciality: diagnosing the disease and calling in the others.

Tonight, I am not confident, but we are slightly further down the road. So much time has been wasted, however. The disease has now reached epidemic proportions and a firestorm is sweeping through north Cumbria tonight. For the sake of our whole country, I say to those colleagues with one or two cases—or with 45, as the hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) has in his area—and to others with ten or a dozen cases: I hope that we in Cumbria have a unique epidemic and that that hotspot will remain unique to us. I would not wish this on the rest of the country for a king's ransom.

We must have on-farm burials in Cumbria. I will not bore the House by reading out the letter that I sent the Minister for the Environment on Sunday, urging him to overrule his own Environment Agency and to permit on-farm burials. I also wrote to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, urging him to overrule the Environment Agency. From all sides we have had demands to let burials on farms proceed. I know that that is MAFF policy; it has always been MAFF policy and it is the safest policy.

My criticism of the Government and of MAFF Ministers is that they should have had the courage to say that we faced a crisis of epidemic proportions and that, in most cases, there would be on-farm burial, except in a few cases where it was unsafe to do so. Cremation would then take over.

I beg the Minister not to use two council refuse tips in Cumbria—the waste tips at Hespin wood and Flusco quarry. Flusco quarry was going to be closed by the Environment Agency three years ago because it is a limestone quarry and even domestic garbage was leaking out. Now it has been lined with plastic and is to be sealed. A methane gas pipe is to be put in; if 6,000 sheep are put in it, it had better be a big pipe.

We have 100 years of experience of what happens to animals when they rot in the ground. We have no experience of what happens when they are in a sealed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

6.28 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I do not intend to speak for too long this evening. I share the anguish of other Members and the worries of all those who are so desperately affected in the 29 areas of the country that have been touched by this outbreak of foot and mouth.

I appreciate that agriculture is an issue devolved to the Scottish Parliament; none the less, I would hope that Members in this House will appreciate that devolution can be swept to one side. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) said that there were 45 cases in my area; the latest figures I have show that that is rapidly increasing towards 60.

We must share the difficulties that face those affected. Some people, until four or five weeks ago, would have looked at agriculture and said, frankly, that it had nothing to do with them. Only now are they beginning to see that what is happening is seriously impacting on their lives and livelihoods.

Many animals in Dumfries and Galloway are still waiting to be slaughtered. The numbers involved are astonishing, especially given how many animals have been slaughtered already. I got a real glimpse of what was happening when I visited the community in Langholm in the east of my constituency a week last Friday. I was due to meet local people to discuss the impact that the outbreak was having on them, and what the future held. It was evening, and as I crossed the bridge into the town the fields to my left were on fire. That was the first time that I had ever witnessed the sight: television footage or newspaper photographs do not give a real impression of what it is like.

I hope that hon. Members attending the debate, and those who have not been able to do so, will read what has been said today, and consider the extent to which the disease is affecting people. For example, schoolchildren cannot begin to understand what is going wrong in their communities. They have been moved back and forth every day for perhaps a week or 10 days. There is smoke in the atmosphere, and the fields seem to be on fire after dark. That is not a healthy environment—not because of the smoke, but because of what people are seeing every day.

On the evening about which I am talking, I met the local community initiative group. We talked about concerns involving tourism and small rural shops. Rural areas do not have strong and vibrant economies, so everything is based on small and medium-sized enterprises. A lot of help will be needed in the future.

I have spoken in some detail with the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border several times over the past couple of weeks, and he has told me that his perception is that the authorities in Dumfries and Galloway are coping much better than their counterparts in Cumbria. The House has heard this evening, from the right hon. Gentleman and from my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), how desperate the situation in Cumbria has been.

The Dumfries and Galloway local authority has co-ordinated the work in my area, and it has done an excellent job, controlling operations from a bunker at the

council headquarters. People working there have been through some pretty desperate days, and I think back to the Lockerbie air disaster in 1988. My predecessor in the constituency was constantly in touch with the command centre at that time, when it was also having to deal with an extremely difficult situation. I do not want to draw comparisons between then and now, but this foot and mouth outbreak has been my worst nightmare. I only wish that I could wake up and find that it had never happened.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been criticised for saying that the outbreak was under control. I want to examine what controlling the disease has meant to those working at the sharp end in my area. They have tried to keep this terrible disease within the confines of the local authority boundary, and to ensure that it does not spill over. Clearly, the disease may have spilled over from Cumbria into my area, and vice versa, but we are trying desperately to ensure that it does not go further afield and reach Ayrshire and the Scottish borders.

A lot of help will be needed, and Ross Finnie, the Rural Affairs Minister of the Scottish Executive, will be making announcements in the coming days about what help will be made available. For my part, I have spoken to the banks to encourage them to help people affected by the outbreak. Only one of the three main banks in Scotland has responded to my appeal, and I am bitterly disappointed that they are not responding quickly enough to people's needs.

My constituency has five large estates, and many tenant farmers. I am not about to say that different treatment should be given to different people, but we must look closely at what is being done. Tenant farmers watching all that they own being wiped out must wonder how they will survive. If they want to stay in the business, they will have to hang on to the end of the year, when they can buy stock. However, the price of that stock will be much greater than it is at present. Breeding will take place next season, so businesses will only start to reap any benefits 18 months from now.

People cannot survive on fresh air, so support must be made available. Especially careful thought must be given to the problem of what we must do for some tenant farmers.

There are some excellent pedigree animals in my area. People are desperately worried about the Cheviot flocks grazing on hills in the east of my constituency, and about what can be done to protect them. There are also excellent flocks of Suffolks and Texels, and we must do our utmost to protect them, as their strong bloodlines extend over generations.

I have also been contacted by families with pet sheep and lambs. One's heart has to go out to them too; they need as much support as possible.

I am sure that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border will be sick of hearing me say what I have said so often over the past couple of weeks, which is that I have almost ceased operating as a politician. I am more of a social worker, talking to people on the telephone for 30 and 40 minutes at a time, rather than the usual five minutes. In the current situation, all hon. Members must undertake such long conversations with people, simply as a matter of decency. I am delighted to have been able to put social workers at Dumfries and Galloway council in touch with people whom I consider to be at risk. They are happy to step in and ensure that people are getting the support that they need.

At the end of the day, questions will be asked about the cause of the outbreak, and who is to blame. We will have to get back to the fundamentals: if there has been something wrong in the conduct of someone's business which has caused this tragedy, we will have to deal with that. I would go as far as to say that, if necessary, the matter should be dealt with through the court system.

The shape of our countryside will be different in the future. There is always a glimmer of hope when a tragedy such as this comes along. We will have to look closely at agriculture, and all the other elements that feed into it. I hope that we will be able to do so sooner rather than later.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now have to announce the results of the Divisions deferred from a previous day.

On the motion on Weights and Measures, the Ayes were 182, the Noes were 263, so the motion was disagreed to.

On the motion on European Security and Defence Policy, the Ayes were 303, the Noes were 133, so the motion was agreed to.

[The Division Lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

Foot and Mouth Disease

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

6.38 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): No one could have heard the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and not be moved by the great devastation that has hit his constituency. He has prayed that no other farmers go through what those in his constituency have gone through, but farmers everywhere fear that that is exactly what will happen. That burden will overhang the farming industry and community over the next few weeks.

I was horrified to hear the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food say that he did not think that the crisis had passed, and that there were many more cases still to come. That admission was brave, but it is worrying and scary for any hon. Member in this Chamber with an agricultural constituency.

The Opposition do not get many days on which to choose the subject of the debate, yet this is the second time that we have used our Opposition Day to discuss something that the Government should have found the time for. This is a national emergency—the Government have found no time to allow us to debate it, yet the Opposition have.

The Government have sent out mixed messages during the crisis. A newspaper report of 12 March said of the Minister of Agriculture:

> "While the Government denied that it was being overwhelmed by the foot and mouth crisis, Mr. Brown insisted that he was 'absolutely certain' that the devastating outbreak was under control."

[Mr. Patrick McLoughlin]

The right hon. Gentleman gave a reassurance then which he was unable to give with any certainty today. I was very concerned by the Minister's admission.

Let us be in no doubt that this is a disaster for the countryside. Things were bad enough before the outbreak started; the agricultural industry has been going through a continuous crisis for quite some time. The accountants Deloitte and Touche published an analysis of farm incomes in October 2000. Average-sized farms of 202 hectares that earned £80,000 in the mid-1990s earned just £8,000 in 2000, and might run up losses of £4,000 in 2001. That was before the outbreak started.

The crisis is comprehensive—the fall in farmgate prices and incomes is affecting every sector of the industry. Net farm incomes are down by 16 per cent., dairy farm incomes by 21 per cent., upland livestock farm incomes by 26 per cent., and lowland livestock farm incomes are down £1,500.

The industry was just starting to believe that there were signs of a turnaround before the outbreak of foot and mouth. Having gone through a very bleak period, farmers saw some signs that things might be starting to get better, but any improvement has now been totally wiped out.

I represent a constituency of outstanding natural beauty, which covers a large area of the Peak district. More than 20 million people visit the Peak district each year. It is, without doubt, the lungs of Britain, with a catchment area of Sheffield, Manchester and the west midlands. On a bank holiday, it feels like the whole of that catchment area comes to my constituency. Yet I believe that we have taken the countryside for granted. We think that it exists because of nature, but that is not the case. It is farmed, maintained and looked after by farmers—that is what makes it the countryside that we love and enjoy going to see. If we do not realise that, we will be in peril of losing one of Britain's great national assets—its countryside.

There has been much talk about the 1967 outbreak and the comparisons that can be drawn, but I do not think that many comparisons can be made, because the farming environment has changed dramatically. Farms are now bigger and when a farm is infected, more animals are involved. For the past 20 years, Governments of both colours have encouraged farmers to diversify but now they find that the money that they invested in diversification is not bringing in the returns that it should. That is one of the great problems of the rural economy. We must remember that we are talking about the future of the rural economy, not just that of the agricultural industry.

Too many mixed messages have been, and are still being, sent out by the Government. We heard Ministers say yesterday that the countryside was open and that people can go there providing that they do not come across cattle and sheep. In the Peak district, we do not have much arable farmland; it is mainly given over to livestock.

Derbyshire county council has issued the following notice:

"HELP STOP THE SPREAD OF FOOT AND MOUTH

Help us protect our countryside—DON'T VISIT UNLESS YOU HAVE TO."

I believe that the county council put up that notice in good faith. Yesterday, however, the Minister for the Environment gave a different message to the House and to the nation. Can we please have some consistency? People do not want foot and mouth to spread, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border said, but they need to know what the advice is from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Towns in my constituency such as Bakewell and Ashbourne have been devastated by the lack of visitors. Indeed, some business people have set up a mutual self-help group, known as Hartington and Newhaven Development, or HAND. I shall be going to see those people on Saturday morning because they want to express to me their concerns about the future of their industry and the way in which they can survive the crisis. One of the establishments in the group was serving 60 lunches until a few weeks ago; it now serves three or four. That is the kind of devastating impact that the outbreak has had on small rural businesses as well as those in the agricultural sector. It is incumbent on us as Members of Parliament to tell the Government that those are the concerns that businesses throughout the Peak district have to face, partly because of the Government's mixed messages about whether access to the countryside should be encouraged or prevented. That is the problem.

I hope that the Government will get their act together in the next few days and send out one, single message so that people can understand what the criteria are for access to the countryside and certain areas. That is particularly important in the run-up to Easter, which is a tremendously busy time for our small rural businesses. If they lose their takings or their takings are substantially down at Easter, they will not be around next Easter or even this summer.

This is a crisis for the agricultural industry; it is also a crisis for rural Britain and the rural environment. For far too long, we have taken the countryside for granted. The Government have brought in right to roam measures to give people greater access to the countryside, but the truth is that this crisis threatens the very existence of our countryside.

6.48 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): Following the contributions of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown), none of us wants the maelstrom that has hit those areas to be visited on our rural areas.

In my constituency, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said in his opening statement, there is a concentration of the outbreak of foot and mouth. There are nine confirmed cases and others are suspected.

Three weeks ago, at the beginning of the outbreak, when the Forest of Dean was made an infected area due to the outbreak on the other side of the Wye valley in Herefordshire, I attended a planning meeting that included representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the police, the Forestry Commission, the district council, trading standards and emergency planning departments, as well as the commoners from the statutory Forest of Dean. At that meeting, I raised the important issue of sheep roaming free in the statutory Forest of Dean. We are not sure exactly how many sheep there are, but believe that there are about 5,000. They are grazed there by right of commoners or badgers.

I asked whether the sheep would be mustered and penned together. The area of the forest is wide, and contains many towns and villages. I was told that there had been advice that it would not be good policy to muster the sheep since that would cause tremendous disturbance and disruption, which would increase the risk of spreading infection. I was told that only 40 per cent. of commoners had holdings elsewhere for sheep, which raised the difficulty of where the sheep would go. The forest enterprise could identify only five areas in the statutory forest that could be fenced in, and even they would create problems with grazing the animals. I made it clear that I would want to see someone take responsibility for the problem. I was told that responsibility for managing and checking the sheep, and for keeping them in the statutory forest area would, as it always had before, fall on the commoners themselves.

Since then, the situation has changed. At Coleford magistrates court today, Glyn Barclay, a badger, was tried at short notice and found guilty of allowing his sheep to roam free outside the statutory forest. Indeed, they were roaming down the A48. He was heavily fined, and the case was dealt with quickly to show its importance.

There has also been a confirmed outbreak in the village of English Bicknor, outside the statutory forest. A couple of weeks ago, free-roaming sheep went on to the farm in question from the statutory forest. The farmers were told by MAFF to pen those sheep separately and feed them. They did so, but have now had a confirmed outbreak of foot and mouth disease, although it arose not from a link with those sheep, but from a link with Ross market.

On Friday, at my surgery, a gentleman arrived breathless and late. He apologised, and said that he had been held up by a sheep truck. I said, "They can't be moving sheep around; how do you know there were sheep in it?" "I could see them," he said, and we realised that he was talking about an area inside the statutory forest where one of the commoners was moving sheep in an open truck.

In addition, there has been a confirmed case at a farm in Blakeney, which abuts the statutory forest, and we must consider the possibility that that will infect the sheep in the forest. I have written to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture and the head of the planning team in Gloucestershire to ask them to reconsider the decision taken three weeks ago so that we can go ahead with mustering the forest's free-roaming sheep. We need those sheep to be properly managed, as they patently have not been to date. I want those 5,000 sheep checked to ensure that they do not have the disease, and we must be sure to protect the surrounding agricultural community.

It is clear that in recent weeks some—though not all—commoners have behaved irresponsibly. Indeed, MAFF has made it known to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) that commoners have been obstructive in letting out their sheep at night. Such behaviour contrasts directly with the measures taken in the surrounding agricultural community. Other farmers are rigorously enforcing controls and taking every possible precaution.

I seek urgent reconsideration of this matter. The decision must be taken on the advice of experts, but since we have all suddenly become experts on foot and mouth, let it be left to real experts. The free-roaming sheep could cause a serious risk, although I appreciate that there has until now been no evidence that infection among any Forest of Dean flock has come from them. I do not ask for a cull, which would be a complete change of policy. At present, the sheep are clean, and a cull would also include deer in the forest. However, we must consider penning and controlling the sheep since the commoners are not doing so themselves.

In my area, as in all others, farmers are extremely anxious, and not only on the nine farms that have foot and mouth. Those farmers are at a loss to know what to do as they grieve the loss of their animals and businesses, some of which may have been built up over generations.

I have a few further issues to discuss, including concern about mixed messages from MAFF. There are problems with the website. Although it is excellent in part, I have been told that it is not updated frequently enough. Local farmers are finding out about outbreaks from the local news rather than the MAFF website. Nor is it precise enough. It will say, for example, as it did in a case last week, that there has been one on a farm near Lydney. That information was no good since the farm was in Purton, which is not near Lydney. Farmers need to know whether an outbreak is on the farm next door or 3 km away. The information on the website is not accurate enough.

I am also concerned about information for the general public. We have all become experts on foot and mouth, and I have heard some curious stories. One lady, for example, rang up to say that she knew that sheep in a nearby field had foot and mouth because all the baby lambs had pink legs. Lots of new-born lambs have pink legs, and it is not a sign of foot and mouth. Suddenly, however, everyone is an expert.

We need to put out more accurate information for the general public whom we are asking to play a part by keeping out of the countryside in infected areas and away from footpaths and the statutory forest. We need to make sure that people do not panic and build up myths that could damage our farming community and tourism industry. We need accurate information.

I want to touch on what is happening to other rural businesses in my constituency. The Forest of Dean is beautiful and unique, and it depends heavily on tourism. Indeed, it depends more on tourism than it does on livestock. Although I recognise that we must do absolutely all that we can to secure the future of the livestock industry by eradicating this dreadful disease, I do not want the tourism industry sacrificed.

Since 27 February, my area has been classified as infected. That creates punitive problems for businesses such as local pubs, outdoor centres, centres running canoe courses and the Newent bird of prey centre. All those places are either closed or serving few visitors. Cancellations have been made at our hostels and at all our caving centres. We must recognise that people can cope with a problem for a short time, but that they face cancellations not for now, but for June and July as schools pull out. We need much more support. We need not sympathy alone, but measures to tide businesses over until the affected area is cleared and we can open up the forest again.

The work of the taskforce must be widely publicised among businesses. I have been asked what the Government are doing and have said that the taskforce would report and that a transitional package would be put

[Mrs. Diana Organ]

in place. But people do not know what is in that package, and I must point out that there has not been enough information even in the House of Commons Library about what the taskforce is doing.

I welcome, as small businesses will, deferrals of value added tax on businesses, the three-month business rate relief and support from the Small Business Service in the form of a loan guarantee scheme. All that is good, but we need more. The taskforce must go on meeting and making recommendations. That information needs to be disseminated to businesses close to infected areas so that they know what help they can obtain during this difficult period.

Many people in rural areas have made a terrific sacrifice. Although we welcome the work that is going on, the rural community—farmers and small businesses—must have clear messages both from MAFF and other Departments about how the Government are handling the matter and seeing it through, and about what we are doing to assist businesses in this dreadful situation.

7 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I want to raise some practical issues that affect my constituency. There is only one outbreak cluster in the area—in Hawes in North Yorkshire. Although my constituency does not have an outbreak, a large part of it is in an infected area, so the impact is strong.

My first concern is for farmers in an infected area who do not have the disease on their farms. They are heavily restricted and cannot sell or move their animals. Their cattle are going over the 30-month limit—cattle are often marketed at 28 or 29 months. There is a similar problem with lambs. When they push up their second teeth, they are sold as mutton and that can mean a 50 per cent. price discount.

Those farmers do not stand to receive compensation, but they are losing substantially because their animals are eating their capital, yet generating no revenue. The matter is serious. Those farmers are directly concerned. Will the Minister of State look urgently at that matter when she considers compensation? The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has already said that compensation is needed in relation to the over-30-months scheme for cattle.

I want to draw attention to the problems of farmers whose ewes are away from the main farm. The Minister said that they have an option: they could repatriate the ewes voluntarily, provided that the animals were passing from an area of lesser infection to one of greater infection. In practice, there is little of the voluntary about that; many farmers have no real choice. Their ewes are in lamb in extraordinarily difficult circumstances—on small patches of land where little food is available. There is high mortality among ewes. The farmer cannot bury or dispose of the carcases. There is also high mortality among lambs. In my constituency, one farmer's ewes were eating ivy and so produced many dead lambs. If a farmer wants to bring his sheep home, the sheer hassle involved is almost prohibitive.

I understand why the regulations are in place, but the distances—as well as the series of journeys to get disinfectant—and the costs mean that in practice, for a farmer who is really concerned about animal welfare, the only sensible choice is slaughter. However, that farmer will not receive proper compensation: because his action is deemed voluntary, he will receive only two thirds of the price. A responsible farmer would not regard that as a voluntary choice. Will the Minister of State consider that matter seriously? The animal welfare implications are very real.

The most chilling remarks that I have heard in my constituency during the past few days have been from farmers who ring me up to say, "The best thing for us would be to get the disease on our farm. Then we'd get the proper compensation. We are suffering because we do not have the disease." There is only a short step from farmers who think that the restrictions are unreasonable or perverse and who are suffering because they are combating the disease to people who might be tempted to relax their guard or even, in marginal cases, attract the disease. The sheer frustration and anguish of farmers, their sense of vulnerability and foreboding, cannot be exaggerated.

It would help if the Minister of State explained why some of the exclusion zones have been drawn as they are. Around Hawes, they are extremely wide; they stretch 25 miles to Ripon, yet they are much shorter in other directions. There are some perverse lines on the map. I realise that one needs to identify proper traceable features, but farmers who are 25 miles away from an outbreak and under restriction know that other farmers only half that distance away are not under restriction. The Minister of State should consider local authorisation for the revision of those boundaries where that can be done sensibly and rationally so as to liberate some farmers. The older idea of drawing a circumference around affected areas might be considered.

I want to look ahead. At the end of this experience, we shall need to draw the threads together. I want to make a pre-emptive strike by noting three conclusions that I hope will not be drawn because they are entirely false.

The first is that the outbreak is all the fault of intensive farming. That is the greatest load of nonsense I have heard. As foot and mouth is endemic in the third world, yet the United States has managed to eliminate it entirely, it is difficult to argue that intensive farming generates the disease. That is a false and ridiculous conclusion.

The second false idea relates to abattoirs. There is a case for small, local abattoirs—but not on the grounds of animal health. The case for such abattoirs is that they serve a local market and meet a proper need. It is not to do with hygiene. We closed down many abattoirs, and many of them badly needed it. Between 10 and 15 years ago, Britain was heavily over-abattoired; there was much surplus capacity.

It is ironic that the disease was detected in an inspection of a modern, up-to-date abattoir. I am in favour of such abattoirs. Of course, small abattoirs have a role, but they, too, must be modern and up to date. Let us consider such abattoirs sensibly rather than in the context of the romantic folklore that, by definition, they are superior to what has replaced them.

The third false statement is that the outbreak is all the fault of the supermarkets. I regret that the Prime Minister made such silly remarks about supermarkets when he visited Gloucester recently. The supermarkets have probably done more to change the shape of the common

agricultural policy and of agricultural development in the United Kingdom than any politician. By and large, they have done so for the better.

We must look to the future—the Minister of Agriculture talked about that. Many people will leave agriculture as a result of this experience. The average age of farmers in Britain is 59. Farmers will receive compensation if their animals are slaughtered. I accept that he has said that he has tried to make that compensation generous rather than otherwise, but for many farmers, it will be their retirement pension. He would be well advised to consider whether some modest outgoers scheme might not be a useful weapon to deploy at this stage, despite the arguments levelled against such schemes in the past.

We must also bear in mind the heavy costs of stock replacement. The Minister of Agriculture may be paying a good price for the cull, but that price probably comes nowhere near the replacement cost of the animals, simply because less stock will be available. Some farmers who are suffering now may do well soon if they have stock available for sale as replacement stock and a marketplace for it.

The shape of British agriculture will change dramatically; BSE did not change it, but foot and mouth will. It is inevitable that live animal exports will come under scrutiny. It will be difficult to resume them. I have supported such exports. My constituency earns a large part of its agricultural livelihood from sheep, and export plays a part. It will be difficult to resume exports, especially as only one vessel, the Farmers Ferry, is used. We may have to examine the practicalities involved. There will be consequences for the market. The Minister of Agriculture talked about the need to restore a functioning marketplace; those factors must be taken into the equation.

Scrutiny of live auction marts is also inevitable. I support them. In my constituency, where many farmers lead an isolated life, the mart is the one place where they meet other farmers. Indeed, if Government are looking for an instrument to tackle social exclusion, the live auction mart could play a major role in rural parts of the United Kingdom.

I realise that questions will be asked because of the problems of transmission, so the Government must think about what measures might be necessary to reassure people that the live auction system can continue, while eliminating any risk that might stem from them. At the same time, I believe that introducing a pause before traded animals can be dispersed is likely to be the inevitable consequence.

We will also need to consider meat imports. Meat can be imported from regions where foot and mouth does not exist, but from countries where it does, and many people will want to be reassured that the controls that govern the movement of that product in the country of origin are strong enough to enable us to have confidence in that trade. If we regionalised the United Kingdom and had regions that were free of the disease, I doubt very much whether it would be easy to export our products on the basis that some of our regions were free of foot and mouth when it was endemic in others.

The disease will accelerate the trend away from support for production towards support for the public good. Even before this crisis, the question for farmers was what they should do in a society that is well-off and well fed, that has no problems with food security and that is mobile and environmentally conscious. The answer is that they will have to move to new marketplaces, going up the food chain and producing better food. They will also have to move to recreational and environmental markets.

We, the other parts of society, must define what we want in terms of the public good and what we are willing to pay to achieve that public good—a more difficult problem. We should have that sensible debate sooner rather than later, as it would take us entirely in the direction that the previous Government and this Government have been going, to try to move away from supporting production to defining agriculture in the wider rural context. That is the sensible way forward.

Finally, the Government are taking the right actions, but there is a danger that they will lose the argument because of the problems involved in implementing them. If an animal is slaughtered and disposed of rapidly, that is better than if it hangs around. Putting right the practice is an important element of winning the arguments of principle involved in the Government's actions, and I am sure that they will observe that importance.

7.12 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): It is rather ironic that I should follow the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) in the debate, as we have recently been to Poland together, where he inveigled me into talking about agriculture for much of the time, when I wanted to talk about the chemical industries and the development of information technology, which are my natural interests.

Some might not have predicted that I would take part in this debate, given that Falkirk, East is mostly an industrial and residential constituency, but I can claim some credentials because, between 1980 and 1990, when 10 per cent. of the beef farmers in the Forth valley area went out of business for economic reasons, they came to me, as leader of the council, and we struck up a very good dialogue which continued between 1992 and 1997. When they came to the House to lobby they would see me, even though I was the Member for Falkirk, East, because they did not seem to receive much of a hearing from the former Member for Stirling.

The new Member for that constituency, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire), has a very close relationship with the farming community, but she has been rostered to sit on the Whips Bench today. However, we have been talking about the issue, and I know that she is in close contact with the farming and tourist industries in Stirling.

Although Falkirk, East is mostly an industrial and residential constituency, it has a hinterland, as do all constituencies, except those in cities. Sadly, that hinterland contains two farms at which foot and mouth has been suspected during the recent outbreak. I told the farmer and his family that I would mention their plight today. Although their animals have not suffered from foot and mouth, outsiders might think that they would be better compensated if they had, as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon has suggested, because it seems that they will receive no compensation for the losses that they suffered when their farm was embargoed and movements frozen while it was under inspection.

[Mr. Michael Connarty]

The farmer's mother and wife came to see me at the weekend, and they were in a rather emotional condition. They are concerned about the hard work of a young, enterprising farmer, who is under 50—well below the average age of 59. He decided to diversify in what seemed to be the right way. In fact, he became a haulier, stocker and wholesale sheep dealer for abattoirs, the markets and the supermarkets. He had a well-worked-out business plan, and he seemed to be doing very well until the recent outbreak.

Although some sniping and posturing has occurred, most of the debate has been enlightening, intelligent and balanced. It does not help farmers if hon. Members try to score points rather than settling down together to work in a bipartisan manner to solve what is a massive problem for them.

I want to raise the issue of consequential loss. It is clear that there is a spectrum of claims. That spectrum includes matters far removed from farming and the breeding and rearing of animals, but I hope that farmers and those in farming-related enterprises, directly linked to the production and distribution of animals, will be treated slightly differently from those who may also suffer, but have a tenuous link to the industry because they happen to be in the rural environment.

The problem occurred as a consequence of something that happened on the farms. As a non-farmer who does not come from a farming community, I have to say that it happened because of something done by a farmer. Someone did something in the farm food chain that caused the disease to spread. All the people whose livelihoods depend on farming should be considered to be victims of that act. I heard the Minister say that one of his aims was to put more money into farmers' pockets, and he said that the Government will consider whether more can be done.

I want to relate the story of the Stewart family of Drum farm in Bo'ness. They are a young family who had broken away from rearing animals, by fattening sheep for four weeks before market. Those who know about farming understand that that involves feeding high-protein cake. Although the cake is expensive, those who use it normally get their reward in the end because they can sell lean sheep at a good price. The family purchases for abattoirs on a wholesale basis and they offer overnight lairage for local abattoirs. They also buy sheep to sell on to the supermarkets.

The family also owns a livestock haulage firm, running eight lorries. Theirs is a small firm, not a large concern, but they employ 11 men. At the weekend, it was remarkable to hear them say that they were really worried in case they had to lay off any of those people because they had been very loyal. Their firm was clearly haemorrhaging cash, but they did not want to make anyone suffer who had shown them loyalty as they changed from being farmers and breeders and developed their new business.

The family owed 6,330 sheep the day before the foot and mouth outbreak. I am told that the sheep were worth £2.50 a kilo before the foot and mouth outbreak, but the family gets just £1.75 a kilo for the sheep now that they have been released from their incarceration and can take the beasts to market. That represents a cash loss of more than £90,000 to that business. A bank manager would need to be very understanding to be happy that a business had lost that amount of money in such a short period. That money will be not recoverable unless the Government seriously consider compensation.

Dur g the 10 days that it took for the family to get the all clear, when they were almost locked in, they had to bring in feed in bags because no one could take feed to the farm in large lorries. They keep sheep at a number of places in my constituency, and they had to take medical supplies to all those animals, some of which were suffering because they had been kept long beyond the day that they should have gone to market.

I commend the family on being very enterprising. Now that they have been allowed to move, they have started to take small herds of sheep from smaller farms directly to the local abattoir, and they are involved in the secondary business of moving the carcases to supermarkets. They are trying to recover some of their losses, but they are not getting anything like the money that they should. If we say that such consequential losses should be written off, I am sure that that would be the tip of the iceberg. All the other Members whose constituencies contain many sheep farms and other types of farms that are also frozen under the embargo will say that they are also losing out and that it will be a long time, if ever, before they recover.

My plea to the Government is that they treat businesses such as that run by the Stewart family as direct farming units and compensate them as direct farming units. If we do not do that, we are saying that it is better to have beasts with foot and mouth slaughtered than it is to do what the Stewart family did. They showed a real public concern. I understand that only one sheep was ill and that they had been to many markets, but not to the Longtown market in the borders. They called in the local vet, who did not know whether the sheep had foot and mouth—he did not know what was wrong. Therefore, he decided to call in the MAFF vet.

As soon as the MAFF vet stepped on to the farm and took a test, the two farms that the family use were embargoed and locked off for 10 days. The fact that the family did their public duty cost them money. It is therefore rather odd to hear from the media that the Government will not compensate them because their losses are consequential. I would say that they are direct losses.

Mr. Stewart asked me to pass on a few thoughts on the wider issues. The first relates to proper washing and disinfecting at markets. The Stewarts' haulage firm has full wash-bay facilities that are often used by other people hauling back and forward to the market in Edinburgh. Although it is probably a matter for the Scottish Parliament, and I do not know how it happened, I have been told that the wash-bay facilities have been taken out of one of the markets in Edinburgh because the sewage did not conform to the environmental health regulations. That seems rather strange. Instead of moving the market or upgrading the treatment facilities, the wash bay was removed. That does not suggest that the people who run the market have much concern for public health. I hope that that matter will be considered either here or in the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Stewart feels strongly about the second point that he made. He said:

"UK meat now has an image problem. The public perceives meat as being expensive because of recent problems. In real terms the lamb price being paid to farmers is 30 per cent. less than before.

Consumers need to be made aware that meat is good value for money, and it has been for a long time. The British public wants meat of the highest standards like Scottish lamb."

I am sure that he meant "like British lamb", and he adds:

"They need to be made aware of the good value of lamb for their money.

If this does not happen we will have greater imports of inferior meat coming into the country than ever before. We must not forget that it was probably imported meat that caused the whole problem in the first place."

I heard my right hon. Friend the Minister say that we will crack down on the illegal importation of meat. Clearly, that is very welcome.

On the next point, I disagree with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon. Mr. Stewart said that the marketing structure had been extremely fragile for many small farmers and small hauliers, and the market had become far too dependent on large farming and hauling enterprises. Small farmers had to take the price given, and that probably would not sustain them. Mr. Stewart thought that he had found a niche market in which his small haulage firm could sustain a large number of small farmers. It would provide good value for money and he would give them good rates for haulage, lairage and so on. The outbreak has thrown the situation into chaos and he said that we must consider seriously how we can help small hauliers and small farms to sustain their contribution to agriculture. I agree that the smaller farmer seems to be more concerned about the quality of the product rather than the number of the beasts that they turn out.

I wish to quote the conclusion of my letter to my right hon. Friend the Minister, because I hope that the Government will take this point very seriously. I wrote:

"I hope that the Government are planning to offer adequate compensation to farmers and livestock hauliers such as the Stewarts of Drum farm, Bo'ness."

If we do not, we shall be seen as not having treated the whole farming industry in a proper manner.

I end my remarks with an ironic story. Mr. Stewart has a close friendship with another haulier who comes from the Cumbria area. His animals were found to have foot and mouth, and he is looking to buy a farm in Scotland when he receives his compensation. That is a crazy indictment of the way in which compensation is being paid.

7.24 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I welcome the debate, because the tone of the House has reflected the extreme gravity of the situation. As many Members have said, the problem does not affect just agriculture. Anyone who has read the front page of *The Times* today will have seen that the village of Porlock in my constituency reports a total absence of visitors and that there has been a collapse of all the businesses involved in tourism and with the wider Exmoor community

I have just received a report of a meeting in Porlock village hall today, where I shall be on Friday. Two hundred people in the village hall, the chairman and director of the national park, the local director of the National Trust and the chairman of the district council all recognised the extraordinary gravity of the situation.

I was concerned whether it was appropriate to table this motion, and I discussed the matter with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo). However, it is important to make a distinction. I believe that we should take a bipartisan approach to this serious and growing problem, but the Government should realise that some real problems need attention. That message must go right across government.

On an earlier occasion, I pointed out to the Minister that people did not know what foot and mouth looked like. I urged on him the need to advise people on how they could recognise the symptoms and he made a reasonable reply. He said that he understood my reasonable suggestion. Most of the people dealing with the problem have never seen foot and mouth, and I understand—I may be wrong—that Mr. Jim Scudamore is about the only person serving in MAFF who was involved in any significant way when the previous outbreak took place in 1967.

The great problem with such issues is the collective memory. No Minister has ministerial experience of dealing with foot and mouth; hardly anyone in MAFF or in Parliament has either. I have been here a long time—some people say too long—and I came to the House two years after the previous outbreak. Therefore, I hope that someone is keeping a careful diary of every event in this outbreak.

Although the Minister said that it was a good idea and that he had the matter in hand, it was nearly 10 days before the first pictures appeared showing what foot and mouth looked like. They were good because they showed what to look for in cattle, pigs and, in particular, sheep, which are liable to get blisters on the palate which makes the disease very difficult to recognise. I hope that those pictures will be stored and a stockpile will be kept so that they can be printed instantly should an outbreak occur again.

Today, we heard the Prime Minister commending burying in line. The 1968 report shows that that was the preferred method then. It warned against burning because of the risk of spreading the disease further. It is only now, in week five, that we seem to be returning to one of the strong recommendations of the 1968 committee. It is important that we learn lessons. Prompt slaughter is another of the 1968 recommendations. Discretion should be given to vets so that they can move faster. It is as though we have had to reinvent the wheel.

A further recommendation in the 1968 report was that we should bring in the Army earlier and provide assistance at an early stage. I have just received the excellent foot and mouth bulletin that is produced by the National Farmers Union in the south-west; I always ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk receives a copy. The bulletin says that Major Belinda Forsyth has now appeared on the scene in Devon. She is the commander

"of the army team which has been brought in to assist with the logistics of the slaughter and disposal operation. She has 25 two person teams out in the field, organising contractors, coal, straw etc, so freeing up vets' time for more appropriate work."

That is jolly good. However, the bulletin adds:

"What she does not have is access to military resources or manpower, and we remain to be convinced that resources in that regard are adequate."

No Minister should be embarrassed about asking for military assistance. In the Ministry of Defence document "Defence Policy 2001",

"Military Aid to the Civil Community"

[Mr. Tom King]

is a justification for defence expenditure. I recall its being used during strikes by ambulance men. That is carefully provided for and part of peacetime security. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is entitled to expect a proper contribution.

The leader of my party implied in his speech two nights ago that a vast resource is available. I might have to disagree with him. The Royal Engineers are overstretched, so I am not sure how large the resource is. However, whatever is available should be used and, with great respect to the Minister, should be in place because such arrangements take time to organise. That was a recommendation of the 1968 inquiry.

That inquiry made another recommendation. It is obvious and, I think, starting to be accepted that it is impossible to manage the crisis from Whitehall or regional offices. One Member made a profoundly true remark when he said that the Ministry and all Government offices are institutionally urban. Calls to the regional office in Bristol are answered by terribly nice people who have probably never seen a farm in their lives. They have been recruited in Bristol to do a call centre job or whatever. The problem in the south-west is that the regional office in Bristol is going to close and has lost some of its key people. The Minister should worry about the wisdom of that closure, because suddenly that office is desperately needed.

Management of the crisis cannot be run from a regional office; there must be local discretion. I understand that we are to have a south-west supremo who will be based in Worcester. That will not serve Devon and Cornwall too well. Let me give the Minister an example of a pathetic case. People are ringing up because they have seen ewes in a village called Enmore. The west country has had terrible weather in the past few days, with 2 in of rain and snow on Exmoor. The animals are out and there are welfare considerations. The farmer has asked to move his sheep to new grazing which is 5 miles away, but an earnest, decent and conscientious person sitting in Bristol has read up the rules and told him that he cannot have a local movement order because that is limited to 5 km. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals turned up, looked at the ewes in the field in the village of Enmore and ordered them to be shot. They have been killed because someone in Bristol who has never been to my constituency looks at a map and cannot use his or her discretion. That cannot be right.

I understand the problems that Ministers face. I dealt with a few when I was in Government and recognise that the crisis has a complexity beyond most of the difficulties that I encountered. It cannot be controlled from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Nobel house or the regional offices. There must be local discretion.

Common sense must be applied. To make a further movement of livestock, a lorry has to be sent to a regional cleansing centre. When a farmer in my constituency gets a movement order and wants to move animals, the closest regional cleansing centre is in Exeter. A farmer from Weston Zoyland, which is 5 miles outside Bridgwater, would need to send his lorry to Exeter, bring it back to Weston Zoyland to load the animals and take it to a farm four miles away, before sending it back to Exeter to be cleaned again. South Molton has a regional cleansing centre, but there has been an outbreak two miles from there.

On the market situation, a large pig producer in an infected area—thank God it has now been cleared—cannot move his pigs because the price has collapsed and the slaughterhouses will not take them. The other slaughterhouse in my constituency deals mainly in beef. Although it could be open, the flood of Irish beef has meant that it has laid off its people because it cannot sell beef at commercial prices.

The rising trend of outbreaks will continue for some time. Farms and the rural community as a whole are facing a crisis. Half our potential county councillors are farmers who are locked on their farms. For the Prime Minister to parrot what the Leader of the House said about holding the county council elections on 3 May sends a bad signal. It seems that the Government's best argument for not cancelling them is that people throughout the world would say, "Good Lord! The British have cancelled their county council elections."

If those elections go ahead and any Agriculture Minister goes near the hustings, there will be a riot. They know that it is their job to work. They will not be able to campaign because the Government have responsibilities at a high level to deal with the crisis. If we get a measure of control in force and the election, and its related activities cause the disease to burst out again, I shudder to think what fate would face the Government, and they would deserve it. Although I understand the pressures, I hope that people realise that we are in a major crisis and it must be given top priority.

7.36 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): If the debate is to have any value, it should focus on two issues: first, whether the Government's strategy is right and, secondly, whether that strategy's implementation is satisfactory. We have heard little about the strategy. The farming community accepts that the Government's objective to eliminate the disease as fast as possible and restore our country to its previous disease-free status is right. Our strategy is to identify each outbreak, trace it and eliminate the animals involved and their contacts. My only concern is that, although farmers are persuaded of that, the population at large are not sure that that is the only route to eliminate foot and mouth in this country.

I have just received a briefing from the Soil Association, which is promoting a meeting tomorrow to discuss the possibility of using vaccination around the areas with the highest concentration of the disease. I shall be surprised if that proposal does not receive a good deal of support from people who are concerned about the welfare implications of the strategy and the likelihood of succeeding with the methods that we have chosen. Although my right hon. Friend touched on the possibility that there might be a plan B should the mechanism that we have identified fail, we need urgently to work out whether there is a fall-back strategy that could be implemented reasonably quickly.

The current strategy has my support. We have not established that it cannot work, although there is evidence that, in some parts of the country, resources are being overwhelmed by the demand placed on them. I have received many inquiries from people who are concerned

about the need for slaughter and the possibility of exploring alternatives. We should continue to keep an open mind and engage with the wider public in some of the complex issues that have not been played out. That is why I welcome the announcement of a briefing to journalists on Friday.

I want to concentrate on the effectiveness of our delivery of the current strategy. We need to put any comments into context. I listened with care to the remarks made by experienced Conservative Members. It is easy for us to criticise with hindsight, and there has been a tremendous number of references to 1967. It is clear that this outbreak of the disease was not identified early, which means that the virus had numerous routes of transmission that could not be shut off because it had already passed through them. There appears to be far more movement of stock, particularly of sheep, than in 1967, making spread of the disease rapid and exposure wide and not readily predictable.

The main carrier is our sheep flock, in which movements and locations of animals are far less traceable than in other species. Flocks and herds are far larger than in 1967, making the sheer scale of the outbreak far greater given the lack of early identification. This virus is particularly hard to spot in sheep, making early identification hard. Sheep are farmed extensively, making identification even more difficult in most conditions.

The outcome of those disadvantages is that the disease is far more widespread than in 1967. I share the gloom of Front-Bench Members about the prospect of an early end to the disease or even an early sight of its peak. We face a logistical nightmare. Instead of the relatively tight concentration of outbreaks in the midlands in 1967, we have outbreaks the length and breadth of the country. That makes the concentration of scarce critical skills in the right places much harder to achieve than before.

When faced with such a problem it is normal, first, to define where those skills add most value and, wherever possible, to simplify the processes that skilled individuals have to follow and, secondly, ruthlessly to prioritise the tasks that they have to carry out. On that point, some of the comments about inexperience this time round have some resonance. Insufficient care has sometimes been taken to define clearly what vets do best and on what they should concentrate all their time. We have not used some of the key analytical and management skills early enough.

The critical tasks in disease control are identifying the disease, valuing the stock, killing the animals and disposing of the carcases. When risk analysis is also involved, movement control management requires analytical skills of a high order. We have had to increase the number of vets available, and identification remains a vital task for the farmer himself. The Government have done their best to recruit vets, but a lack of vets is not the major cause of our difficulty. Understandably, there have been difficulties with valuation, for which there should be simple, fair formulae. I was encouraged by the fact that my right hon. Friend the Minister said that we are moving towards that.

There is clearly a difficulty in getting qualified slaughtermen to the right places at the right time. As abattoirs are running well below capacity, it should surely be possible to bring those skills to the places where they are needed. Live animals pass on infections—as far as we can tell, often within hours. It is critical that the gap between identification and slaughter be cut from days, which is how long it takes in some parts of the country, to hours.

Destruction of carcases is less critical. In disease control, the critical issue is whether the animal is alive. The presence of carcases is obviously distressing to farmers and others and runs the risk of spreading other kinds of disease, but the destruction of carcases is clearly a lesser priority than some of the other tasks facing the team confronting the disease. As other hon. Members have said, burial is less of an option than in 1967 simply because of the scale of the herds and flocks that we are dealing with. There is also a greater awareness of the potential for pollution from burials. In my area, where there have been seven outbreaks, I would be extremely doubtful of the value of burials on land that lies within the flood plain. Nevertheless, it is clear that burials should be made easier, and we urgently need to clarify what might be the Environment Agency's concerns.

Movement control is a complex process of risk analysis. The disease could be incubating at the time of movement and animals could be infected during that time, so any movement carries some risk. My constituents expect vigilance to prevent the further spread of the disease in the area. Many farmers have expressed concern to me about the complex process that must be undergone to acquire movement licences. That should be simplified for the convenience of farmers and, just as importantly, to reduce the work load on our hard-pressed public servants, who have better things to do than shunt bits of paper around the countryside.

Clear information is critical to the handling of this crisis. Although MAFF's website is excellent in many respects, it is not always up to date. It should include details of sites where a form C has been issued. People should be aware of the high risk attached to a vet's opinion that an outbreak is likely to occur. Farmers have had one high-quality mailing, and I myself received one. They now need much more detailed practical information on issues such as obtaining movement licences, access to the voluntary scheme that has been referred to, rules on disinfectant and restocking and aid packages for farmers considering alternative uses for their property. They need to know how agrimonetary compensation schemes will be firmed up, how exactly the schemes will work and within what timetable.

Initiatives are being taken in my area which are outside the Government's grasp. I commend the *Derby Evening Telegraph* campaign to aid farmers in the area. It works directly by fundraising and encouraging support for local rural enterprises that have been badly affected by foot and mouth because visitors and business partners have been discouraged from coming to see them. We need market support mechanisms to maintain the prices of the tradeable sector now and through recovery. I commend also the Minister's approach for examining the long-term issues. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) made some intelligent remarks about the issues that we must confront.

Finally, we urgently need definition of the policies necessary to aid recovery. Many farmers face a complete reassessment of their life prospects, and it is entirely understandable that they may be considering retirement or an alternative future. We should help them in their time of need. Rural development plan resources are almost

[Mr. Mark Todd]

certainly inadequate to meet that requirement. We should review the resources already set aside for schemes, which are available to fund alternatives to farming.

Farming and related rural enterprises have a great future in this country. I have said that before and I say it again—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I know that this is a very important debate and many hon. Members want to participate. If everyone takes their 12 minutes, there will be widespread disappointment.

7.48 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I shall endeavour to be brief, but I want to make a couple of points on behalf of the farmers of east Kent. The area is not recognised on the maps that one sees on television as being heavily affected by foot and mouth disease, but of course as in any other agricultural area, the knock-on effect is dramatic.

I want to talk about animal welfare on behalf of farmers because there seems to be a mood abroad that farmers do not care. The press have indicated that some of my local farmers are weeping for their bank balances, and one farmer this morning described that quite simply as "offensive crap". He is right to use exactly those words. Farmers care enormously for the welfare of their animals. They care because, as that farmer said, if one has built up a flock of Merinos over three generations and that flock is slaughtered, one is likely to cry. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) referred to a field of lambs that the RSPCA ordered to be shot. The cameras do not go into those fields; they are not allowed to. The pictures that the public see on television are not the worst images, although piles of dead animals and palls of smoke are bad enough. The dying lambs; the ewes out in the cold; the pigs crammed into sheds unable to move; the cattle that cannot be moved—those are what ordinary people do not see in newspaper photographs or on television.

This morning, a farmer told me about his flock of sheep on waterlogged pasture, with no edible grass. He has only a fortnight's supply of feed and once that is gone, he will be cleaned out and those animals will starve. I am told that sheep are already starving on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. There is no veterinary care either; even if there was, the farmers cannot afford it. The impact of all of that on farmers who care for their animals is simply terrifying; the impact on the animals themselves is just as bad.

I resented it when the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box this afternoon that thousands of sheep went to the abattoirs every week, and that just a fraction of the national herd was involved, so it did not matter. Of course it does. The knock-on effect extends beyond the animals that are culled and has an impact on every farm and every animal across the land. In the main, those animals cannot be moved into fresh pasture or shelter for lambing; they cannot be moved to feed in areas where there is no feed. The knock-on effect on those who supply wheat feed is just as bad because they cannot get their food to areas where the animals need it.

As I said, the cameras are not going in so people are not seeing that. However, today my farmers and the British Veterinary Association told me, "Cull and bury, and do it fast." That is the message, but there is a backlog of animals waiting for slaughter and burial. In the Chamber last night, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment quoted Humpty Dumpty in "Alice Through the Looking-Glass":

"'When *I* use a word . . . it means what I choose it to mean'"—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2001; Vol. 365, c. 215.]

Today's word seems to be logistics; that was the message from the Dispatch Box at Prime Minister's questions. The logistics team of soldiers—who, I am sure, are doing a good job—are going into the west country. However, people there do not need logistics; they need soldiers with machinery to go in and bury the dead animals.

I am angry for those people because a farmer and his wife with dead animals in their pasture are like every man and every woman with their dead dog or dead cat lying unburied on their lawn for days. That is what the Prime Minister is ignoring. The Minister of Agriculture is a decent, honourable and caring man, and his speech was very beguiling indeed. However, the bottom line is that we need not logistics but troops to do the job—the culling and burying. We do not need vets to do that. The BVA and the farmers want that done, and they want it done now.

I want my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) to listen. My farmers' criticism of him and of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—not the Government—was not that we had called for a postponement of local elections in Cumbria and Devon, but that we had not done that nation wide. There is no recognition that this is a nationwide problem; it is about not just Cumbria and Devon, but every farm in the land. Do the Government seriously believe that they can go ahead and send out canvassers because advertising has already been booked and 3 May is in the diary, holding the countryside and the rural economy in contempt, when Ministers should be doing the job that they were elected to do and sort out the crisis? If they do, they will pay a terrible price. The farmers are paying a terrible price now, and it behoves all of us to recognise that.

7.55 pm

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) mentioned the need to look at strategy, and to consider whether it is right and whether it is working. I want to say a few things about both the short-term and long-term situation for my farmers.

In Pembrokeshire, we have two main industries, agriculture and tourism, both of which have been hit heavily in the past few weeks. We have been fortunate in not being directly affected; ours is still a clean area. However, we have had a couple of blips and worrying incidents, when everyone held their breath. Basically, we export livestock, including cattle, to other areas, where they are fattened up; and we have therefore kept clear of foot and mouth disease.

My farmers, with whom I have been regular contact since the outbreak started, wanted me, first, to tell the Minister how grateful they are that he is listening to what they have to say, and is being open about the advice that he is getting. That is a major concern for my farmers, especially bearing in mind the historical record. However, I shall not go into that now, because farmers also tell me that they are desperate that the issue should not become

political in any way. They are grateful for the cross-party approach to the issue, which is far too important to make cheap political points on the back of the United Kingdom's rural economy. That is the other prime message that my farmers in Pembrokeshire would want to give the House.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) in praising the role of Ben Gill, who has shown great courage in his approach to the problem. He, too, is looking to both the long term and the short term, even when it has been difficult for some of his members to cope with that.

Although we must keep the problem clear of party political issues, we cannot ignore a couple of small points arising from past decisions. First, there is a shortage of vets because of the decimation over 10 years of the state veterinary service. Secondly—and this relates to my Pembrokeshire farmers—another problem arose from the restrictions imposed after the BSE crisis.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford) *rose—*

Mrs. Lawrence: I see the Opposition spokesman gesticulating. I hope that he will agree with what I am going to say, especially since his Government, regrettably, were responsible for those measures.

Mr. Green: Two minutes ago, the hon. Lady said that farmers in her constituency did not want the problem to be treated with cheap political points. She is now making cheap political points.

Mrs. Lawrence: I am terribly sorry if the hon. Gentleman thinks that raising regulations that had to be introduced because of BSE is a cheap political point. Those regulations are having a major impact on livestock farmers in my area. The over-30-months scheme, for example, is having an impact, along with movement restrictions. My farmers in Pembrokeshire are responsible people and could, if they wished, fatten their livestock on waste vegetable matter, as happens in other areas. They choose not to because they are responsible people who keep their animals on grass until the last minute and send them to market before the 30-month limit. As a result of the foot and mouth outbreak coming on top of the BSE restrictions, they must face the fact that they simply get the sum, under the OTMS, for cattle for which they would normally get market value.

Since the end of February, I have argued in the House that affected farmers should be classed as eligible for direct, rather than consequential, compensation. As a result of the regulations, their cattle are as condemned, just as they would be if they had FMD. I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) chooses to ignore that fact.

Several concerns that I expressed in our debate on 5 March have now been addressed. I spoke about small-scale movement of livestock within holdings, so I was pleased to hear about provision for further movement and for licensing longer journeys in clean areas. That provision will be helpful in my constituency.

My local branch of the National Farmers Union has spoken to me about the role of the Army. It recently said, "Jackie, tell the Minister that we are desperately concerned. We want everybody to pull together, including the Army, but we want them to be used appropriately." The Army could, for example, be put in charge of ensuring that proper disinfection systems are up and running for movements over long distances. It certainly has the necessary manpower for such tasks. The NFU has significant concerns, which I am sure were the basis of the comments that my right hon. Friend the Minister made earlier.

I should like to make a quick point about the broader scene with regard to farming business and the wider rural economy. A couple of weeks ago, I rang the Samaritans in my area to find out how much more their services were being used. Clearly, some people are desperate about facing the future with so much uncertainty. I was told that not only in Pembrokeshire, but in the area represented by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) and in Carmarthenshire, a shortage of funding means that the Samaritans in those areas can offer a counselling service only during certain hours of the day. For the rest of the time, the service has to be switched to Swansea, an urban centre that is some 70 miles away. I ask local authorities throughout Wales and the United Kingdom to consider giving stronger support to organisations such as the Samaritans, as they are very useful in helping people to cope with difficult circumstances. They are especially important in respect of farming, as so many farmers lead extremely isolated existences.

I have already mentioned the OTMS. Farmers have told me that a 28-day movement restriction is needed for animals that have just been purchased at market. It has been suggested that they should stay in one settlement before being moved again, so that any disease can manifest itself within those 28 days. I was sent an article from *Farming News* by Mr. William George, a livestock farmer in Camrose in my constituency. He pointed out the final paragraph of the article, which states:

> "The solution being mooted . . . is some form of movement control. A limit to the frequency of stock movement.
>
> It would mean more red tape and checks, but could have made isolating this terrible FMD outbreak much easier."

The article deals with a matter of growing concern among people in Pembrokeshire.

We have also read in the newspapers recently about farmers who have been responsible enough to take out insurance to cover them for of foot and mouth losses and whose policies have come up for renewal during the outbreak. Apparently, many farmers have been refused renewal by the insurance companies, which are happy to take money when there is no FMD, but whose attitude changes the minute that it appears on the scene. They are behaving immorally by not fulfilling their commitments to allow farmers to renew their policies. Will the Government please consider introducing a proper, Government-based insurance scheme that will cover all farmers in respect of any such problems in future?

My farmers also continually express concerns about imports. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend say that he would look into illegal imports and consider what action needs to be taken on them. He also gave an assurance that he would look into regulation regarding pig swill. It is an absolute scandal that £5,000 is the maximum fine for someone who is shown to have broken the rules by feeding unsterilised pig swill, when; if feeding unsterilised swill is shown to be the cause of the disease, it will have cost the British economy £9 billion.

[Mrs. Lawrence]

I have spoken for only nine minutes, but I am aware that other hon. Members want to raise constituency issues. I should like to speak about one further concern among my farmers in Pembrokeshire. They are decent, honest people who are trying to make a living from the land. They have been most anxious about reports published recently in the national media about movements arising from so-called sheep leasing, allegedly used to beat quotas; there have also been reports of some farmers moving animals closer to sources of infection. Of course, anxieties have also been expressed about illegal movements in general. My farmers are anxious for the Government to take quick and efficient action if there proves to be any substance to those allegations. They fear that unless such action is taken, illegal activities could wrongly influence people's attitudes towards them, as they are honest, decent people.

8.5 pm

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I shall try to follow the example of the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) and keep my remarks short.

Like many rural MPs, I have been approached by many farmers who are very worried about the outbreak. On one occasion, two farmers' wives "hijacked" me into their car as I walked down the street. They wanted to press the concerns that I hope to get on the record now. Obviously, the Minister of State may not be able to address all my points; if so, I hope that MAFF will consider the details and write to me.

I want to associate myself with the remarks made by the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), who made a general case about all farmers and the economic plight that they are suffering, whether or not they are directly affected by the disease. I want also to associate myself with comments made by other hon. Members about the wider community.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) rightly raised the issue of consequential costs, which the Government will have to confront. We are discussing a major crisis that has hit an industry that was already on its knees, and which was blighted by so many other problems that it simply could not take on board the consequential losses of the outbreak. I join in expressing sympathy for people in the area represented by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and in neighbouring constituencies. Many of them have been devastated by the disease, and I thank him for expressing the wish that the rest of us will not face such serious problems.

I am disappointed that even when Ministers say that welfare movements will be improved, it takes time for such changes to be made. Once the hope has been prompted that a measure will be introduced to help in dealing with the crisis, it must be delivered as quickly as possible if farmers' morale is to be kept up. They sit at home and see the issues being reported, but then find that they are not necessarily arriving on the ground.

Many people are anxious about the quality of imports and have asked about their control and inspection. Labelling is a related concern. It is extremely disappointing for farmers to hear about carcases entering the country to be butchered here and then turn up as British meat in the supermarket, especially when they have met far higher quality standards than the producers of that imported meat and have paid proper attention to disease and to human health.

If licensed movement is to work for the farmers, proper capacity is required in the abattoirs. Farmers have told me about their worry that the imports of foreign meat that arrived during the complete close-down have reduced the available capacity to make such licensed movement work. What are the Government doing to monitor the abattoirs' capacity and their ability to provide an outlet at the other end of the process? If such measures are to relieve farmers' problems, abattoirs must be able to process the stock.

Abattoirs have raised with me another serious concern. They are worried about how long they will have to close down for if they open up to take licensed movements but end up receiving infected animals. The risk of closing down for a month—the time scale applied for many closures—and suffering the consequent damage is not one that they are willing to take. That risk is especially great with regard to sheep, whose symptoms are less obvious.

I heard on the phone recently about worries in respect of the fact that some flocks have been traced back to the market very late in the process. Farmers who are trying to protect their herds want reassurance that information on where every movement has ended up is now out in the open. They do not want suddenly to find that a nearby flock carries a high risk and that they have not been able to take extra precautions.

Let us consider the wider lessons and the way in which we can deal with some the problems of movement. One farmer made the point that if we are going to create producer co-operatives, reduce movements and introduce electronic auctions, farmers need to have more confidence in the grading at abattoirs. Any sizeable producer co-operative will have to use more than one abattoir. Such producers will not get a choice of abattoirs, but if they opt out of the co-operative, they can choose the abattoir where the grading is most sympathetic to the supplier. I have raised that point with Ministers and the Meat and Livestock Commission.

Farmers have made the valid point that if they have no confidence in the grading system, they will not happily auction animals electronically to any old abattoir for a price that can be downgraded when the animals arrive. For farmers to reduce movements and ensure that the system is working efficiently, they must have confidence in the grading system.

I want to emphasise the strain on those farmers who are not yet directly affected. That is a problem throughout the country. It is vital that we learn lessons from the crisis. Clearly, most of MAFF's energy must be directed at containing and controlling the outbreak. However, it must also try to learn how to avoid a recurrence. We cannot go through such a crisis again. If the original trigger is not identified, fully understood and placed on the record as soon as possible, we cannot be confident that we will have the necessary precautions for avoiding a recurrence.

I stress to the media the importance of balance. It is difficult for them to deal with a continuing crisis that takes time to develop, because they need a new story or angle all the time. The fire-break strategy caused a media feeding frenzy about the slaughter of healthy animals. An

outbreak of any disease on a farm means that all animals on the farm are slaughtered. Some may be healthy at the time, but all animals must be slaughtered to contain the disease. The fire-break strategy is simply an extension of that, because the disease is not easily contained or easily detectable. Rather than referring to the slaughter of healthy animals, the media should use the phrase "apparently healthy". The strategy is being used to remove infectivity from the flock.

I especially remember Kevin Bouquet revealing the journalist's lack of perspective when he nearly began a report by saying, "They are about to murder"—before correcting himself and using the word "slaughter". There must be perspective in reporting the outbreak if the wider public are to understand and embrace the strategy.

Obviously, I cannot meet farmers groups now. However, in meetings between representatives of NFU branches, Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament, and with individual farmers, I have been impressed by the energy with which they try to understand the wider issues that affect their industry and the complexities that surround them. Often, when I am on a platform and one farmer confronts me with a question that is almost impossible to answer, another mentions the complex reason for a certain regulation, for instance, before I have a chance to try to reply.

Farmers live and breathe their industry. Farming is not a nine-to-five job; it takes over farmers' lives. The crisis deeply affects them and their families. The nature of the disease controls means that their natural support networks are not there. I hope that the wider community understands how seriously they are affected, and that the Government recognise the importance of tackling the crisis, and of taking every possible measure to contain it now. I urge them on in their actions. They must accept some of the anxieties about implementation and the need to take advice from the Army. They must take their action forward because the disease must be tackled quickly, efficiently and effectively if the strain is to be removed from all our farmers and the wider community.

8.14 pm

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith), who speaks with great authority about the experience in Scotland, and to follow other hon. Members who have spoken with passion about the serious predicament that faces the country. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) told especially disturbing stories and spoke very well.

I did not expect to attend a debate in the House today, because I had made plans to be in my constituency to share a platform with the Archbishop of Wales. I regret that I am not able to do that, but I am sure that people will appreciate the necessity of my being here to speak on behalf of the farmers of Monmouthshire.

Until last Friday, we had had a few scares, but no outbreaks in Monmouthshire. Last Friday, the first case was confirmed on a small farm in Grosmont near the Hereford border. The outbreak in Llancloudy in Herefordshire meant that movement across much of Monmouthshire was restricted. The case in Grosmont sent a shudder through Monmouthshire farmers, who expressed to me the anxieties that I shall outline.

Although the outbreak in Grosmont was confirmed on Friday, the stock was not slaughtered until Monday. I took that up with the Ministry vet in Cardiff, who informed me that the infected stock were killed over the weekend, but local farmers dispute that. I should like my right hon. Friend the Minister of State to make inquiries at the National Assembly for Wales about that.

Neighbouring farmers say that they were not formally notified of the case and they believe that communications have not been as good as Ministers said they ought to be. There has been a suspect case at the neighbouring farm of Mr. David Probert, who was chairman of the Monmouthshire branch of the National Farmers Union until a couple of years ago. He shot the suspect sheep immediately and put them in bags. He is now awaiting, with some trepidation, confirmation of an outbreak. I have discussed those matters with Mr. David Thomas, the Ministry vet in Cardiff, and I appreciate his help, advice and willingness to speak to local farmers.

I recently spoke to a pig farmer in my constituency. We have few pig farms in Monmouthshire, but Mr. Whittal-Williams informed me that there are 3,000 pigs currently on his farm. At this stage, he would normally have only 2,000. The extra pigs are overweight and growing rapidly. They cannot be housed adequately, they are fighting each other and some have even fallen into the slurry pit and drowned. That is an especially disturbing animal welfare case. Mr. Whittal-Williams feels incredibly frustrated that he cannot either get the pigs to abattoirs, which will not take them anyway, or get them destroyed on animal welfare grounds and be compensated. I welcome the announcement of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture that animal welfare considerations for slaughtering such pigs will be in force as quickly as possible.

In recent discussions in my constituency with the NFU and the Farmers Union of Wales representatives expressed anxiety about the welfare of sheep in Monmouthshire, about the need to move lambing ewes indoors, and about farms that are divided by the restricted area boundary. Farmers cannot bring their sheep from one part of the farm to another because the boundary runs through it. They also want to be able to bring home sheep that are on tack, so I am glad that licences are available for that. I am grateful for the representations that farmers have made to me and for being able to convey them to Ministers.

Farmers have expressed anxiety about dealers who buy and sell livestock around the country and put small groups of livestock together. As my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) said, a 28-day restriction on livestock movement could help to prevent such outbreaks.

Farmers have also expressed frustration over the role allocated to the Army and hon. Members have spoken of the need to involve the Royal Engineers. I have in my constituency the senior Territorial Army regiment in the country: the Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers. They go out on exercises every month.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I have heard the hon. Gentleman say that before. The senior Territorial

[Mr. James Gray]

Army regiment in Britain is, of course, the Honourable Artillery Company, which is 200 years older than the Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers.

Mr. Edwards: Thank you, Jamest—that was really useful. The hon. Gentleman has intervened on me on that point three or four times, and I still believe that I am absolutely correct. The regiment that the hon. Gentleman represents is the oldest, whereas the Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers is the senior regiment. I hope that my point has been made.

Farmers with pedigree herds are also concerned that, if the disease spreads, they will have their entire herds wiped out after building them up for many years. The previous owners of their farms, perhaps their fathers, often helped to build up such herds, and it would be a tremendous tragedy if they were to be lost completely.

I am grateful for the way in which my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has dealt with the crisis. As I said in the House a week or so ago, the farmers of Monmouthshire do not often compliment Agriculture Ministers. I have represented them when there has been a Conservative Agriculture Minister, as I now represent them when there is a Labour one, and there is a feeling that my right hon. Friend has handled the crisis rationally and soundly. That is not to say that they have not been concerned about some aspects of the crisis and how it has been dealt with. Of course, there has been concern about the delays in having sheep and other livestock identified and slaughtered.

I am grateful that my right hon. Friend has made available the agrimonetary compensation. It is important to reiterate that this Government have devoted more than £600,000 to agrimonetary compensation, whereas the previous Government did not devote one penny to it. Agrimonetary compensation is not compensation for foot and mouth, but it is right that it has been brought in as quickly as possible to provide an important mitigating form of support.

The tourist industry in my constituency is very important. My constituency includes the beautiful Wye valley, and the Llanthony valley, of which many people are unaware. I hope that, when the time is right, they will be able to visit it. In those tourist areas, market towns such as Monmouth, Chepstow, Abergavenny and Usk have all been affected by people's sense of responsibility that they ought not to travel into rural parts of the country. Perhaps that feeling is genuinely felt, but it is somewhat misguided. We have so many attractive pubs, restaurants and hotels, probably all of which have been affected in one way or another by the lack of custom resulting from the restrictions.

I have been speaking to the proprietors of the Crown hotel at Whitebrook in my constituency. It is a beautiful small hotel with an equally beautiful restaurant, which has suffered quite considerably. I know that the proprietors appreciated the measures that the Minister for the Environment announced yesterday. Those announcements went further than many people in the tourist trade had anticipated, and I am sure that those people are grateful for that and will look forward to the introduction of any future measures.

The farming community has been subject to a number of crises in the past five to 10 years, and now it is facing another crisis. I hope that we can all work together to support those in that community who have worked with great resolution. I feel the greatest sympathy for them, but they need much more than sympathy and I hope that we can work together to bring about a resolution to this crisis.

8.23 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) and I express my commiserations to him and his farmers. Mine was the first constituency in which the fires started to burn, and I know exactly what he must be going through. It is very difficult talking to farmers whose livelihoods are being destroyed before their eyes. The hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) talked about Members of Parliament all being social workers now, and that is indeed the case. We are spending a lot of time with our farmers, trying to solve various problems.

I am pleased to see the Minister of State on the Front Bench. It would be churlish of me not to thank her for her office's help when I had a problem earlier last week with getting some sheep moved to Brindles farm in my constituency from the neighbouring fields. The farm is well outside the 3 km net, and was working within the regulations, but people on the ground were unwilling to take the necessary decision. Had it not been for the kind intervention of the right hon. Lady's office, that movement would not have happened, which would have led to the unnecessary deaths of perfectly healthy sheep.

That case illustrates the problem that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) mentioned, which is that people are unwilling to take decisions. It is absurd that a Member of Parliament has to ring the Minister of State's office to arrange for a few sheep to be pushed through a hole in a hedge in a field in Essex. There is a lesson to be learned from that.

I also need to thank the right hon. Lady for the decision to speed up the opening of the abattoir in my constituency in which the foot and mouth outbreak was first diagnosed. I went round the abattoir last Friday with the owner, looking at the preparations for reopening, and I was struck by the necessity of getting that abattoir back into operation. It was strategically important for the pig industry of the United Kingdom, and it will help enormously in dealing with the problems from which that industry is suffering. It is a good thing that it is going to reopen, particularly as it ensured, by being so vigilant, that the foot and mouth outbreak was identified so early.

One of the more chilling aspects of the Minister of Agriculture's statement this afternoon was his saying that the crisis—far from being over and far from being under control—is going to get much worse, and that the number of cases, and the number of herds affected, is going to rise. The disease is undoubtedly going to spread. We are experiencing exactly the same sort of thing that we did in 1967. This is a peculiar disease, because it will jump over a farm, missing it completely, and occur in another one. It will then jump again, quite wildly, across the county.

My worry is that, while we are trying to get this outbreak, this epidemic, this great crisis under control, we now have to start to think about what is going to be left. I believe that we need a rescue package. We have gone beyond talking about compensation now. We have gone beyond haggling over individual carcases. We are talking about what is going to be left, what kind of British agriculture will exist, and what kind of support services there will be, in terms of abattoirs and haulage services.

Gaining control over this dreadful disease should not blind us to coming up with a rescue package. After all, in one small section of the pig industry, 800 tonnes of sow carcases are being processed every week. Something is happening to those pigs that are not going to slaughter. We know the effects and we have to ensure that, as we start to bring the industry together, there is some means left by which the industry can survive.

Many problems that farmers face, especially the fall in farm incomes, have been described today, most notably by my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin). About three weeks before the outbreak, I met about 16 farmers who are well established in my constituency to discuss the crisis in the industry. They said that few of their children want to take over their farms and many have gone into other businesses. A young farmer who graduated from Reading university about three years ago told me that only two of his class are active in agriculture. People have moved into jobs elsewhere.

Farmers tell me that they are simply overstaffed. Many are keeping people on because of the commitment that they feel towards their employees, but the prospect of their being able to retain staff is beginning to diminish as the crisis deepens. Farmers quote a long list of burdens that have been placed on them by the Government and local government, such as having to collect taxes, having to distribute benefits, having to fill in forms and having to duplicate paperwork for different Departments.

Yesterday, I was surprised by the Minister for the Environment's comments on the climate change levy. He said, "Don't worry about the climate change levy. It will not really affect farms." He added that

"overwhelmingly, it will be larger and non-rural businesses that will certainly have liabilities under the levy."—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2001; Vol. 365, c. 195.]

I am sure that that is absolutely right. More urban businesses will be involved, but rural businesses will also be affected by the levy. Significantly, my farmers raised the climate change levy with me and I have also received telephone calls about it since the outbreak.

Even if the Minister for the Environment is right about the long-term benefits that the levy will achieve, surely it makes sense to ensure that farmers who are facing up to these great difficulties are relieved of that problem. Why place additional burdens on farmers at this most difficult time?

Today, I talked to an old friend who is a hill farmer in the Pennines, where I used to live. His farm and his area are fortunately free of foot and mouth, but he wanted me to tell the House that if foot and mouth strikes, he will give up. That applies not only to him, but to the majority of his neighbours. Restocking simply would not be worth while—he could not afford to restock—and if farmers go out of business, the nature of the Pennine foothills will change for ever.

May I make a suggestion to the Minister about how to get the pig industry back in operation when the crisis passes? East Anglia, for example, has been hit badly because it has suffered from classical swine fever, so we must recognise what has happened to that industry. When foot and mouth descended on us, pigmeat imports increased enormously, but some supermarkets underestimated consumers and put on the market joints that people simply did not want. The net result was the complete collapse in the price of pigmeat.

To retrieve the position, we need to go with the market and the way it operates. We must support infrastructure and we should encourage the private commercial storage of pigmeat by giving aid to abattoirs. Such a system could operate only if it went with the general trend: modern consumers want meat traceability. Encouraging private storage of meat by commercial abattoirs would enable us, in time, to offer a guarantee that such pork came from a farm free of foot and mouth. That would be a better way in which to stabilise quality in the market after the crisis and I hope that the Minister will consider ways to achieve that which flow with the general mood of market.

I have one message to pass on from my farmers: the crisis is about respect. They expect the Government to respect the countryside. Ministers talk about people going to the countryside, but that runs contrary to what they know is right in respect of ensuring that the outbreak does not spread. When they talk about tourism, my farmers say that what they are really talking about is the enormous amount that the Labour party has spent on posters and its publicity campaign.

The signal for which the outside world does not look is a Labour candidate wandering up the drive in a borrowed Barbour and a red rosette. That is not what will end the crisis.

8.35 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): When I last spoke in a debate on this subject, my speech preceded that of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles). He made some nice remarks about me, and until the last minute of his speech tonight, I had intended to make some nice remarks about him. I could go along with nearly all he said during the first 11 minutes, but that last minute contained remarks that could be described as a little far-fetched.

This has been a sombre debate, as indeed it needed to be. It has also been an honest debate. However, some of us become riled by accusations based on the idea of town versus country. Many of us represent what I would describe as semi-rural areas, which contain urban centres in the form of market towns but which also feature a rural hinterland in the villages and the surrounding land, most of which is farmland.

At times such as this, it behoves everyone to try to bring people together. I have been genuinely impressed by some sharing of ideas about strategy and by the attempts of politicians on both sides of the divide to find some hope in what has been happening. There is no case for politicking: many people look to this place for leadership, and they will not find it if we are seen to be bickering and point scoring.

We are going through an emotional time, and we have heard some moving speeches. I pay special tribute to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown), whose constituencies are at the centre of the catastrophe.

We are, in fact, talking about three separate parts of the agricultural environment. There are the hot spots—Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway, and Devon. There are a number of other areas in which infectivity is present, and must be dealt with through a range of measures. Then there is the rest of the country, which may have experienced the odd case but to which we are trying to

[Mr. David Drew]

restore some normality. We are, however, sharing common worries and calling together for the cohesive action that is needed.

If there is any lesson that we can learn from today's debate, it is this. It is not necessarily the case that mistakes have been made, but there have been problems in the way in which policies have evolved, and in the way in which decisions were—or should have been—made.

We should recognise, following what was said by my right hon. Friend the Minister, that more bad news seems likely, but as the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar sensibly said, the disease is difficult to predict. There have been two outbreaks in my constituency, and there is no rhyme or reason as to why those holdings suffered and others have not. Pray God the others will not suffer, but there is a measure of uncertainty about how the disease begins to take hold, which makes coming up with solutions that much more difficult—if, that is, we are to avoid the most drastic solution, which is the "clean ring", or proactive culling.

There is much that we should try to do in regard to the science of the problem. Some of that is for the future, but we need to use some science today to learn how to discover further outbreaks as quickly as possible, to implement a slaughter policy, and—this seems to be, in many respects, the most difficult aspect—to dispose of animals in the right way.

Alongside the science of dealing with the disease are all the usual problems over money and compensation. It may be of secondary importance, but we fool ourselves if we regard it as being of no importance. Unfortunately, for all sorts of reasons, people haggle.

As I said in an intervention during the speech of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), there was some criticism of the work of valuers in the other place. I have talked to valuers and they have fiercely defended their position and the way in which they work under pressure. They seem to be paid more than vets from private practice, and perhaps that needs to be changed, but we need all those people in place.

It is not a question of MAFF doing all the work, with the help of the Army and other public servants. We are indebted to the private service and must try to make that relationship work as well as it can. When I talk about the public service, it is important to remember local government, as I have tried to do whenever I have spoken, because it has done an amazing amount of good work.

I want to talk about agriculture because that is the issue that most affects me and we should, I suppose, concentrate on it, but like every other hon. Member in an affected area where there is infectivity, I know that other parts of our environment and the context in which people live their lives are being drastically affected. I have in my constituency the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust centre at Slimbridge, which for the past two weeks has been closed. An organisation that relies almost entirely on people coming through the door—I accept that there is some charitable giving on top of that—is day after day incapable of opening. It has staff with whom it does not know what to do. Should it get them to do some tidying up or research, or should it lay them off? Those are the dramatic, drastic decisions that people face in those areas.

I am indebted to MAFF because it has helpfully clarified the position with regard to whether such organisations should be open or closed. That makes a lot of difference in respect not only of loss of revenue in the immediate future, but of possible insurance claims and of how to re-gear. Businesses based around other wildlife face a tricky transitional period in getting the public back into their facilities again. It will perhaps not be as tricky as restocking will be for our farmers, but it is a difficult exercise that must be thought through carefully. People will need monetary help as well as advice on how to do it.

Other hon. Members have spent some time going through the antecedents of the disease. I can make suppositions only on the basis of what we appear to know about where it came from, the implications of that and the way in which it has spread throughout the country. My hon. Friends the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) and for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) both talked about the movement of animals throughout the country. We need to consider carefully whether those movements are excessive and whether we should demand that animals stay in situ for longer.

Whether one thinks that that was a causal feature or an effect, the nature of the movement of sheep in particular has added to the seriousness of the outbreaks. I do not mind saying that we must question at least some of the ways in which dealers operate. Perhaps they feel that they are in the frame to take too much of the blame. They will in due course have the opportunity, through the media and in other ways, to defend their position.

From talking to farmers—dealers are, in their own way, farmers—I know that there is some question about whether we have gone too far in allowing such movement to take place. That leads us to questions about the food chain. Clearly, sheep are not traceable in the way that cattle and pigs are. More particularly, we must look at the centralisation of the food chain and how we move animals nationally and internationally. Some animals were exported to France and had to be slaughtered.

I want to look forward. We know the difficulties of the current situation and we feel great sorrow for those who are affected and in the depths of despair. However, we will see the problem through and get on top of foot and mouth. In so doing, we must recognise that, in reconstructing the industry, we must learn some lessons. There may be some value in re-engineering a localised food chain that locks into what the consumer seems to want. That is not a call for a drastically different food chain, but one that is in tune with what the customer wants. That will involve different production and distribution methods, which cannot come too soon.

We must examine how MAFF has performed. There seems to be agreement across the House that it has handled the basic strategy well, but there are points of detail, particularly in the hot spots. I heard what was said by hon. Members from Cumbria, where things are very difficult. There is an issue about the command-and-control structure and the way in which MAFF can give information. We can learn from that and get on top of the disease. We must look outwards and onwards, as that is what our farmers want at this time.

8.47 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise some matters of great importance to my constituents. We have cases of foot and

mouth and, as in many other constituencies, the farming community is on tenterhooks. The pressure on farms—particularly the small family farms in my constituency, which is a livestock area—is enormous. I hope that, as the days go by, we will hear about the ways in which the Government are addressing the issues raised tonight and on earlier dates by hon. Members because the present situation needs to be changed.

In my area, slaughtered animals have been left in fields for up to a week before removal. However, it is not just that they lie in the fields. They are attacked by vermin, and that is a matter of great concern in terms of the spreading of the disease. Of course, moving animals that have been lying in that condition for a week is a very unpleasant task. Anyone who knows what happens to an animal post mortem will know that. There is also an added risk in terms of what is spread when the animals are moved.

Ministers have heard pleas from both sides of the House. It is essential that animals be disposed of immediately they are slaughtered. The plan must be there and put into action. Members on both sides have called for the Army to be more actively involved. In Devon, it has been deployed this week, but not for the purpose of overseeing the removal and disposal of animal carcases.

I have heard the arguments against burial on farms. Clearly, there are some farms and parts of farms where burial would be highly inappropriate, particularly because of leaching, contamination and the level of the water table. However, farmers know their land, and I believe that carcases could be disposed of on-farm in many cases. In that way, we could speed up the system and allow vets to be released to do other work. That would make a significant difference, as the task of overseeing the disposal of animals could well be left to the armed forces.

The Minister of Agriculture said that the problem was likely to get worse. The figures in my area show that it is getting worse every day. We must therefore make big changes in how we tackle the slaughter of animals and the disposal of carcases.

I intervened on the Minister earlier about a case in my constituency involving the welfare of pigs, and I was grateful for his response. People in this country say that they care about animal welfare, but they would be appalled if they could see some of the critical problems on-farm. The pig industry especially is in great distress, as animals are growing in size and are densely stocked. On welfare grounds, therefore, something must be done to help pig herds.

The scheme introduced last Thursday has a proper structure. Matters to do with compensation remain to be discussed, but I reiterate a plea that I have made before: will the Ministry please allow animals to be slaughtered on veterinary certification alone? We could then deal with the rest of the bureaucracy and the payments afterwards. Such an approach is justified on welfare grounds, and it would mean that we could start to sort out some of the pig industry's problems tomorrow.

I want to pay tribute to Mrs. Jean Turnbull of the National Pig Association. Her telephone number has been circulated around the country, so that pig farmers undergoing a great deal of stress and worry can ring her, day or night. She has also given out her mobile number for the same reason. All hon. Members who have had to deal with some distressing cases in the past two weeks will have appreciated the fact that people like Jean Turnbull have offered their support in helping to talk people through their problems.

We should not underestimate the stress that the farming community is going through. It is tragic and difficult for people to come to terms with the slaughter of their animals, but hon. Members from all parties have noted that the problem is not confined to them. Families waiting to see whether they are going to be the next to suffer are also under stress. For instance, a lady telephoned in the morning a week ago last Sunday as I was peeling the vegetables, saying that she just had to talk to someone. That illustrates the stress that families are going through.

The consequence of the outbreak for many people will be that they will lose their farms. Tenant farmers in my constituency tell me that they will have nothing if they lose all their stock. Many of them are close to retirement, and do not have the years in front of them in which they can rebuild. Even if they were given the money tomorrow, the experience has knocked the stuffing out of people of that older generation. I therefore urge the Minister of State to look at what can be done to help those who want to leave farming, and to give hope to the younger generation who will have to face the challenge of restocking and starting again under the most severe of circumstances.

It will be a long time before farms can be restocked. People's financial problems arising from the loss of stock will be exacerbated by the fact that there will be a long lead time before they can restock and get going again.

All hon. Members pray that the outbreak ends as soon as possible, but the reality is that it will not just disappear. The problem will remain for some months to come. Even when the last case has been dealt with, there will be a long period of restructuring and reorganisation before farms can get back into business.

I also ask the Minister of State to address the situation, particularly in the west country, where there are animals that could be slaughtered for the food chain now. I was encouraged to hear the figures on how the amount of meat in various species is increasing in terms of its distribution through the food chain.

I am particularly concerned about the sheep industry and about getting more sheep into the food chain. This is the time of year when thousands of animals, known in the west country as hoggets, are ready for the table. They are about a year old and have been fattened up. We need those animals to come to slaughter and to enter the food chain. Has the Ministry considered whether there may be a case for intervention if the meat from animals that are slaughtered for the food chain is not immediately taken into the food chain? That would give farmers some hope.

Some farmers are having difficulty feeding their stock. Mr. Lee, in Sandford in my constituency, has a feed bill of £4,000 a week, but no income. Mr. Hill, who farms a smaller farm in Ashley, has a feed bill of £1,000 a week, but no income. Farmers are extremely worried about how they will continue to feed their animals. Has MAFF considered contingency arrangements for emergency feedstuffs when the feed runs out, as it certainly will for some of my farmers in the next couple of weeks? They will not be able to buy feed for their animals because they cannot pay for it, which is very distressing.

Much has been said about bureaucracy. I know only too well how difficult it is to get wheels turning as quickly as one would like on occasions. However, a little more

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flexibility would help. In my constituency, for example, there is a very small, minor country road going through a farm. It is between Uplowman village and Stag Mill. The local villagers have, by consent, decided not to use the road through the farm because there is an alternative lane that can easily be used to bypass it. They do not want to put the farm at risk. The "road closed" signs put up by the villagers were taken down by the authorities, and they were told that they would be fined if they did it again. That is surely bureaucratic nonsense.

I have not phoned the Minister's office about the matter because I know that she has a lot of very difficult cases to deal with and that a lot of people are ringing her. However, where common sense prevails in a local community whose members want to protect the local farm, surely that common sense can be respected, without the need for an official to take the signs down. After all, it will not inconvenience anybody. That is an indication of the enormous concern and respect felt in the rural community for farms. The problem affects the whole countryside.

We have heard much this week about alternative industries in the rural areas connected with farming—perhaps not the most obvious ones—that are affected. I ask the Minister of State, as many hon. Members have tonight, to clarify what is meant by access to the countryside. I confess that I would be hard-pressed to advise a constituent what it really means. It is not sufficient to say that people should not go near grazing animals in fields. We all know that the disease can be transmitted on the wheels of vehicles and by people. Although human beings are not affected by the disease, they can carry it, so there is a certain nervousness in rural communities, which understand these things, about what is meant by access to the countryside.

A lady in my constituency has just invested her life savings in a fishing tackle shop, yet people cannot go out into the countryside to fish—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. Many hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I ask Members to be brief so that as many as possible may speak.

8.59 pm

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): I shall be as brief as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have great sympathy with all the hon. Members who have spoken about the way in which their constituencies have been directly affected by outbreaks of foot and mouth disease. I am fortunate enough to have a large farming constituency that has not, so far, had an outbreak, although a suspected case a few weeks ago turned out to be negative.

I intend to speak on the impact of the current situation on my constituency and my farmers. I have some suggestions for my right hon. Friend the Minister of State that may ease matters. My farmers have problems of animal welfare and the costs that flow from that. In particular, the establishment of the longer-distance licence movement scheme has raised some problems. It is, I accept, a brand new scheme, which is bound to have teething problems, but it is important to address such problems quickly so that movements in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) may take place.

Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and, to a lesser extent, Ceredigion are areas in which there are many sheep during winter. Thousands of sheep from elsewhere in Wales are now on pasture that should be used for dairy herds. That is adding significantly to animal welfare problems for sheep that should be moved elsewhere and to the costs of farmers who want to get their dairy herds into the fields.

There are also welfare problems for dairy herds that are off their home farms and within the same area but outside the short-distance movement radius for the previous licensing scheme. That problem was brought to my attention by Mr. and Mrs. John, whose home farm is near Templeton in my constituency, but who rent land 25 to 30 miles away in Angle. They have 50 dairy cows calving on that land at the moment. They want to bring the cows to their home farm for obvious reasons. They are travelling three times a day back and forth, which is not a good thing when we are trying to limit the number of movements. It is essential that the licence scheme for longer-distance movement should be got up and running.

The initial problem with the availability of application forms has now been sorted. That was followed by the problem of centres for disinfection and cleaning of vehicles, which are essential. That, too, is now up and running. Now, however, as my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) said, there are questions about the licences themselves. I understand that matters are in hand, but the licences must be made available as quickly as possible.

I perceive a further problem. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State said that movements would be accompanied, and I have reservations about that. I understand that agricultural development advisory service staff will accompany the vehicles, but as some round trips may amount to 100 or 200 miles, tying up staff to accompany some vehicles may create a problem with finding personnel to accompany others. As the vehicles will be sealed, just as Customs and Excise seals bonded vehicles between a port and a bonded warehouse, would it not be better for ADAS staff to seal a vehicle at one end and have another member of staff at the receiving farm to ensure that the seal had not been tampered with? It would seem better to use ADAS personnel in that way than to insist on them making the full journey.

I want to raise with my right hon. Friend the Minister of State the over-30-months scheme, to which other hon. Members have also referred. An early decision is needed that payment will be made to farmers with beef cattle who, through no fault of their own, cannot get the cattle to market before the 30-months deadline and who thus make a substantial loss. That would be welcome.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food referred to the need to establish collection centres so that the smaller beef producers can put together a load of animals to be taken to an abattoir. I realise that there are difficulties, but I hope that work will continue on such schemes; they offer a way of ensuring that beef cattle get to an abattoir before the 30-months deadline.

I have some comments on the wider rural economy. As I have pointed out in previous debates, I was a Member of Parliament when we were dealing with the Sea Empress disaster, which had a massive effect on the tourism industry although there was a huge compensation scheme. In my constituency, the tourism sector is probably far larger than the agriculture sector in that it employs more people and generates more revenue. Even in seaside resorts such as Tenby and Saundersfoot, hoteliers are already expressing real concern about the impact of foot and mouth.

We learned several lessons from our experience after the Sea Empress disaster in 1996. The first was that perception is all. News programmes covered in great detail, rightly, the environmental damage—the huge amounts of oil washed up on the Carmarthenshire and south Pembrokeshire coasts. During the first week of that disaster, the phones rang constantly at the hotels and caravan parks; unfortunately, all the calls were cancellations. Even though the disaster happened in February, people were cancelling their July and August holidays because of their perception that the whole environment of Pembrokeshire was so seriously damaged that they would not be able to take their holidays. That was not true, but that was the perception at the time.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), who is not in his place at present, referred to the cancellation of the county council elections—as did his hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles). If that happened, the perception would be that the whole British countryside had closed down. We know that that is not true—especially those of us who live in our rural constituencies. We know that people are moving about. I accept that there are real restrictions in those areas where there are outbreaks, but the vast bulk of Britain has no restrictions—people just need to be sensible.

The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) said that the advice from MAFF was hit and miss—it was not clear. However, it is horses for courses. We cannot have people walking across the moors in the Peak district, where there are huge areas of open land and a large number of sheep; but elsewhere, people can go into the countryside to visit particular attractions or towns—to castles, beaches and so on. We have to get that message across.

Timing is all. That is the second lesson that we learned from the Sea Empress. It is pointless to mount a massive advertising campaign—as has been suggested—if, while we are trying to promote the idea that everything is okay in the countryside, we see only burning pyres on our news programmes.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment rightly announced, following the work of the taskforce, that investment and additional resources will available to tourism associations and so on, but it is essential that the advertising campaign is timed correctly, otherwise it will be completely fruitless. The intention will not be achieved because people's perceptions will be formed by what they see on their television screens. No matter how many adverts are run and how many articles appear in newspapers, we shall not achieve our aims while those pictures remain on our television screens. It is essential that the campaign takes place and that we gear up for it, because there is no question that it will be needed.

There will be very large consequential losses not only in agriculture, but in the tourism sector. I am very pleased with yesterday's announcement, but it is an interim statement, and the taskforce clearly needs to undertake further work. However, I remain convinced that substantial funds will have to be made available in various forms to the rural economy, to our farmers and to our tourism sector, so that they can fully recover.

9.11 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Together with the constituency represented by my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), my constituency, which is in south-west Cheshire, is the largest milk field in Europe and the most intensive dairy farming area in the United Kingdom. That area was at the epicentre of the 1967-68 outbreak of foot and mouth, which devastated the farmers, their families, the rural communities and many of my constituents and their forebears in Darnhall, Winsford and the other villages in the area.

The book, "Plague on the Cheshire Plain"—published in 1969, by the then editor and his colleague of *The Chester Chronicle*, Messrs. Herbert Hughes and J. O. Jones—records, in all its horrific detail, the scale of my constituency's appalling experiences of that time and the beginnings of the recovery that took place a little under a year later. The preface states:

> "We say now, it must not happen again . . . This, then, is the story of Cheshire's greatest farming disaster—this long trouble on some of the fairest fields in England. It is a story which, we hope, will never have to be told again."

With two confirmed cases at Baddiley, just a short distance from my family's home in the constituency, the spectre of my constituents having to go through that disaster again, 34 years later, is all too real. For Mr. Hockenhull and the Huntbach family, who have lost all their stock, that has now become real, and I know that the House will join me in saying that our hearts go out to them. None of us who lived through that time—I was 10, and remember it well—will ever forget the acrid and bitter smell of the burning cattle pyres blazing across Cheshire.

I did not intervene on the Minister about that point because I understood why he seemed not to want to take interventions at the time, but the 1967 outbreak, which geographically was relatively contained compared with today's epidemic, lasted nine months, which may be a guide to the time scale that we must seriously contemplate today. Following that dreadful time, there were many lessons to be learned, most of which were set out in the excellent and thorough 1969 report. Sadly, I am now doubtful whether all those lessons were learned, although many were.

In Eddisbury today, there is real fear, stress and anger. However, my constituents are responsible people; they support the measures that have been taken, but they want them to go much further, much faster. In the interests of time, I shall not list what many right hon. and hon. Members have already mentioned, but I endorse all that they have said.

Of all the lessons in the 1969 report, the key one is speed of action in containing the spread of disease. Speed is of the absolute essence, especially between farmers contacting the vet, the vet investigating the clinical suspicion and confirming the presence of the disease, and the slaughter and disposal of the animals. It is important

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that the animals be buried in preference to burning. However, burning may be necessary, and on-farm disposal is the key.

I pay tribute to all the residents of Eddisbury who have notably sought to comply with all the restrictions, because they are deeply conscious of the desperate anxiety that exists.

Safe zones have been mentioned, but it is unfortunate that zones that were safe in Cheshire on Tuesday then became unsafe on Wednesday—the very day the Minister talked about the concept. That is unhelpful and we need much greater clarification. I call on the Government to give aid to all who seek to help the farmers, as well as to provide that clarification for all those who live in the country and depend on the rural economy.

A problem arises out of yesterday's announcement by the Minister for the Environment about compensation. Understandably, he focused his remarks on the retail sector, even though many, such as Mr. Clacker's company in my constituency, are contractors laying pipelines across farmland on behalf of the utilities. They are not in the retail sector, but they have been desperately seriously affected. However, because they have a job but now no income, they are not able to access the compensation arrangements. It is important that their needs should be taken into account, so I call on the Government to consider carefully the needs of the non-retail sector.

I want to be brief, and I know that the Minister has sought to address today the issue that I shall raise now. I received information on the day that the outbreak was announced suggesting that several constituents had heard that timber supplies for pyres had been sought many weeks before the outbreak began. With due diligence, I spoke to those sources and I raised the issue in the proper manner in a named day written question that is due for answer tomorrow. I shall not prejudge the issue even though I know that press speculation and some excitable comment has attracted headlines. However, as far as I am concerned, the answers will be received tomorrow and that is when we shall judge them. I look forward to that, and I am grateful to the Minister for addressing my concerns.

I want to ensure that the Minister and his team are aware of an issue on which I have been guided by Mrs. Perry of Pear Tree farm, who has experience of the 1967 outbreak, and the House of Commons Library, which at breakneck speed came up with some evidence today. I have not heard much from the Ministry about the contact that it has had with the Meteorological Office. Weather is a key issue. According to historical records, we are entering the windiest time of the year and we have extensive evidence from the outbreak in 1967, notably from Mr. Rowland Tinline, about wind-driven spread.

There have been all sorts of experiments about lee wind and wind-driven spread but, in summary, Mr. Tinline's research showed that

"airborne spread was the major spread mechanism. Wind direction, wind speed and 'wind swing' were the major weather variables that influenced spread. Rainfall had little effect except perhaps in isolated cases".

Experiments have demonstrated that considerable reduction in outbreaks could be obtained by reducing the slaughter and confirmation periods through increasing exponentially field veterinary staff. I therefore endorse everything that is happening to try to increase the numbers of such staff.

The issue of ring vaccination has been touched on today, but the research shows that such schemes

"were successful in terms of controlling spread but showed that accurate weather forecasts about 20 days in advance were required."

That is why it is so important, in considering all the options, to liaise closely with the Meteorological Office. I am sure that the Minister will want to reassure me that such liaison is taking place. Wind-driven, airborne spread appears to be taking place in Cumbria, not least because of the turbulence created by the wind.

I am conscious that I need to keep my remarks brief, but it is appropriate to share with the House something that has touched me greatly in the current crisis. It is an anonymous prayer—that is typical of farmers and their folklore—that appears in the book "Plague on the Cheshire Plain". It was written by a Shropshire farmer in 1967, and I am sure that the whole House will share in these sentiments:

"Let us pray for those who tend our herds and flocks and all who stand guard this day. May God comfort the afflicted and give them new hope. Strengthen the resolve and diligence of those who tend with loving care the cloven hoofed animals and remove the fears which each day brings.

Let us give thanks for the fortitude of the few who labour in the task and for the understanding and self denial of the many.

Let us pray for the winds to be stilled so that a calm and peaceful countryside can open its pleasures once again to all people."

I wish to offer support for the Minister for what he has done so far, and ask him to listen carefully to all the constructive points about more action that have been made in this serious debate.

9.19 pm

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in the debate, because the issue is of grave concern to my constituents. I apologise that I could not be present in the House earlier, but I sent a note to the Speaker's Office to explain that I had a long-standing constituency engagement.

I returned to the House because the issue is so important. Seven cases of foot and mouth disease have been found in my constituency—one bordering the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) and six in a hotspot in the Leigh and Bramshall area.

The disease is devastating for people who are directly affected by it and, as many hon. Members have said, it is desperately worrying for those who farm close by. However, it is not just farmers who are under a great strain. The local cattle market in my constituency has closed, which has had a knock-on effect on the retail trade in the market town of Uttoxeter. It has also meant that the Friday retail market, which takes place on the cattle market site, no longer takes place and Uttoxeter race course has closed. Sadly, the local abattoir has had to close, with 15 men being laid off.

Local businesses that are also in difficulty include those that one would not expect to be affected, such as the glass works in Tutbury. Not only is that firm missing the tourism trade, but it is losing out on orders for competition prizes because those are not taking place. Hopefully, as a

result of yesterday's announcement by the Minister for the Environment, the canals will reopen. That will help a local company that produces a superb book on canals.

Like many hon. Members, I welcome yesterday's statement. It is desperately important that we do not accept that all the countryside is out of bounds. It is not. However, we must be careful about where we allow people to go in our countryside. The most important consideration is to tackle foot and mouth.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) mentioned Cheshire. I grew up on a farm there, and I know what it was like when there were outbreaks of foot and mouth. My father had just moved over the border into Staffordshire when the 1967 outbreak occurred. Thankfully, my family's farm never suffered from foot and mouth, but the fear that we might have been next is very real in my memory. It was different then because Cheshire had mainly dairy herds.

Blame has been placed on the lack of abattoirs. It is true that there are fewer of them, but one of the greatest problems is the movement of livestock, especially sheep, around the country and into different markets. That was the source of the outbreak in Leigh. Farmers from that area have contacted me because they are worried about the way in which the disease is being handled. There is concern that the disease is hidden in sheep. One farm, which has now had foot and mouth diagnosed in its cattle, was checked by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for several weeks because it had sheep from Longtown market. However, those sheep have not tested positive.

People are deeply worried that sheep in areas where there are also cattle may be the hidden source of future outbreaks in cattle. I have received requests, which I have conveyed to the Minister's office, for the introduction of a voluntary disposal system so that people who are prepared to give up their sheep within two miles of an outbreak are allowed to do so. I hope that that is given serious consideration.

We must also carry out a risk assessment of the possible causes of future outbreaks. No doubt much of the disease is spread by the wind, but the problem is compounded because foot and mouth is not easily identifiable in sheep. Perhaps cases were identified quickly in Cheshire because the disease was predominantly in cattle.

One of the main points that farmers have raised with me and, I am sure, many other Members, is that we must try to speed up the time between identifying the disease and disposing of carcases. That is crucial for disease control and for environmental reasons, and also because, otherwise, people are living on farms alongside dead animals.

Another issue that has been raised with me is closure, which I understand will be for six months. It means not only that farmers cannot have animals on the farm for that time, but that they will be unable to produce hay and silage. Farms that close now because of foot and mouth disease will need fodder for animals when they are allowed to return.

I know that the Government are doing everything possible to look at how the system can be improved. In the end, sadly, the disease will run its course, but I hope that we can put an end to it far quicker than we did in 1967.

9.25 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I commend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for the way in which he opened the debate. He was correct to say that this is not a party political matter, and he handled it as such. Indeed, how could it be a party political matter? We all agree on the problem, which is foot and mouth, and we all agree on the solution, which is eradication.

The right hon. Gentleman's remarks were in contrast to those made by the Leader of the House yesterday, perhaps by way of a slip, when she said that animals were in quarantine, not people. Two farmers who telephoned me today after hearing that were extremely frightened by the implications, but that is not the tone in which the Minister conducted the debate and I am grateful to him for it.

It is essential that country people have confidence in the way in which the system is operating. The Minister may find it unpleasant to know this, but he must understand that there is a lack of confidence in the far south-west about some aspects of the situation. Time does not allow me to quote correspondence in great detail, but one farmer who wrote to me, Roderick Young, said that the tenants of a particular farm

"have been subjected to living in quarantine surrounded by their stinking dead animals for the last six to seven days."

He concluded:

"It is quite obvious to those on the ground, surrounded by the stinking, rotting carcasses of their animals that something is not quite right."

He makes a good point.

If we have 108,000 animals waiting to be slaughtered and 80,000 waiting to be disposed of, we are not there yet. That is why I wish that the Minister had been able to consider using the Army in a different way. Nobody suggests that the Army should go boar hunting in Essex, but it does have expertise, through the engineers, in performing tasks such as burial, and it would be well capable of doing that. I shall not ask the Minister to assent to my next comment because I do not think that he will like what follows. I suspect that he might have some sympathy with what I am saying, but the Army is not being used in that way because the Prime Minister knows that if it were, the cat would be right out of the bag and people would realise that this is a national crisis that goes far beyond the regions that are affected.

As this is a national crisis, we have gone far beyond mere talk of compensation. We must realise that we are talking not about compensating individuals, but about the need for massive infrastructural input to ensure that whole regions do not simply crash out of economic prosperity altogether.

In the hope that many of the hon. Members who have been here for some time will be able to contribute to the debate, I shall make my final point. We must look at control. The Agriculture Minister will remember an exchange with me on 1 February, when I put it to him that when there is good, solid evidence abroad about unsafe meat coming into this country, it is not a sufficient response to say that to act in those circumstances might be considered anti-European. The one point that is common ground between us—the Minister has always had the courage and grace to admit it—is that this condition came from overseas, and whatever other conclusions we come to, we need to look at our importation controls.

9.29 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I have nothing but praise for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. He has treated the House with great courtesy and patience and he has tried to be as helpful as possible. The substance of all his remarks today and on previous occasions is that we want national unity to tackle this crisis. He said also that we want to have a Parliament that he can report to regularly. It would be an absolute scandal if a Government with 14 months of their mandate left, a massive majority and now a national crisis to add to their other unfinished business, plunged the country into an unnecessarily premature general election. That would be a great disservice. The Prime Minister's remarks this afternoon gave me the impression that he was not fully apprised of the great national calamity facing us. He talked with a glib assurance that was deeply disturbing and in marked contrast to the tone adopted by his right hon. Friend the Agriculture Minister.

The Government should not divide those parts of the country that are terribly beset by this dreadful disease by holding local elections. They should be postponed in certain areas of the country, but not necessarily everywhere. It would be contrary to the Minister's wish to maintain national unity if the Parliament to which he is answerable were dissolved prematurely and unnecessarily. We must face the crisis together and fight it together. We wish to give the Minister the support that his gentlemanly and sensible conduct manifestly deserves.

9.31 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Anyone who has listened to our debate over the past few hours will have been struck by two things: the sheer scale of the crisis facing our countryside and the extent of the misery that it has created for communities across the United Kingdom. We wanted an Opposition day debate because of our alarm—which is increasing day by day—about the fact that, in some ways, the response to the crisis in the countryside does not measure up to the scale of the problem.

I have no complaint about the Government's motives and objectives, especially those of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whose speech was, I think, appreciated by the whole House. He is much more aware of the desperate nature of the situation than, I suspect, some of his colleagues. However, some of the Government's actions have been late, half-hearted and not effective enough. There are two separate crises hidden within the overall problem: the farming crisis, and the collapse of various local economies that depend on a combination of tourism and agriculture. Our motion and the Government amendment both make that clear, yet the wider economic aspects were only touched on by the Minister. However, they should be taken just as seriously as the farming crisis.

I shall say a few words about farming first. In the past few hours we have heard from Members on both sides of the House that farmers want speedy and decisive action. They need quick diagnosis, quick slaughter if necessary and quick disposal of carcases. Above all, they need immediate, authoritative and clear advice. All too often they are still getting none of that and I am afraid that all the Minister's charm cannot hide that fact. Too many farmers in Britain today are not just frightened: they are confused and are getting contradictory advice from local and regional offices.

That is why, a few days ago, we proposed three specific actions that the Government could take. As many Members on both sides of the House have said, we recognise that this is a national crisis, and in those circumstances, it is the role of a responsible Opposition to be constructive as well as critical. That is what we have sought to be, and we shall continue our role as the crisis proceeds. The Minister has made moves following our suggestions about speeding up the slaughter without requiring a lab test and bringing more vets to the front line. I am glad that he recognised that our suggestions were genuine and constructive. In return, may I say that we welcome the steps that he has taken, but we want him to do more and we want him to do it quickly?

Last week, we suggested that the Army be used for the disposal of carcases. We welcome the small steps that the Government announced yesterday, but they are not enough. The average wait of two days between diagnosis and slaughter, and another two days between slaughter and disposal, disguises the longer and more dangerous gaps that are occurring in some cases. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) said that he was pleased that, in Cumbria, 36 hours is now the going time between diagnosis and slaughter. I am sure that many of the farmers in Cumbria, about whom we heard some eloquent tales from my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), still regard the 36-hour wait as inadequate as the crisis threatens to envelope them.

I hope that the Minister will deal within the next few days with the welfare of animals, which is becoming one of the new focuses of the crisis. My hon. Friends have said a lot about pigs, but he should deal also with the thousands of sheep that are starting to lamb in unsuitable land, miles from where they should be. For two weeks, farmers have known that many such sheep are dying. They cannot move them and they are asking MAFF for guidance, but too often they are getting none. I know that from my constituency and from colleagues representing areas around the country. I profoundly hope that the Minister's words will be followed by action within hours, rather than days. That is what is needed if a serious animal welfare crisis is to be prevented from hitting large areas of the country, including some that have not been as badly hit as those about which we have been hearing. The outbreak could spread and hit new areas.

I am also grateful to the Minister for his unequivocal statement that he and his officials had no knowledge of any infection before 18 February. I am happy to accept his assurance that the phone calls that were made to timber merchants were part of a regular contingency planning process. However, that gives rise to another vital question: what does all this contingency planning achieve? If there is a contingency plan and it is regularly practised, why is it taking so long for sensible solutions to be put in place? The Minister made welcome comments about valuation tariffs, but we are now a month into the outbreak. Is not the Army included in the contingency plan? Various hon. Members spoke about using the Royal Engineers. Whether or not one believes that it is right to use them—the Opposition believe that it is—surely the Army would have been included in any contingency plan. There is no evidence in the Government's reaction to suggest that it was. Whatever time and effort was put into the regular contingency plan, it was, frankly, a waste of energy, as the Government seem to have started from scratch.

Similarly, as the debate is rolling on, we are hearing that the Environment Agency is gearing up for action with regard to on-farm burial. Will the Minister of State tell us whether the agency is included in the contingency planning process? When was it brought in to consider suitable burial sites? Does not it already have records telling it where the sites are located? If so, why are we not using them now, four weeks into the crisis? From the outside, it is impossible to tell whether the Environment Agency is being dilatory or whether its attention was directed at the problem too late. It holds the key to the solution to one part of the crisis and it needs urgently to raise its game.

The crisis goes much wider than farming. Yesterday, the Minister for the Environment announced some welcome steps towards dealing with the wider issues, although I fear that they are too tentative. As many of my hon. Friends said in response, more needs to be done and it must be done now. I am delighted that the Minister for the Environment has joined us. It is regrettable that he has not participated in the debate, not least because the motion and the amendment make clear that there are two sides to the outbreak: the agricultural crisis and the wider crisis.

Indeed, I agree with one of the points that the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) made in a thoughtful speech. She said that, as someone who followed the crisis carefully because of her constituency interests, she did not know what the taskforce was doing. She wanted more information; the debate afforded a good opportunity for providing it.

Yesterday, the Minister for the Environment made some welcome announcements. However, it is significant that, in a 16-paragraph statement, he used the word "consider" four times. That sums up the statement; the Government are considering doing many things. I shall quote part of a fax that the chief executive of the British Incoming Tour Operators Association sent my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) a couple of days ago:

"We need help—and we need it fast if Britain's inbound tourism industry is not to collapse. I've been in this industry over 30 years and I've not seen anything like it (including the Gulf war!)"

It continues:

"No long drawn out 'consultation' processes or 'reviews' or 'consideration will be given' . . . & Action this day, please!"

He is right.

In a 24-hour period, the organisation received many damaging cancellations. They include 12 adult German groups, representing a value of £1.4 million, and 21 student groups, representing a value of about £1 million. The Austrian Government have advised their nationals not to travel to the United Kingdom. Ninety per cent. of language students for a particular course have cancelled. Tour operators report that forward bookings are non-existent.

Confusion at the heart of Government exacerbates the problem. The Prime Minister and Labour Members have told us that we must encourage tourists to visit the British countryside and that it is open for business. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) pointed out, Derbyshire county council, doubtless with the best intentions, has taken out adverts headed "Help Stop the Spread of Foot and Mouth", which state:

"Help us protect our countryside—don't visit unless you have to."

It is not surprising that potential tourists are confused about the message.

Mr. Luff: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is highlighting that point. In tonight's Worcester *Evening News*, the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock), is reported as urging

"people to stay away from the countryside in an effort to curb the spread of foot-and-mouth in the county."

Is not that different from the message that the Prime Minister gave the House this afternoon? Is it not time for the Government to clarify their message?

Mr. Green: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There is confusion in Government about solving the crisis. Resolution will remain difficult as long as the confusion continues.

Many businesses besides tourism are in severe, possibly terminal, difficulties. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) therefore called today for interest-free loans for businesses that qualify for rate relief. Attracting tourists back to the English countryside will take some time. It is clear that we need practical action now to help the cash flow of those businesses so that they continue to exist to take advantage of any upturn. Conservative Members will continue to offer practical ideas; they are desperately needed by thousands of businesses, which will go under unless the Government act now.

Everyone in the House and in the country shares the objective of ending the crisis as soon as possible. I hope that everyone shares the view that the Government should concentrate all their energy on dealing with the crisis. The Minister admitted with characteristic honesty that the epidemic will get worse and that the outbreak will show a rising trend. If he is right, the British people will not understand it if the Government do anything to suggest that solving the crisis is not their highest priority. If they have another matter at the forefront of their thinking in the next few weeks, they will fail to tackle the crisis in the countryside and earn the condemnation of those who live and work there. They will pay the penalty, and they will deserve it. For the sake of those who are clinging to their livelihoods throughout our country, I hope that the Government will choose the honourable path.

9.44 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The debate has reflected accurately the fears and anxieties felt in all parts of the country as a result of this dreadful disease. Right hon. and hon. Members of all parties have spoken of the immense distress caused to farmers who have had confirmed cases or suspected cases, or who are in infected areas. Members representing non-infected areas have also vividly expressed the fear of farmers in their areas that they might be affected in their turn. A number of hon. Members mentioned that, including the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), who also praised the Opposition for holding this debate.

While I fully understand that the Opposition would choose this subject for debate, I do not accept that Ministers have not made time to address the House on these issues. The Minister for the Environment made a statement yesterday, and regular statements have also

[Ms Joyce Quin]

been made by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who was also, quite properly, giving evidence to the Select Committee on Agriculture all morning.

The severity of the situation has understandably and powerfully been referred to by many Members. Not surprisingly, that has been particularly true of Members from Cumbria. The speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and other Cumbrian Members showed that they were deeply concerned. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) has an Adjournment debate on this very subject tonight.

The south-west has also been very badly affected and, not surprisingly, has been referred to throughout the debate. So has the area round the Welsh border—particularly Powys—and the area of Dumfries and Galloway, on which my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) made a powerful speech. There are a number of worrying hotspots around the country. Even in my own part of the world, we are very concerned about the concentration in Durham, Tyne and Wear and the adjacent area of Northumberland, where there are also a considerable number of cases.

We have also heard outstanding contributions from hon. Members representing other areas who are very close to the situation of farmers in their constituencies. They include my hon. Friends the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) and for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger), and the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith).

Let me say something about the role of all Ministers in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on this issue. As has been pointed out by many hon. Members, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has shouldered a huge burden of responsibility, and I certainly echo the many compliments that he has received in the Chamber today. My right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Hayman, as Minister responsible for animal health, has also been fully involved in the issue and has to report regularly to the other place.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is the Ministry's representative on the taskforce, building on his experience working on the rural White Paper and as the Minister responsible for the countryside. I have responsibility for trade issues, not many of which have been aired today. None the less, many companies throughout the country are affected by export restrictions. I assure the House that we are working closely with companies to provide the necessary certification for when they are able to export again. We also work with them when they encounter export obstacles created by other countries—either European Union or third countries—because import blockages are imposed, even against products not covered by the restrictions. That is an important area of work. As a result, I have a weekly meeting with representatives of the trade and the companies concerned to tackle some of the issues.

I pay tribute to officials and staff. People are working round the clock. I have experienced that on visits to offices around the country, and I know that many administrative staff in the Ministry's regional centres and animal health staff are making Herculean efforts to tackle the problems.

A number of Members, including the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), referred to the 1967 situation. He and I bumped into each other in the Library last night and we discussed that outbreak, to which the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) also referred because of his constituency interest in it. We have learned lessons from 1967 and it would not be true to say that no one involved in tackling the disease this time has any knowledge of what happened during that outbreak. Indeed, the chief vet himself, Jim Scudamore, has such knowledge.

I accept the differences, to which hon. Members referred, between the two events. Many Members on both sides made the point that the current outbreak has occurred at a time of enormous difficulty for farming. The tourism industry was perhaps not as important to the national economy in those days, but this time round, Cumbria and Devon, two of England's premier tourism areas, are affected, as is tourism in other parts of the country, as hon. Members vividly described.

There are also differences in our knowledge of the environment, which affects some possibilities, but not all, of disposal by burial. On wider losses, the Government have already been more imaginative than were the Government in the 1967 outbreak—certainly in respect of considering the welfare disposal route for animals, the work of the rural taskforce and other, wider measures.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the Minister accept from me that the wider losses are analogous to a natural disaster and that they will place a great burden on local authorities? Local authorities can take advantage of the Bellwin scheme, so can we consider a similar measure to support them in their dealings with local businesses in affected areas? Will she also consider the Treasury suggestion for a community investment trust to achieve urban regeneration, which could be used to regenerate rural areas as well?

Ms Quin: I know that the hon. Gentleman wanted to contribute to the debate and he makes some useful points. Obviously the rural taskforce is examining some of those issues, but it makes sense to consider what has worked elsewhere—urban regeneration schemes, for example—and think about whether such ideas can be applied to the current situation. The Bellwin scheme can be considered in that context.

Another difference from 1967 is that this country is a significant agricultural exporter. That was pointed out in an interesting article in the press yesterday by Professors Thompson and Oswald. Not surprisingly, many Members on both sides of the House referred to the different measures taken to tackle the disease, including the various ones mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture.

There are measures for disease control and for protecting specialist breeds and flocks, which two Members raised, and we have introduced a scheme to

allow movement of animals to slaughter to help the market to pick up. I hope that the welfare disposal scheme will start very shortly.

Mr. Duncan: When?

Ms Quin: I said "very shortly", which is what we expect. I want to pick up points made by hon. Members by saying that it is best to introduce the scheme properly and in a way that will work. That is why we are preparing it in the way that we are.

Many Members mentioned the various schemes relating to the movement of animals, including short-term movement. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) thanked my office for its help, but I take his point that we want the scheme to work without the need for our private ministerial offices to be contacted. The longer-term movement scheme is also important, and is now under way.

Members on both sides of the House have said that bureaucracy must not override common sense, and I accept that.

Mr. Maclean: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Quin: I will not, because I have only a few minutes in which to finish my speech, and I want to respond to a couple of points made by the right hon. Gentleman himself. As he knows, we spoke earlier about the situation in his area.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) made an interesting point about variation in the size of restricted zones. The borders of the zones are sometimes pushed beyond the minimum to natural boundaries, or for topographical or meteorological reasons. The hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned the importance of meteorological considerations. None the less, the distance to which he referred seems lengthy, and we shall therefore look into the example that he gave.

Mention was made of the increase in the number of vets. The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) met a vet from overseas who had come to help us, and the number has indeed increased considerably. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) mentioned on-farm burial. Animals have been buried when it has been safe to do so, but in each case we have been guided very much by environmental considerations.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater said that we should not be embarrassed about asking for military assistance. I assure him that we are not, and that the Army is already deploying successfully at three levels. We expect its contribution to increase in the way outlined by my right hon. Friend the Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington mentioned changes in management in Cumbria. I am glad that he welcomed the arrival of Jane Brown as director of operations. I also commend to him the assistant chief veterinary officer, Richard Drummond, who will oversee veterinary operations in the area.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) asked about the countryside stewardship scheme. I assure him that we are considering whether it may be necessary to extend the deadline for applications beyond 31 May, as he suggested, and also considering ways in which we can help farmers to make applications between now and the deadline.

Wider issues were mentioned, particularly by the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green)—who now seems deep in conversation. Those wider issues are important. Many speakers have talked movingly of the effect of the crisis on the wider rural community, and of the devastation faced by some members of that community. It is particularly frustrating that in many cases that devastation—that reduction in commercial opportunities—is unnecessary, which is why it is so important to convey a clear message. Over the next few days, we shall embark on television and other publicity to make that message as clear as possible.

I applaud some of the efforts made by the Cumbria taskforce—which has been mentioned—by the taskforce comprising Exmoor businesses that have united to seek opportunities, and by similar efforts in the area represented by the hon. Member for West Derbyshire.

The Government have kept the House informed and responded to hon. Members' concerns. We have to bear down on the disease as effectively as possible.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North–East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 171, Noes 305.

Division No. 164] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James

Green , Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton–Brown.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice

Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House expresses grave concern about the very serious effect of the current foot and mouth outbreak on farmers, the livestock industry and the wider rural economy; supports the firm and rapid action taken by the Government to control the spread of the disease, identify outbreaks and slaughter and dispose of animals that are infected or 'at risk'; pays tribute to all those who are continuing to work around the clock to combat this devastating disease; endorses the Government's policy of intensifying disease control measures in areas of high infectivity and working towards modifying controls in areas that have remained free of the disease; expresses deepest sympathy to those farmers whose herds and flocks have been slaughtered in order to control the disease; and welcomes the Government's provision of financial support to farmers including £156 million in extra agrimonetary compensation and a preliminary package of measures to assist the wider rural economy including temporary business rate relief for affected businesses.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

REHABILITATION OF OFFENDERS

That the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) (Amendment) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND EQUALITY

That the draft Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Designation of Public Authorities) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

PENSIONS

That the draft Social Security (Reduced Rates of Class 1 Contributions) (Salary Related Contracted-out Schemes) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

PENSIONS

That the draft Social Security (Minimum Contribution to Appropriate Personal Pension Schemes) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

PENSIONS

That the draft Social Security (Reduced Rates of Class 1 Contributions, and Rebates) (Money Purchase Contracted-out Schemes) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Tax Credits Up-rating Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Open-Ended Investment Companies Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 27th February, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 77) on 2000/2001 Special Grant for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (HC 315), which was laid before this House on 12th March, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Foot and Mouth (Cumbria)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10.17 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I apologise to the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, for keeping her on the Front Bench. She has been here for most of the day and I am sorry that she will have to be here for a while yet.

May I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to my constituency on Sunday at very short notice to talk to the National Farmers Union and the farmers regarding the very serious problems that Cumbria has with foot and mouth? There are more cases of foot and mouth in Cumbria than in any other county in the United Kingdom. In my constituency, which does not have a very big rural area, two more cases were identified today. The problems are increasing.

There will obviously be an inquiry into the outbreak. It may be through the Select Committee system or there may be a public inquiry. When that inquiry is held, it will look into the reasons for the outbreak, what went wrong, what went right and how we will deal with the situation next time. It will come back to the fact that what really started the problem was the two or three-week delay in the notification of the disease at the farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall. Unfortunately, that delay allowed the disease to spread throughout the country, specifically within Cumbria. That has led to the problems that we see today.

Much concern has been expressed today about the farmers and their families. I reiterate that; there is no doubt that they are devastated and, in many cases, are in despair. I have talked to farmers in my constituency and throughout Cumbria and there is a sense of desperation.

My constituency is mainly urban—90 per cent. of the population is urban—but there is no division between the two communities. There is great support among those who live in the city centre for help for those on the farms and in the rural community. Carlisle city council intends to allocate £250,000 tomorrow for aid for those who are suffering, and I applaud that. There is no division between the communities, and no one should try to create one. There has been too much talk in this House over the years of town and country: this crisis has brought us together, and it should keep us together.

Concern has been expressed about how the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has dealt with the situation. Some farmers' grievances are justified, even if others arise from anger that something has gone wrong and a need to blame someone for it. Certainly, no blame can be laid against the staff who have worked in my constituency. The vets and slaughtermen, those who have gone out to farms and those who work at Rosehill, Edenbridge house and the new crisis centre that has been set up at the civic centre have worked tremendously hard. Unfortunately, we must ask them to work that hard for a lot longer since there is no sign of abatement. I pay tribute to them.

The Government made the right decision in deciding that the regional headquarters in my constituency should expand. It was under threat, but if we had closed it,

Cumbria would have more serious problems now. The decision to expand it depended greatly on the calibre of the staff, and they have shown that calibre recently.

There has been criticism about communication problems. Whether the true extent of the problems did not go down the line from Carlisle to Whitehall, or whether Whitehall was not listening, I do not know. I have, however, been deeply concerned about those problems, and have brought them to the Minister's attention. Over the weekend, too, I made several telephone calls to Downing street. I am glad that a senior civil servant, Jane Brown, has been sent to Cumbria, and I hope that the Minister will tell us more about her brief. I hope that she will have powers to take the immediate decisions needed if we are to get on top of the crisis.

Last Thursday's announcement on a cull within 3 km of an affected farm was greeted with anger and dismay by some farmers in my constituency. That anger abated somewhat when we clarified the position with regard to cattle, and there has been further change since then because my right hon. Friend the Minister of State met National Farmers Union representatives in Carlisle on Sunday and went on television later to explain the policy to people beyond that group. In addition, the chief vet, Jim Scudamore, came on Monday to talk to vets and farmers.

Time has also changed matters since last Thursday. Almost a week later, it has become apparent that the Government's policy announcement was correct. The increase in cases has proved the Government right, though I must enter the caveat that we have to listen to local opinion, especially among vets. Where a farmer has good reason to protect his stock, that farmer should have a right to appeal.

I have already thanked my right hon. Friend for coming to Cumbria on Sunday. The NFU in Carlisle much appreciated her visit, and she learned as much as they did from it. She was told one or two things about which she had not been aware, particularly about delays. I also pay tribute to the NFU in Cumbria, with whom my relationship has not always been of the best, but we have worked well together during this crisis. I pay tribute to Nick Utting, the local NFU secretary. We have done a lot, but much remains to be done.

Will my right hon. Friend the Minister of State give me some information on targets? There is still concern about delays, although I accept that the situation is improving. I hope that as soon as an outbreak is confirmed—or perhaps as soon as it is suspected—the target should be that action is taken: the diseased animals should be destroyed within 24 hours and within a further 24 hours they should be buried or removed from the site—sent to the rendering plant or whatever. That is important. We cannot say that the outbreak is under control until we can act within such time limits. Hopefully, the number of cases will start to decline in the not too distant future, but the problem will continue for a while.

I wholly support the involvement of the Army; that is obviously a help and we shall see the benefits. However, I am not sure whether we need to bring up hundreds of soldiers with heavy-lifting equipment—probably from the south of England—to carry out burial and disposal. Good civil engineers and building contractors in Cumbria have the expertise to carry out such work, with the advantage that they are there already—we do not have to wait for them to arrive from Salisbury plain or wherever. I hope that my right hon. Friend will carefully consider the involvement of more local contractors to help with disposals.

Compensation for slaughtered animals is being paid quickly—that point came out at our meeting with the NFU. There is no problem with that; the animals are valued and slaughtered and the cheques are being sent out. There was no complaint about that, which is good. However, the agriculture sector will need a great deal of support over the next three to six months—perhaps for a year or more. The Government must find ways of providing that support.

We need to examine the structure of the agricultural industry. We should consider what we really need in Cumbria—what we want farms to do—and make the necessary adjustments in the sector.

I welcome the support announced by the Government yesterday for the wider rural economy. However, we need to look further into the matter, so it was especially pleasing to hear that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment had agreed to meet a delegation from Cumbria to discuss what is needed to help the whole county. I hope that meeting will take place towards the end of next week, because immediate action is needed.

Agriculture is not the only problem—tourism faces great problems. The affected areas of Cumbria stretch from Silloth on the Solway plain to my constituency and up to the Scottish border and south of Penrith—probably a quarter of the county. Fortunately, the rest of the county does not seem to be affected yet—touch wood. However, there are effects on the whole of Cumbria because of television programmes and pictures in the newspapers that suggest that the entire county is affected. That is not the truth. Areas such as Barrow, Whitehaven, Kendal and Workington do not have a problem. People can visit those places and enjoy their holidays. We must get that message across.

It is not helpful when the Leader of the Opposition says that the Cumbria tourist board is in favour of cancelling the elections. I have checked that point. The tourist board did not say that; it is the personal view of the chief executive. Obviously, I understand that the Leader of the Opposition misquotes people; he misquoted me today. I still have not found out where he got the quote relating to my criticism of the Government.

It would be wrong to cancel the local elections in Cumbria, especially if we are singled out along with Devon. What does that say to people who are thinking of coming to stay? It suggests that there is something seriously wrong in Cumbria, and people will not go there. Let us consider the impact that that is having on the Cumbrian economy. Agriculture is losing £5 million a week and the tourist trade is losing up to £10 million every week—a £15 million loss in a county with a population of less than 500,000. That is a major hit, and it would be bad enough, but we know that it will get worse unless we can get the tourists back. It has been calculated that we will lose £70 million if things have not improved by Easter. As the holiday season begins, the losses will amount to £20 million or £30 million a week. We must do something drastic about that.

I want to make two points before I conclude my comments. Cumbrian Members of Parliament are here now. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness

[Mr. Eric Martlew]

(Mr. Hutton) is sitting on the Front Bench and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) is sitting behind me. We must accept that the economy of Cumbria will go into recession this year. We cannot disguise the fact that people will lose their jobs and businesses will close. Some people have said that Cumbria is in meltdown, but that is not true and it does not help.

The Cumbrian economy will bounce back. How soon it bounces back and how high it bounces will depend, first, on those of us who live in the county. We must decide how we shall get out of the situation. It is no good holding up our hands, saying, "Help us." We must take action. Although the Cumbrian taskforce is very useful, Cumbria county council must be the lead organisation.

Secondly, we need assistance from the Government. Agriculture needs Government assistance, as does the whole county, but it does not just need money. However, it will need quite a lot of money, and I hope that the assistance will be generous. We must remember that public money is involved; we cannot throw it away. The Cumbrian taskforce should be given some money so that it has the option of picking out the priorities, and I hope that that will be discussed during the delegation's visit next week.

Finally, the economy will not improve greatly unless we eradicate foot and mouth disease throughout the county. We can do the other things that I have mentioned, but the main priority must be to get on top of this terrible disease and wipe it out in Cumbria as quickly as possible.

10.33 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) on initiating this debate, and I fully understand and appreciate the reasons that have prompted him to do so. I very much welcome his presence here tonight, as well as that of other Members with a deep interest in the issue, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) and the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton). They represent different parts of Cumbria, but they are all deeply concerned about the consequences of foot and mouth disease not only for the farming community, but for the wider economy of Cumbria.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is also here. That is particularly appropriate given his work on the rural taskforce that will be responsible for dealing with many of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle has raised.

I thank my hon. Friend for his work in facilitating my visit to Cumbria last weekend. That was very much appreciated. The meeting that he organised with farmers' representatives was particularly valuable in providing me with many telling examples of some of the problems that have been experienced in the area.

I was amused—and sorry—that one media report of my visit alleged that I had met everyone but farmers. That is simply not true. I do not know whether the reporter concerned does not understand that National Farmers Union officials are also farmers or simply overlooked the fact that, later in the day in Keswick, I met different types of farmers, including different types of livestock farmers. However, the visit was informative for what the farmers told me.

I am glad that the visit was followed by the visit of the chief veterinary officer, Jim Scudamore, who met several farming representatives and took a great personal interest in some of the veterinary and management issues that were raised with him and that had been raised with me the day before.

There is no doubt that Cumbria is, by a long way, the area most affected by the foot and mouth outbreak. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) is present, and it is true that a wider area in the south of Scotland, including Dumfries and Galloway, has also been badly affected. We know how some cases of the disease were transmitted and affected Cumbria particularly severely. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle referred to the original outbreak at Heddon-on-the-Wall—it still seems to be the original outbreak—and it is alarming that the lesions on the animals there suggested that the disease had been around for some time. Given the fact that it had been transmitted to the neighbouring sheep population and given the movement of sheep around the country, the extent of the problem became clear after a few days.

The trade at livestock markets—in particular, that at Longtown—enabled the disease to be carried around the country. Although it was carried around the country, most of the sheep that went through Longtown market stayed in the Cumbria and Dumfries and Galloway area. That is clear from the number of outbreaks that have occurred there. We must consider a whole range of issues—including those relating to the movement of animals and how the disease is transmitted—to learn the lessons properly.

It is particularly tragic that the disease has become so embedded in the sheep population. Cumbria contains many sheep, but the way in which sheep are affected makes it difficult sometimes to recognise that they have the disease. They may carry the disease and infect other livestock, particularly cattle, and that adds to the huge problems that are now being experienced.

My hon. Friend referred to the measures that are being introduced in Cumbria to tackle the disease. I appreciate his comments about the proposals for the wider cull. I understand the distress in Cumbria. My right hon. Friend the Minister apologised fully for the initial misunderstanding about the scope of the extended cull. Given the tremendous problems in tackling clear examples of disease, the talk of an extended cull alarmed Cumbrian farmers. None the less, I agree with my hon. Friend that there seems to be greater understanding on both sides of the border of the veterinary reasons why the chief vet recommended the wider cull.

Although the animals are often referred to as healthy, "apparently healthy" would be a better description. They are dangerous contacts and may well incubate and carry foot and mouth. We are keen to avoid thinking that we have got on top of the disease only for it suddenly to break out again more virulently and over a much wider area because of the movement of infected sheep. Farmers increasingly recognise the need to avoid that. Such an outbreak would be appalling news for Cumbria and bad news for our livestock industry. On the advice of the chief vet, we believe that the measures are necessary.

The number of animals for which slaughter has been authorised in Cumbria is about 165,000. The number that has been confirmed slaughtered is 118,000. Some 46,000 are awaiting slaughter and 26,000 are awaiting destruction. I was concerned about the delays that were cited to me. Some of the changes reflect our determination to ensure that the targets for dealing with cases from confirmation to slaughter and from slaughter to disposal are fully complied with. The vital target is to ensure that the time between confirmation of the disease and slaughter is as short as possible. We must act on that most speedily. Obviously, the time from slaughter to disposal should also be as short as possible, but in disease-risk terms, it is less important than the first target.

There are different forms of disposal of animals, including burial. My right hon. Friend mentioned the difficulties in Cumbria because of the shallow soil and complications with the water table. None the less, we are not against burial if it can be safely carried out in accordance with good environmental standards. There is also the landfill option. My hon. Friend did not mention that, but he knows that we are pursuing it. However, I noted the concerns about one of the sites that was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) in the earlier debate. Again, everyone has to be content that the landfill site is appropriate and does not present risks. Rendering and incineration are other forms of disposal.

During the longer debate that preceded this one, hon. Members asked about slaughtering on suspicion. That happens in the vast majority of cases. They asked also why a qualified vet should have to telephone head office before slaughter is ordered. Concerns were expressed, not by my hon. Friend but by others, that that could slow down the procedure, but it speeds it up by triggering the next stages of valuation and disposal. Often, it is extremely useful for the vet at head office to discuss with the vet in the field the details of the case, its likely connection to others and so on. That is an important link in the chain.

The use of the Army in Cumbria has been addressed. There is a command-and-control centre in Carlisle, as there is in Exeter. We are considering further support with the Ministry of Defence. The comments of my hon. Friend and the farmers in Cumbria whom I met showed a clear understanding of what the Army could and could not do, unlike comments that have been made about the use of the Army more generally.

The management changes that we are introducing in Cumbria will be important. The arrival of Jane Brown as director of operations is a helpful development. She is a very senior MAFF official, and she will co-ordinate the Army logistics and the disposal mechanisms, and work with existing staff and new staff who are being brought in. It is also important to highlight the work of Richard Drummond, the assistant chief veterinary officer, who will be responsible for veterinary operations in Cumbria and the north-east. I have known him since the beginning of the outbreak, when he was advising me on an earlier visit that I made to the Heddon-on-the-Wall area, and I know that his role will be useful.

My hon. Friend mentioned the wider issues. Jane Brown will participate in the Cumbria taskforce because we believe that the Ministry has a role in its work. When I was in Cumbria at the weekend, I was interested to hear about the setting up of the taskforce, and I endorse my hon. Friend's comments about Cumbria county council's role in the process—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at thirteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

Deferred Divisions

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES (S.I., 2001, No. 85)

That the Weights and Measures (Metrication Amendments) Regulations 2001 (S.I., 2001, No. 85), dated 16th January 2001, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17th January, be revoked.

The House divided: Ayes 182, Noes 263.

Division No. 162]

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul

Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Question accordingly negatived.

EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

That this House takes note of the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 27th November 2000 relating to the Presidency Report to the Nice European Council on the Common European Security and Defence Policy (document 14056/3/00) and the three unnumbered Explanatory Memoranda submitted by the FCO on 22nd and 23rd January relating to the establishment of permanent CESDP bodies; welcomes the Government's approach to a Common European Security and Defence Policy; and supports the Government's intention to pursue this intitiative in the EU and in close co-operation with NATO.

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 133.

Division No. 163]

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnlow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*

Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Joyce, Eric
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert

King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 22 March 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Thursday 29 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Renewable Energy

1. **Mrs. Jackie Lawrence** (Preseli Pembrokeshire): What action he is taking to promote renewable energy. [153626]

12. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What steps he is taking to increase energy production from renewable resources. [153642]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain): The Government have set an ambitious target of securing 10 per cent. of our electricity from renewables by 2010, driven mainly by the proposed renewables obligation on all electricity suppliers. In addition, we have allocated more than £250 million over the next three years to promote new renewable energy technologies, including offshore wind, energy crops and solar voltaics. I am pleased to be able to announce that the Government have also decided to introduce an order in the House that will allow non-fossil fuel obligation 3, 4 and 5 contracts to change location, so freeing up projects that have been unable to win planning consent to transfer elsewhere and help meet our renewables target.

Mrs. Lawrence: The Minister will be aware that the tariff payments to generators of wind power change on 1 April and that sites with wind velocity as low 7.5 m a second will be viable, instead of the previous 9 m a second. Will he do everything possible to encourage wind generators to switch their attention to new sites and remove pressure from environmentally and aesthetically sensitive sites, such as those in my constituency near the Pembrokeshire coast national park?

Mr. Hain: I am well aware of the beautiful countryside in my hon. Friend's constituency—indeed, I may even visit it with her in the next few weeks. We are anxious to ensure that renewables projects, in particular offshore and onshore wind projects, are sensitively located. I assure her that NFFO portability will encourage transfer of projects to less sensitive sites. In addition, the increased buy-out price for renewables will encourage wind farm projects to be located at lower levels. That should reassure my hon. Friend and her constituents.

Ms Drown: Is my hon. Friend aware of a recent survey published by the Scottish Executive that shows overwhelming support for renewable energy, especially wind energy? Interestingly, there was more support in areas adjacent to existing projects. That reinforces evidence from many surveys that show that a lot of the fears that are raised before a project is installed are unfounded. Will my hon. Friend agree to have a public information campaign to emphasise the benefits of renewable energy, which is better for the environment, uses safer production methods and improves the environment for the staff who work in the area? Will he also emphasise the fact that that massively expanding sector also benefits British business.

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is why we have made £250 million available to support wind projects, solar photovoltaics, biomass projects in better generation and other renewable energy projects that we are keen to promote. Our approach will encourage cleaner energy and environmentally more sustainable energy. I agree that public opinion is often more content with such projects when they are established. When people consider a renewables project on their doorstep, they should bear in mind the fact that it is the cleanest form of energy. Whatever planning issues may be at stake, people should not adopt a Nimby attitude to those projects.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Minister agree with the unanimous view of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs that energy from waste should not be classified as renewable energy?

Mr. Hain: I read the report yesterday and was impressed with the level of analysis. I know that the hon. Gentleman takes an interest in such matters. However, it is important that we give maximum encouragement both to the recycling of waste and to clean methods of waste disposal. New technologies such as gasification and pyrolysis allow the transformation of waste into energy in a manner that is clean and produces few, if any, emissions. I do not rule out bringing the biodegradable form of waste generation into the renewables obligation. We are studying how that might be achieved to give maximum environmental protection while ensuring that the alternative of burying waste in landfill sites is not encouraged. Indeed, we want radically to change that practice.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Given that this is likely to be the last trade and industry questions before Labour has to defend its record to the country, will the hon. Gentleman say how he will explain to the electorate the fact that the Government's target of reducing CO_2 emissions to 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010 will be missed by a mile, with Britain achieving just 8 per cent. by 2010 and CO_2 emissions rising,

according to the Government's own figures? How will he explain his Department's failure to get anywhere near the target of generating 5 per cent. of electricity from renewable sources by 2003, given that just 2.8 per cent. has been achieved so far, and most of that is hydro-electric? Is not the truth that this is a Government full of grandiose targets that no one believes will be met and with absolutely no idea of how to achieve them?

Mr. Hain: It is rich for the hon. Gentleman to complain about renewables targets when the Conservatives did virtually nothing to support renewable energy when they were in power. There is the potential for at least two more terms of Labour Government before 2010, and during that time we will drive forward the renewables programme and meet the targets. We have already achieved 2.8 per cent. of generation from renewables towards our target of 5 per cent. by 2003. Today's announcement will help us, and the recent announcement of £250 million will be a huge boost to spending on research and development and capital projects in renewable energy.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Given that the Labour party had a strong commitment to renewables in its last manifesto, will my hon. Friend assure the House that the next Labour Government will strongly support renewables industries—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hardly a day goes by when the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) does not shout. I do not know whether he is rattling anyone else, but he is beginning to rattle me.

Mr. White: Will my hon. Friend assure the House that there will be strong support for indigenous renewables industries, especially combined heat and power programmes?

Mr. Hain: Yes, I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. We want a vibrant, expanding renewable energy industry. There is enormous potential for British businesses, with which I have had many discussions in the past few weeks, to take advantage of the fantastic opportunities that exist as part of our strategy for creating the best knowledge-based economy in Britain.

Nuclear Power

2. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): If he will make a statement on the role of the nuclear industry in helping to meet Britain's future electricity generation requirements. [153629]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The nuclear industry's role will depend on its cost compared with that of other generation options and on securing public confidence in respect of issues such as safety and the environment. The generators have said that they have no current plans for new nuclear power stations.

Mr. Jack: The Secretary of State will be aware of the commitment to the industry of nuclear workers in my constituency and their awareness of the industry's contribution to meeting our Kyoto target and giving us security of energy supply. In light of recent press reports of the wish of British Energy and BNFL to investigate further investment in nuclear energy, will he say what is the Government's strategic vision for the industry? Will he support both companies' endeavours to renew our rapidly ageing stock of nuclear power stations?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman refers to the press reports about comments allegedly made by British Energy and BNFL. Both companies have denied that they have any proposals at present to begin a new generation of nuclear power stations.

Springfields, the facility in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, is a major employer, and he is rightly concerned about the implications of the decline of Magnox in the next few years and its impact on his constituents. It will be another five years or so before the Magnox fuel demands at Springfields will be in decline, so we have time to work out together the new role that Springfields can play. I believe that it can remain a vibrant manufacturing facility, employing many people. I want to work with the right hon. Gentleman and BNFL to make sure that the expertise and talent at Springfields can be used in future, perhaps in a slightly different way. There is huge potential at that facility, and we have time to map out a way to ensure that it can be used to the full.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the nuclear industry's importance lies in the people in that industry, and that without clear and coherent policies we shall not attract into the industry the younger people we need not only to develop new generation potential, but to manage safety issues, which must always be uppermost in our mind?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right. We have to ensure that public confidence in nuclear is retained, so we need to explain the benefits that can be derived from nuclear, as well as the safety measures that are in place. Nuclear accounts for 23 per cent. of electricity production; even given the projected decline, in 10 years it will still account for 18 per cent. of electricity generation in the UK. Therefore, nuclear will have a strong role to play well into the foreseeable future. We need to communicate to the young and talented people who want to know whether there is a future for the industry the clear statement that yes, there is. We want diversity of generation and nuclear electricity will continue to play a significant role in achieving that.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): We heard in answer to the previous question that the Government are way behind on their target for renewable energy. Will the Secretary of State now confirm that even if the Government were to meet their renewable energy target of 5 per cent. and then 10 per cent., CO_2 emissions would start to increase in the medium term because of the decommissioning of nuclear power stations? How can the Government claim to have a rational climate change policy when, according to their own figures, emissions will start to rise again? Is not the truth that the Government have no coherent policy, save for a hope that that future will never arise? Does that have something to do with the fact that the junior Minister responsible for nuclear power is a member of CND, which opposes the civil use of nuclear power? Will the Secretary of State override his junior Minister and CND and conduct a

review of nuclear power and the environment policy; or is the Government's entire climate change programme yet another sham, condemned by their own figures in their own document?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman knows that our energy policy has not changed as a result of the appointment of my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe. Our policy remains as it has been for the past few years: an energy policy based on diversity and on sustained and secure energy production. The right hon. Gentleman appears to argue that the Government should embark on a new generation of nuclear build, but he must be aware that the two UK companies working in that sector—BNFL and British Energy—have both clearly stated that they have no plans to begin a new generation of nuclear build. Therefore, it would fall on the Government to support such a programme. The last nuclear plant built—Sizewell B, which was commissioned and completed in 1994—cost £2 billion at 1994 prices. Is the right hon. Gentleman making a commitment on behalf of the Conservatives to fund a new generation of nuclear build? The figures are clear: we project a 5 per cent. reduction in nuclear by 2010 and a 10 per cent. renewables contribution. We shall benefit from the climate change programme to which we are committed. In government, the right hon. Gentleman did absolutely nothing about it.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Would my right hon. Friend care to tell us when he thinks the MOX—mixed oxide—facility at BNFL's Sellafield plant will be given permission? I realise that the responsibility is held jointly with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but the matter appears to have been lying on Ministers' desks for some time. Given that some of the problems that BNFL has encountered in recent years have been addressed and that the nuclear installations inspectorate is giving positive signals about the improvement in performance, when is the MOX facility likely to be licensed?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The nuclear installations inspectorate has said some positive things about the steps that have been taken at Sellafield in the light of the difficulties that were experienced a few months ago. My hon. Friend is right that my Department and DETR are jointly responsible. Within government, we are discussing closely the progress that we can make. I hope that shortly there will be a proposal from my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment that will allow us to make some speedy progress.

Business Incubation Programme

3. **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): If he will make a statement on his Department's support for the business incubation programme in the north-west. [153630]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): The North West Development Agency will spend nearly £4 million over the next two years to initiate the north-west incubation programme. Organisations in the north-west will have the opportunity to bid for the Small Business Service's £75 million business incubation fund.

Mr. Goggins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and for her Department's support for the business incubation programme in the north-west.

Campus Ventures, which is a Manchester-based company, is playing a leading role in the development of the programme. It recently initiated discussions with key players in the region with a view to establishing a seedcorn capital fund. Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to underline the importance of such a fund to new enterprises and encourage public and private organisations to contribute to the fund once it is established?

Ms Hewitt: I readily respond to my hon. Friend's question. Seedcorn funds of the sort that he mentioned are enormously important in helping more businesses to start up and to grow. I congratulate Jim Keaton, the chairman of Campus Ventures, and the vice-chancellors of many of the universities in the north-west, who have collaborated in different ventures, including the Manchester challenge seed fund, which was helped by the first round of university challenge funding that we provided.

Climate Change Levy

4. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): What assessment he has made of the impact of the climate change levy on UK manufacturing industry's competitiveness. [153632]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): The climate change levy is an environmental protection measure designed to avoid damaging the competitiveness of UK manufacturing. The levy's impact on individual businesses will depend on the extent to which they take advantage of the various levy exemptions, the new scheme of enhanced capital allowances for energy efficiency, the energy efficiency advice and support from the new carbon trust, and whether their sites qualify for a discount from the levy. The hon. Gentleman knows that we are offering an 80 per cent. discount to energy-intensive industries exposed to international competition in return for their commitment to challenging energy- saving targets.

Mr. Winterton: Has the Minister seen the report published last week by Ernst and Young, which was commissioned by the Engineering Employers Federation? Will he comment on the remarks of Nick Turner of Ernst and Young, who said:

"There is no doubt that the climate change levy will penalise a number of manufacturing enterprises in the UK, particularly those that have made considerable improvements to their energy efficiency prior to the introduction of the levy."?

Is it not important that we do not have policies that damage the capacity, effectiveness and efficiency of manufacturing?

Will the Minister comment also on the remarks of Martin Temple, the director-general of the EEF, who said that he believes that the levy is

"one of the most badly designed economic instruments in recent times."?

Will the Minister reconsider the effect of the climate levy on manufacturing industry?

Mr. Caborn: I think that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the levy is one element of a national climate change programme, which was published in November. Our answers to earlier questions make it clear that we want to approach energy in the most effective way and to stop damage to the environment. The levy is one of the instruments that is being used to address the Kyoto targets, with which I think the entire House agreed. We have made major concessions in discussions with organisations such as the Engineering Employers Federation—I listed some of them in my main answer—and dialogue continues with them. The tax will take effect in April. It must be seen as part of the Government's attack on damage to the environment.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Is it not the case that the Government have given many millions of pounds of relief to the British steel industry on the levy? Corus repaid the Government's generosity by giving £700 million back to its shareholders and promulgating 4,000 job losses in Wales, including 400 in Shotton steelworks in my constituency. Bearing in mind the fact that the Shotton steelworkers went, with Corus, to see the Government to ask for the levy on steel to be lessened, my steelworkers think that that is a disgrace.

Mr. Caborn: Some of my right hon. Friend's questions about Corus should be directed at the company itself. However, the climate change levy was not a major factor in the decisions that were made, rightly or wrongly, on the present restructuring. That was clear from the evidence given to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry by the chairman and chief executive of Corus.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): How is it that the Department of Trade and Industry has the professed aim of helping manufacturing industry and improving competitiveness—that appears in its so-called mission statement—but in reality is so weak and ineffective that it allows the Treasury to impose a new energy tax, which will come into effect in less than two weeks, at a time when energy prices for industry are already rising fast? Will the Minister confirm that the new tax will be particularly damaging for manufacturing industry, which has already lost more than 350,000 jobs since the general election, and that it is an unwelcome additional burden on the steel industry, which is already suffering severe job losses? The damage caused by the new energy tax has been confirmed by the chairman of Corus.

Will the Minister also confirm that the tax is an extremely clumsy and inefficient way of tackling climate change, which could be dealt with much better by other means, such as emissions permit trading, and that the tax has been condemned by business groups, all of which have declared that it is ridiculously complicated and an additional stealth tax? Above all, will the DTI start to stand up for the interests of British business instead of constantly being ignored and overridden by the tax-raising ambitions of the Treasury and the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Mr. Caborn: I repeat what the chairman and chief executive of Corus said: the climate change levy was not a major consideration in the company's decision to restructure, as has been said at the Dispatch Box before.

The levy is part of the Government's attack on the question of damage to the environment, and of our responsibilities as a Government. The DTI has been extremely active on behalf of British industry, including manufacturing, in our discussions and dialogue with the Treasury. Because representations were made, and strongly supported by the DTI, we have a package of measures to address the concerns raised by manufacturers when we first started discussions on the climate change programme last November. We are now coming to a consensus, and when the levy starts to operate on 1 April, we shall be able to reflect and see that it is a sensible move for all the population.

Miners' Compensation

5. **Mr. Bill Michie** (Sheffield, Heeley): What action he is taking to deliver coal health payments in the south Yorkshire area. [153634]

10. **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): What action he is taking to deliver coal miners' illness compensation payments in the Yorkshire and Humberside region. [153640]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain): Some 2,100 claims in the Yorkshire area have been settled in full, with the highest full settlement to date being £61,004. A further 6,200 claimants have received interim payments, the highest being £30,000. In Yorkshire alone, we have paid out £100 million in coal mining compensation. In total, the Department has paid out more than £360 million in compensation for respiratory disease and vibration white finger, and we continue to pay out about £1 million per working day.

Mr. Michie: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and for the work that he is doing to increase the speed with which compensation is paid out. He will be aware that 139,000 cases are still waiting to be dealt with, and that more cases are still coming in than are being completed. He will also know that it will be a long time before those claims are completed. We had another meeting with IRISC this week and were given further suggestions on how to speed things up. Will he again visit IRISC to see what help he can provide in that respect?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for visiting IRISC and I know about his close engagement with its headquarters in Sheffield. We have put in place a series of steps that are resulting in huge improvements in the speed of compensation delivery. Although my hon. Friend is right that there are about 140,000 claimants in the system, many of them have received payments and 1,000 are joining every year, which makes this the biggest compensation claim in Britain's history. He will be

encouraged to learn that we expect offers worth £440 million to be sent out in the next five or six months. That compares with £360 million in the past three years, which shows that the programme is being hugely accelerated. We are determined to deliver justice for miners and their widows.

Ms Winterton: I welcome the opening of a centre in Doncaster to deal with vibration white finger claims, but I was concerned to hear yesterday from Tommy Bird, a constituent of mine from Armthorpe. Mr. Bird has chronic bronchitis and emphysema, but even though he has had his final medical assessment, it is likely to be about 15 weeks before he gets a final offer. As I understand it, the problem lies in getting the medical assessment from Healthcall to IRISC. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to speed up that part of the process?

Mr. Hain: We will certainly consider the case of my hon. Friend's constituent. Mistakes have been made and there have been bottlenecks, but we have gradually removed such problems so that the compensation scheme is proceeding much more speedily. There should be no rigid figure of 15 weeks or any other period. We are now processing 1,000 medical assessments each week. That compares with about 500 claims per week last year, so it is clear that the process is being speeded up. I am sure that we will pay special attention to my hon. Friend's constituent's case now that she has raised it with me.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I am concerned about miners' compensation in Yorkshire and Wales. I wrote to the Minister on 6 January, congratulating him on his appointment and asking for an urgent meeting to discuss the matter. Is he happy that I received a reply on 3 March saying, "Try some time later in the spring."? That is simply not good enough.

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for congratulating me, but I remind him that he has had an Adjournment debate in which I gave a full response. I am as happy to discuss any matters with him as I am with any other hon. Member. We have been working night and day to drive the programme forward in Wales, as elsewhere. *[Interruption.]* On Friday week, I shall open a new medical assessment centre in Ystrad Mynach, which will take forward the whole process of compensation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) asked the Minister a question, so he should not shout during the reply.

Mr. Hain: I remind the House that while Plaid Cymru whinges about miners' compensation, we are delivering it on a scale that has never been seen in British history and that the Tories refused to deliver in their long years of power. We will continue to do that.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his decision on claimants' pension rights, and, in particular, on his decision about asthma cases in which it is shown that a man could have contracted asthma by working in dust underground. I have no doubt whatever that such cases would have gone to court if the Conservative party had been in power. He will know that the matter involves civil litigation and that although he has extended the claims period until mid-summer, the time bar will come down then. On the basis of the evidence that IRISC will have accumulated in calculating the claims, will he consider introducing a scheme after the time bar comes down, to ensure that people can make future claims?

Mr. Hain: I will certainly consider that. There is no reluctance on our part to pay out the money. Recently, £50 million in offers was stuck with solicitors who were unable to make progress. We want them to speed up their operations. My hon. Friend is right to remind the House of the hugely complex process of litigation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) often makes the point that the Labour Government in the 1970s dealt with such claims immediately and with great speed. We have been unable to do that because of the court process. However, speed has been increased greatly, and compensation will be paid throughout the country.

Metrication

6. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What recent representations he has received concerning metrication. [153636]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): Not a lot. However, several individuals have written directly to the Government or their Members of Parliament about the obligation on traders, under legislation made by a Conservative Government in 1994, to use metric weights after 31 December 1999 for the sale of loose goods.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful for that reply, as far it goes. The younger generation is happy and comfortable using metric measurements. However, try as I may to keep up with them, I understand "a couple of miles down the road" better than "5 km". I understand that it is a hot summer's day when the temperature is 75 deg F, but I am a bit muddled about 20 deg C. I understand a pound of butter or 8 oz of sweeties. I may be out of date, but I am comfortable with those measurements.

Does not the Minister regret the fact that the statutory instrument that he introduced last week removes the right of the retailer to offer an option? Currently, we are offered both sorts of measurements and people know where they are, no matter whether they are young or, like me, a bit of a fuddy-duddy. The statutory instrument means that we will not know what we are buying.

Dr. Howells: As far as I understand the question, I can reply that the hon. Gentleman knows that we negotiated a 10-year extension so that anyone who sells loose goods can use imperial as well as metric measurements.

It is too late for the hon. Gentleman to convince the people of his lovely county that he is more anti-European and anti-metrication than the UK Independence party—that is what he is really worried about. He has a majority of only 3,500, and the UK Independence party is pecking away at it.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Does my hon. Friend believe that the acute grasp of modern measurement that

the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) displays is one of the reasons for the Confederation of British Industry's announcement yesterday that a Tory Government would pose a threat to Britain?

Dr. Howells: Probably.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The introduction of metrication has been a confusion of European Union directives, opt-outs, derogations and statutory instruments. The final stage in that messy process was yesterday's deferred Division. A majority of Labour Members voted to end for ever the ability to display imperial measurements alongside metric ones.

Dr. Howells *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Duncan: Nevertheless, Lord Sainsbury gave incorrect information in the Lords debate on the matter. He claimed that supplementary measurements were already forbidden: that is not true. Will the Minister confirm for the record that the Labour party's vote has killed off imperial measurements for good? They would otherwise have been permitted in parallel. Will he also confirm that Lord Sainsbury's comments did not reflect the truth?

Dr. Howells: No, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. It will remain permissible until 2009 for weighing machines to be marked with imperial measurements, and for anybody to ask for a product in an imperial measure. The trader can measure it metrically if he wishes. There is nothing to prevent us from negotiating a further 10-year derogation if we choose to do that.

Universal Bank

7. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What progress has been made in agreeing a memorandum of understanding with banks concerning the universal bank. [153637]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): Discussions with the banks are at an advanced stage. I hope that they will be resolved shortly.

Mr. Swayne: Will the Minister comment on the reports in today's edition of *The Independent*, and confirm that Barclays and the Halifax are resisting proposals that post office employees should be able to open accounts at their banks, and that they are concerned about the prospect of money laundering? Will the Minister also say whether the Select Committee was accurate in its estimate that the running costs of the universal bank would be in the region of £150 million a year? What element of public subsidy will be involved in that?

Mr. Johnson: We are engaged in commercial negotiations at the moment, and I will not breach the confidentiality of those negotiations. I advise the hon. Gentleman to take as much notice of the report published this morning as of the report published in the same newspaper in November, which said that the universal bank was going to hit the dust. Shortly after that, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced that Barclays, Lloyds TSB, the Royal Bank of Scotland, HSBC, Abbey National and the Halifax had all agreed in principle to the universal bank. Since then, I visited the Alliance and Leicester Girobank in Merseyside, on 8 February. It announced that it too would join a universal bank. I had discussions with the Nationwide building society on 20 February, and it announced that it would sign up to the universal bank.

I advise Opposition Members to recognise that we have an opportunity here to tackle financial exclusion. One hundred per cent. of the socially and financially excluded are among the 28 million people a week who visit post offices, and the universal bank will provide an exciting opportunity to move forward and, at the same time, to address the problems of branch closures and of people continuing to receive their benefits and pensions in cash across a post office counter. That is our aim. This is an exciting prospect and we aim to deliver on it.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Will the universal bank not bring a new income stream to sub-post offices? Will it not also result in more people holding bank accounts? Are not those both highly desirable outcomes?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I would have expected Members on both sides of the House to recognise the opportunities that the proposal makes available. The universal bank concept—originally set out by the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit, which said that the Post Office should set up a universal bank—has moved on a stage, to the point where every bank that offers a basic bank account, a so-called PAT 14 bank account, will now make those accounts available across a post office counter. That will open up the opportunity for far more work across post office counters. It will also attack the disgraceful situation in which up to 5 million people in this country do not have bank accounts or any of the advantages that they bring.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): How far have the negotiations been advanced by yesterday's report by the Competition Commission, on the first anniversary of the Cruickshank report? Specifically, does the Minister agree with the chairman of the commission that it would be appropriate and a useful source of revenue for the universal bank if there were a windfall tax on the excess profits of the banking system?

Mr. Johnson: I do not think that yesterday's report changes anything in respect of the discussions that we are having with the banks. Those are constructive, fruitful discussions. The banks have no legal obligation to sign up to universal banking services. Nevertheless, owing to the skill, wisdom and sagacity of the negotiators, they are willingly signing up to the universal banking services. We should ensure that we continue that process, finalise it shortly and be ready for 2003, when universal banking services will be launched.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): Is the Minister aware that, owing to the clumsy way in which automated credit transfer was introduced, the Government have destroyed the confidence of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in their own offices? Those offices are now closing at the record rate of nearly two a day. Even

if the Minister sorts out the muddle and confusion that surround the universal banking service, there will be precious little income for those in the post offices.

The Minister's answers have been muddled and confused over the months that we have been asking him questions about the universal banking service. Is he aware that when we sweep back to power after the next general election, we are going to cut through this confusion by introducing our own benefit card? That will enable beneficiaries to draw their money at the post offices, and enable the sub-post offices to get some income; most importantly of all, it will preserve the footfall in post offices. When the Minister goes back to 1 Victoria street with his tail between his legs, will he put in hand our work, so that when we take over his office after the general election, we shall not have to waste any time putting in our benefit card scheme?

Mr. Johnson: Last July, the hon. Gentleman described the universal bank as flabby and unlikely; if I were a less kind person, I might say that that was a suitable description of him. He mentioned the benefit payment card, which I understand those on the Opposition Front Bench will be committed to reintroducing. The idea behind that card was well intentioned, but as I said at the time, it was a turkey of a PFI. Read the National Audit Office report: the project was three years overdue and vastly overspent. If Conservative Members would bother to look at the plans for universal banking services, they would see that the smart card—the so-called clear account—which is the post office's part of the system, does precisely what the benefit payment card would have done, except that it is a smart card rather than a swipe card, because it moves the technology forward.

I heard the leadership bid that the hon. Gentleman has just made, but I must tell Conservative Members that if we are to fight the election on the issues that he raised, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters will be on our side in implementing the PIU report; they will not support some adventurer who wants to go back and recreate the benefit payment card.

Minimum Wage

8. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): If he will make a statement on the impact of the minimum wage in Cleethorpes. [153638]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): At least 120,000 workers in Yorkshire and Humberside have benefited as a result of the introduction of the national minimum wage in April 1999. The national minimum wage has also helped to close the gap between the highest and lowest earners, and to reduce the differential between men's and women's pay, both in Cleethorpes and throughout the United Kingdom. Between April 2000 and February 2001, Inland Revenue enforcement officers visited 348 employers in the Inland Revenue's northern region, which includes Cleethorpes, and identified about £240,000 in underpayments for workers in that region.

Shona McIsaac: I represent a part of the world in which low pay, such as £1 an hour piecework rates, was rife. The national minimum wage, and the increase in it that will be made later this year, has given a real boost to eliminating poverty pay in Grimsby and Cleethorpes. My hon. Friend mentioned cases of employers who do not meet their obligations. That is probably the tip of the iceberg in some parts of the country. What rights do workers have to report employers who may not be paying the national minimum wage, or who may alter their terms and conditions of employment to get round the requirement to pay the minimum wage?

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The second report of the Low Pay Commission last year examined enforcement, and its authors were pleased, by and large, with the way it was operating. We have 14 teams of Inland Revenue officers around the country, dedicated to national minimum wage issues. Thanks to the Employment Relations Act 1999, they have access to returns for tax, national insurance and working families tax credit. The Low Pay Commission will re-examine the subject, and its conclusions will be included in volume 2 of its third report, which will be published in May.

If workers are scared of their employers, and scared to enforce their rights, they have only to ring the helpline. The rest will be done for them; they need have no further involvement. Enforcement officers will ensure that the employer complies—and so far, the enforcement officers have recovered £4 million in wages for people who had been denied their rights under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I was in a nursing home recently—*[Interruption.]* I was only visiting. The nursing home was in my constituency, but only a couple of miles from the constituency of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac), and the people there said that the minimum wage had had a severe impact on their business. Although we all want people to receive decent wages, is the Minister conducting a survey of areas of traditionally high unemployment and low wages, such as Humberside and north Lincolnshire? The area contains his own constituency, and he knows it well. The issue is serious, and I am sure that the Minister would not want to increase unemployment in the area. What impact studies is he conducting, especially into the TUC's demands for a minimum wage as high as £4.50 or even £5 an hour?

Mr. Johnson: The Low Pay Commission is an example of social partnership in action, and may not be too popular among Conservative Members. It was established to carry out the type of analysis that the hon. Gentleman has described.

The sector mentioned by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) has been a cause of concern in respect of the effect of the national minimum wage. What—for want of a better term—one could call social care employees have had a major input to the commission's deliberations. Indeed, the commission's second report found that 14 per cent. of establishments in the sector had experienced lower staff turnover since the introduction of the national minimum wage, that 18 per cent. reported higher staff motivation, and that 44 per cent. had increased investment in training and development.

The matter is important. This Government introduced the national minimum wage, and the level at which it is set obviously has to take cognisance of the points raised by the

hon. Gentleman. That is why it is important that the process should be careful and steady, and that it be overseen by the Low Pay Commission. Anyone who reads the commission's reports will see that it conducts a thorough analysis of points such as the hon. Gentleman raised.

Corus

9. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): What support his Department plans to give to former employees of Corus affected by its decision to restructure steel production in the UK. [153639]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in the House yesterday, even at this late stage the Government would urge Corus to reconsider its proposal. Should it proceed, we will work with the National Assembly for Wales, local agencies and other Government Departments to ensure that the best and most appropriate help is provided for the individuals and communities affected.

Mr. Edwards: I thank my right hon. Friend for the efforts made by his Department and the National Assembly for Wales to support the Corus steelworkers if they are made redundant. However, does not he agree that the prime responsibility remains with Corus to restructure its plans and save the jobs at Llanwern, Ebbw Vale and Bryngwyn? Does he share the astonishment felt by members of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs when Sir Brian Moffat confessed, while giving evidence, that he did not know whether the Bryngwyn works was profitable or not but that he was closing it anyway?

Mr. Byers: Once we were able to reflect on the decision announced by Corus, it was clear that the company was adopting a short-term approach to the particular trading difficulties that it was experiencing. There is no getting away from the fact that it has been a difficult period for Corus. The House will understand that the company had to act to remedy the losses that it was incurring. The great concern for my hon. Friend, and many others, was that the company failed to adopt an approach guaranteeing a long-term future for steel.

I have no doubt that steel is an important industry for the United Kingdom, and will remain so. The Government still want to work constructively with Corus and the trade unions to find a better way forward. We could have a plan for steel that would overcome the difficulties that individuals and communities will face if Corus goes ahead with the programme that it has proposed.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Will the introduction of the climate change levy next month result in a net cost to the steel industry?

Mr. Byers: What I can do is repeat the comments made by Sir Brian Moffat, the chairman and chief executive of Corus. His evidence to the Select Committee was very clear. He said that the introduction of the climate change levy made no difference whatever to the proposals being put forward by the company.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): There is nothing new about the conduct of the company. The company's barrister admitted in a recent employment appeal tribunal that the company gave false information to employees during the closure of the H.H. Robertson firm in my constituency. Given the role of his Department, and the possible involvement of the Serious Fraud Office, will my right hon. Friend look again at the conduct of British Steel—now Corus—during that closure?

Mr. Byers: I will agree to do that.

Minimum Wage

11. **Mr. Chris Pond** (Gravesham): What assessment he has made of the effects of raising the national minimum wage; and if he will make a statement. [153641]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The Low Pay Commission has made a thorough assessment of the likely impact of raising the minimum wage to £4.10 an hour. Its report shows just how successful the policy has been, with nearly 1.5 million workers taken out of poverty pay, and no adverse impact on levels of employment.

Mr. Pond: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Will he confirm that he and the Low Pay Commission will be looking at the youth rate before this latest increase comes into effect? Does he agree that although some propose that all small firms should be exempted from having to pay the minimum wage, most firms consider that the minimum wage makes good business sense? Could that be one of the reasons why the Confederation of British Industry said this week that

"most businesses would take their hat off to this Government",

and warned against the effect of another Tory Government, a view that I am sure is shared by most low-paid workers?

Mr. Byers: I think that the fact that we have been able to create economic stability which allows business to plan ahead with confidence is the motive behind the CBI's warm endorsement. On the national minimum wage, the Low Pay Commission will be recommending the youth rate later in May. We expect it to report on that issue then.

Many Conservative Members opposed the national minimum wage and continue to do so. The right hon. Member for Bexley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is a good example—[Hon. Members: "Bromley".] The right hon. Gentleman changes his constituency so often that I have difficulty keeping track. He, however, is a true believer. Conservative Front Benchers do not believe in the national minimum wage, either. The public know that, because the Conservatives have continually opposed it. The Government are committed to it; we are proud to have introduced it. That is why it is going up to £4.10 in October and to £4.20 in October the following year.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has the right hon. Gentleman been spending any of his March advertising budget on promoting the national minimum wage? Can he confirm that more than £8 million has been spent in March by his Department? Can he also confirm that the information in the advertisement on the four weeks' minimum holiday is incorrect, because the person featured

in that advertisement is a partner in a firm, so the minimum wage and the four weeks' minimum holiday do not apply?

Mr. Byers: I am not sure that we are spending any money advertising the national minimum wage in March. If the hon. Gentleman is recommending that we should, I would be more than happy to consider it.

We are, of course, advertising the fact that as a result of measures introduced by this Government, everybody is now entitled to four weeks' paid holiday a year. That would be taken away by the Conservative party. We make no apology for advertising the fact that people in work now have decent minimum standards as a result of the measures that we have introduced.

Rural Post Offices

13. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If he will make a statement on the rural post office network. [153643]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): By accepting all 24 recommendations of the performance and innovation unit's report on the future of the post office network, the Government have demonstrated their continuing commitment to maintenance of a national network. We are working closely with the Post Office, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and other stakeholders to implement the PIU recommendations. These measures are designed to modernise and improve post office services and to strengthen confidence in the future of the network. We have also established a new fund to support initiatives by volunteer or community groups to maintain or reopen post office facilities in rural areas where the traditional post office is closing.

The Post Office has accepted a formal requirement, placed on it by the Government, to maintain the rural network and to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices.

Miss McIntosh: The Minister will be aware of my keen interest in this matter. I am grateful for the briefing given to me by the Leeds regional office. That briefing proved that the rural post office network is virtually non-existent. It is hopelessly inadequate. The whole network is geared to urban and suburban post offices. Does the Minister accept that the Government have failed rural post offices and the countryside?

Mr. Johnson: I realise that the hon. Lady takes an interest in that matter, but I am bemused by her response following a briefing. Rural closures are 20 per cent. down on the same period last year—*[Interruption.]* That is the first time there has been a reduction of any sort in the past 18 years. Many of the initiatives that we announced last month resulted from suggestions made by rural sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses. So we are providing protection through Government subsidy—as specified in the Postal Services Act 2000. We have abolished the 25 per cent. of salary up-front fee that new sub-postmasters had to pay when they first took over a new post office—that was introduced by the previous Government in 1989 and we have waived the fee—and set up a £2 million fund to allow parish councils and local communities to meet the capital costs of opening a village hall as a post office. We predict that that will lead to the reopening of 200 offices that cannot at present find a location.

The hon. Lady asked a genuine question and has a genuine interest, but we should have a better dialogue on the subject because the rural part of the network is doing better than the rest.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Would the Leader of the House please give us the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 26 MARCH—Second Reading of the Adoption and Children Bill.

TUESDAY 27 MARCH—Second Reading of Social Security Fraud Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 28 MARCH—Second Reading of the Private Security Industry Bill *[Lords]*.

THURSDAY 29 MARCH—Debate on the Intelligence Agencies on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 30 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will be:

MONDAY 2 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Criminal Defence Service (Advice and Assistance) Bill *[Lords]*.

Consideration in Committee followed by remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill.

TUESDAY 3 APRIL—Second Reading of International Criminal Court Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 4 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]*.

THURSDAY 5 APRIL—Remaining stages of the International Development Bill.

FRIDAY 6 APRIL—Private Members' Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for the beginning of April will be as follows:

THURSDAY 5 APRIL—Debate on renewable energy.

The House will wish to know that on Wednesday 28 March, there will be a debate relating to the support scheme for olive oil in European Standing Committee A.

On Wednesday 28 March, there will be a debate relating to waste electrical and electronic equipment in European Standing Committee C.

The House will also wish to know that on Wednesday 4 April, there will be a debate relating to community postal services in European Standing Committee C.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[Wednesday 28 March: European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union document: 9431/00, Support scheme for olive oil. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Report: HC 23-xxviii (1999-2000).

European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union document: 10802/00, Waste electrical and electronic equipment. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Reports: HC 28-i (2000-01) and HC 23-xxix (1999-2000).

Wednesday 4 April: European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union document: 10544/00, Community postal services. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Reports: HC 28-iv (2000-01) and HC 23-xxviii (1999-2000).]

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business and congratulate her on retaining her composure, particularly as she read out the latter dates. I want to be helpful to the right hon. Lady today. I am afraid that she has been rather remiss as it is only three weeks until Maundy Thursday. It must either have slipped her mind, or she has been too busy with other matters, but we have not yet had the dates of the Easter recess. I am sure that that is only an oversight. Clearly, hon. Members who have serious matters with which to deal in their constituencies would like to make arrangements for the recess. I would be grateful if the right hon. Lady could give us some indication of its length this year.

In the event—I know that this is hypothetical, but I am trying to help the Leader of the House to foresee the sort of errors and omissions that I have just identified—of a general election [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Well, perhaps. In the event of an election in the next few weeks, will the right hon. Lady share with the House the Government's preparations for how the foot and mouth crisis will be dealt with at ministerial level during the campaign? She will be aware that there are strict codes of conduct on how Ministers handle matters and make announcements. Have the Government considered how they would make announcements about foot and mouth disease and keep people properly informed of developments during a general election campaign, in particular as the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said yesterday that the crisis is likely to continue for several months?

Before the Easter recess, will there be time for the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to the House on Macedonia, which is a matter that concerns many hon. Members? We have not yet heard from him on the subject. In the past two weeks we have seen quite a flurry of Bills scheduled for Second Reading. Can the Leader of the House tell us what has happened to the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill?

Finally, this week the Government announced an important White Paper on learning disability, which I welcome although I have tabled a couple of specific questions on concerns that I have. Interestingly, the White Paper was launched at Fulham football ground, which is owned by Mr. Al Fayed. Is this to be the procedure in future? Clearly, the Government have abandoned making such important announcements on the Floor of the House. Could we have a ballot, so that Members like me with excellent football grounds, such as Ladysmead in Tiverton, without any patronage from anybody whom anyone would have heard of, could host the launch of important papers in our constituency? Perhaps we could have a weekly ballot, so that we could all share in this bonhomie which the Government have introduced.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady was kind enough to say that a reminder might be helpful and I appreciate the courtesy with which she made her point, but, no, the Easter recess had not slipped my mind. In fact, I was discussing it only this morning. I understand her point about the notice that the House likes to have about the length of the recess. All I can say is what I usually say on these matters, which is that it is subject to the progress of business. [*Laughter.*] When the Government have had a chance further to assess the progress of our legislative programme, I will share our thoughts with the House as soon as I can.

The hon. Lady asked about preparations for the continued handling of the foot and mouth crisis. As she will be aware, if a general election were called, Ministers

do not cease to be Ministers. They continue to carry out their duties. She raised the issue of the code of conduct. My recollection is and my impression has always been—although this will be a matter of discussion, should a general election be called—that what is intended is to ensure that the holding of a ministerial post does not lead either to controversial party political decisions being taken which might bind a subsequent Government unfortunately or to exploitation for party political advantage.

As Members on both sides of the House are striving to be responsible about this serious crisis and, although occasionally there have been some differences of view, both the Government and the Opposition take the crisis in the countryside seriously, so that seems to me to be almost the last area in which difficulties of the kind which the hon. Lady identified might be likely to arise. If, however, such a circumstance develops, it will undoubtedly be a matter for discussion and careful consideration in the relevant Departments.

I understand the hon. Lady's remarks about Macedonia. She will know that it is Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions next Tuesday, when it will be possible for Members to raise the issue. She asked about the legislative programme in general. Business is coming back from the Lords and returning to the Floor of the House. That is true for all legislation in the pipeline, including the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill, and other issues on which the Government have proposals to put before the House.

The hon. Lady lost me on her final point about the learning disability White Paper. I am not sure what the relevance was of her careful point about Mr. Al Fayed. I am sure that there is a delightful football ground in her constituency. Indeed, there is a delightful one in mine—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Baseball Ground.

Mrs. Beckett: No, not the Baseball Ground. The hon. Gentleman is out of date. We have a brand new football stadium, Pride Park, on which we hope to hold an international later this year, so the hon. Gentleman will be able to see it on television.

Despite the many attractions of different football grounds in different parts of the country, the germ of the hon. Lady's charge was that the White Paper had not been announced to the House. That is incorrect. My right hon. Friend launched it properly through a written statement to the House. The hon. Lady will know that it is not always possible to fit in the many issues on which Members might seek statements, not least because, perfectly rightly, so many statements have been sought on different aspects of the present difficulties in the countryside.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): May I repeat the request for a debate on Macedonia? My right hon. Friend will be aware of the serious situation that is developing there; the Kosovo Liberation Army is attempting an insurrection from Kosovo. Macedonia has been an oasis of peace in the troubled former Yugoslavia and the Albanian minority share in government and in all the institutions of state. They are in a terrible position as the militants take over. Greece, Bulgaria and other surrounding countries could be drawn into the conflict unless we act quickly. A debate is long overdue.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend takes a great interest in these matters and pursues them with great diligence. The request from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) was for a statement; my hon. Friend asks for a debate, but I understand that they both seek to make the same point—the issue should be aired. I understand and sympathise with the points made by my hon. Friend. She will know that the Government unreservedly condemn the violence that has been taking place in Macedonia. We are fully supportive of the Macedonian Government. We recognise and want to support the efforts made in Macedonia to maintain plurality of representation. I can say to my hon. Friend only what I said to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, however: there will be an opportunity to question my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on Tuesday. Obviously, there may be opportunities after that for my hon. Friend to press for a debate, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for one in the near future.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Did the Leader of the House note the apparent suggestion made by the Conservative spokesperson that Easter should be postponed? May I suggest that an authority higher even than the Lord President of the Council would be necessary for that?

The Leader of the House will have noted that the Minister for Transport in the other place, Lord Macdonald, announced that, next Thursday, he would make a statement on the progress of the public-private partnership for the National Air Traffic Services. May we have an explicit reassurance from the right hon. Lady today that we, too, will receive that statement next Thursday, and that there will be an opportunity to debate it?

I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to the fact that we have received no statement from the Secretary of State for Social Security about the considerable problems facing families in the areas hardest hit by the foot and mouth crisis. We have had a great deal of sympathy and heard many words from the Prime Minister, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister for the Environment, who is responsible for the taskforce. My right hon. and hon. Friends and myself receive many representations—as, I am sure, do Members on both sides of the House—from families who cannot obtain assistance from the Benefits Agency at present, especially if no children are involved. I was in touch with the Benefits Agency earlier; no crisis loans are available in many circumstances for many of the hardest-hit families—be it in agriculture itself or in tourism and ancillary industries. May we have an immediate statement from the Secretary of State for Social Security on the steps to be taken by the Benefits Agency and on the introduction of flexibility in the system to cater for the problem?

I especially draw the right hon. Lady's attention to the fact that at least one regional newspaper, *The Western Morning News*, today felt it necessary to launch its own special relief fund to assist those families. It is organising "green welly day" on 30 March. Although many of us will support that, it really should not be left to the media to take such steps. Surely the national welfare state system should be providing the safety net for those families.

Mrs. Beckett: I am not entirely sure that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) meant to ask that Easter should be postponed, but I admit that

[Mrs. Beckett]

one sometimes receives the distinct impression from the Conservative Benches that the mood is "Stop the world, we want to get off".

The hon. Gentleman asks about a statement to be made by my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Macdonald. I was not aware of the announcement that had been made in the other Chamber, but I think that the statement will be made in fulfilment of an undertaking given by Lord Macdonald during debates in that House. Of course, we have held many extensive, thorough and well-attended debates on the matter in this place.

The hon. Gentleman asks about social security payments, especially with regard to the problems faced by families as a result of the impact of the foot and mouth crisis. Obviously, I take on board his remarks and will certainly draw them to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security, although I do not promise at present that my right hon. Friend will make a statement. However, if I heard the hon. Gentleman's final remarks correctly, he said that support for the families, and so on, should not be left to the media—and, of course, it is not. As I am sure that he and the House acknowledges, the Government are already making available hundreds of millions of pounds in a variety of ways, and we have said that we will continue to do what we can to tackle the impact of the crisis.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Will my right hon. Friend find time to discuss the Senior Salaries Review Body report on the office costs allowance? She will know that Members on both sides of the House and their staff have been waiting anxiously for that report. It is a very good one and goes some way to redress some of the difficulties that many hon. Members—and, more importantly, our staff, who are very loyal and dedicated—have with resources and the way in which we can finance them. Will some time be made available in the next couple of weeks to debate that very important issue?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the review body's report, but I would slightly take issue with him because he suggests that all hon. Members are aware of it. Not all hon. Members have followed such matters with the assiduity of my hon. Friend, who has long been a very effective campaigner on behalf of Members' staff. As the report was published less than a week ago, many Members may well not yet have had time to study and assimilate its contents, but, of course, I understand, and take very seriously, the point that he makes. The way in which the staff of the House and Members' staff work is what makes the House work, and most hon. Members recognise the debt that they owe to their staff, but I am not sure that they are yet ready to debate an issue that has been on the table for only a few days.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Leader of the House find time very soon for an urgent debate on the behaviour of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in relation to the report on Hollis Industries and the former Paymaster General, in view of the fact that the Secretary of State has claimed that he was not legally able to publish the contents of the report, because it was carried out under section 447 of the Companies Act 1985? Section 449, however, explicitly states that he may publish the information with the company's permission and that, even without that permission, he may publish it if doing so helps a public authority, designed by him, to fulfil its obligations. So what possible grounds are there for the Secretary of State to sue people who are making it clear that he held back that report and did not ask the former Paymaster General to come to the House to put the record right about the payment that he had received from Robert Maxwell? If he did not read the report and handed over the decisions to officials, what on earth is he there for?

Mrs. Beckett: That is a disgraceful remark from the right hon. Gentleman. I have not had the chance to consult my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the matter, but I understand that he was advised, by the permanent secretary at the Department, that it should be dealt with by others, not by himself. Under those circumstances, it is quite disgraceful for the right hon. Gentleman to say that my right hon. Friend should have insisted on dealing with the matter himself. I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman would have had much more to say about it, and done so much more fervently, if my right hon. Friend had insisted on overruling the advice of his permanent secretary.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend will know that the Standards and Privileges Committee will publish its report on amendments to the code of conduct tomorrow. Will she make time for a debate on those very important matters before the Easter recess, when many Opposition Members will be able to go on indefinite holiday, because there is a lot of misrepresentation in the press about the rules—indeed, there is some confusion in the House about them?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware that the Committee intended to publish its report tomorrow, and the House will be grateful to my hon. Friend for that information. Obviously, I shall, as always, take the report very seriously. I agree with my hon Friend's observations about the importance of the House carefully considering those matters, and I take heed of his request, but I cannot undertake to find time to debate the report in the next two weeks. However, if the report appears tomorrow, it will form part of the portfolio of matters that the House is being asked to consider.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Many Members wish to ask a question of the Leader of the House and only a limited amount of time is available in view of other business. Too much argument is creeping into the questions, so I ask hon. Members to be as brief as possible.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Is the Leader of the House aware that more than 170 Members have signed early-day motion 3 in my name?

[*That this House welcomes the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology's report on complementary and alternative medicine; notes the widespread and increasing use of complementary and alternative medicine in the UK; supports improved*

regulatory structures and the development of single voluntary regulatory bodies for complementary and alternative medicine professions; encourages conventional healthcare professions to develop clear guidelines on competence and training in complementary and alternative medicine disciplines; welcomes the recommendation that the NHS Research and Development Directorate and the Medical Research Council should allocate research funding to develop centres of excellence for conducting complementary and alternative medicine research; supports the provision of better information for the public on what works and what is safe; and urges complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, GPs and other health care professionals to exchange information and work together to provide an integrated system of healthcare which puts patients' needs first.]

It broadly supports the Lords report on complementary and alternative medicine. Will the right hon. Lady confirm or deny the rumours that the Government are about to publish their response to that report tomorrow or perhaps on Monday? Does she recognise the urgency of that response given that the recommendations on research—particularly that into homeopathy—have a bearing on the foot and mouth crisis? There is very strong anecdotal evidence that a remedy called borax can stop animals getting the disease. It is urgent that research is commissioned.

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of the great and serious interest that the hon. Gentleman takes in these matters. Again, I am not aware of the imminent publication to which he refers, but the recommendations that have been made are being considered carefully. I believe that a response is likely, but I am not aware of the precise time scale. I understand his point and will add it to the list of requests, but I cannot undertake to grant his request at the moment.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): May I refer to early-day motion 231, which stands in my name?

[*That this House is extremely concerned to learn that thousands of asbestos related disease sufferers and other industrial injury victims may be unable to claim compensation because the Iron Trades Insurers hived off the company's pre-1990 liabilities into a separate company registered as Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd that recently went into voluntary liquidation, suggesting that it may well have been launched with inadequate resources; and calls on the insurance industry to give an undertaking that it will settle all current claims not covered by the company's assets as well as those which arise in the future.*]

That motion and early-day motions 355 and 450, which also stand in my name, draw attention to the Iron Trades Holdings insurance scandal in which that company dumped its liabilities in Chester Street Holdings, leaving it with insufficient assets. In fact, the liquidator's initial report is that the assets represent only 5 per cent. of liabilities. If my right hon. Friend cannot provide me with a date for a debate on the insurance industry, will she draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer the need for the insurance industry to provide the certainty that all the victims of Iron Trades Holdings will receive their compensation in full? There is also a need for an independent inquiry into the scandal.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of the campaign that my hon. Friend and others have run on this matter. I understand and share their concerns that victims of such serious diseases should receive the compensation that is their due fairly and speedily. I will certainly draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, because my hon. Friend is right to suspect that I cannot find time for a debate on the subject in the near future. It is my understanding that the Policyholders Protection Board will deal with and meet the claims for compensation, but I will draw all my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of the Chancellor.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Yesterday afternoon, the Prime Minister said that he would give serious consideration to the case for postponing the local elections. As the Leader of the House has announced no such legislation, would the House be right to conclude that the local elections will go ahead as planned?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that I announced the business for the coming week and the provisional business for the following week. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said entirely properly that we are listening to the important representations that the Government are receiving on the matter. The right hon. Gentleman will know that those representations are not all one way and that the tourism industry has expressed increasingly strong concerns. The Government will have to consider the matter seriously, but the right hon. Gentleman will recall that, in peacetime, no Government have suspended local elections except for what some might regard as the unfortunate precedent when the noble Lady Thatcher suspended local elections when she intended to abolish the authority in question.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the educational implications of the case of Marjorie Evans, my constituent who was suspended as a head teacher for 18 months and has now returned to school with no evidence having been found against her? Does my right hon. Friend agree that the case raises a number of issues that relate to the way in which teachers deal with disruptive pupils and the way in which head teachers and teachers are disciplined?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important and powerful point that raises concerns that are shared across the House. Although, like the whole House, I am aware of the case, I admit that it had not struck me that it had dragged on for 18 months. I strongly share my hon. Friend's view that that can only be damaging to all concerned. I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the matter in the near future, but he might consider the opportunities offered by Westminster Hall. However, I certainly undertake to draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Does the right hon. Lady agree that it would be useful to let the House know that the Modernisation Committee, which she chairs and

[Sir Peter Emery]

on which I serve, is concerned about programming? Without breaching any confidentiality, can she confirm that the Committee is considering that issue?

Mrs. Beckett: The House might like to know that. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, the Committee shares some of the concerns identified. We recognise that there have been some successes, but also some problems. The Committee is considering that. However, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we should not prejudge those discussions.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on television programme funding? Channel 4 recently broadcast a programme called "Seven Days that Shook Britain". Although it was good, there were sinister and worrying undertones about the way in which it was produced. Cameras were placed in the homes of the main operators of the dispute before and during it and bugged telephone conversations were broadcast. I am concerned that funding might be received from companies to promote a dispute purely for the benefit of television.

Mrs. Beckett: I could not see that programme, but I heard that it was going to be shown. I was not aware that those who were engaged in the filming were party to the likelihood of a dispute before it occurred. I understand my hon. Friend's concern, but I fear that I cannot find time for a special debate on the matter. Perhaps he will find an opportunity to raise it in questions to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on Monday.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Further to the right hon. Lady's response to the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross), will she reconsider the SSRB report, which specifically states that the recommendation on computers and staff should be implemented before the next general election? Some 600 people might be employed by new Members and computer equipment worth hundreds of thousands of pounds—perhaps even £1 million—might legitimately be bought under the old system and transferred to them. However, we are planning to provide that equipment directly and centrally from public funds. Even if the right hon. Lady does not deal with the salary increases of Members, which is always controversial, I urge her to table a motion for debate next week or the week after so that the necessary arrangement is in place in case the Prime Minister decides to go to the country.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting and important point. He has long taken a great interest in the work of the Information Committee, which has given evidence several times to the review body. I must admit that I had forgotten that important aspect of the report. The body suggested, for the reasons that the right hon. Gentleman gives, that the decisions should, if possible, be taken before a general election. He is right to make it public that hon. Members should take account of the possibility that there might be some changes in the structure of IT provision. I cannot undertake to do what he asks, but I shall consider his request. In general, I am reluctant to separate aspects of a review body report, but he makes an important point.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Is my right hon. Friend aware that residents in tower blocks, such as my constituents in Little London, who regularly find drug dealers in the doorways and strangers on the stairwells, feel insecure in their homes? Will it be possible to find time for a debate on ways in which targeted help from Government might support local residents, housing managers, local authorities and the police in trying to tackle that serious problem?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. I think that we are all conscious of the difficulties faced by people in the circumstances that he describes, and concern for those who find themselves so placed is widely shared throughout the House. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the issue in the near future, but I certainly undertake to draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who, as he will know, is doing what he can with Ministers in other Departments to promote imaginative and cross-departmental programmes to produce exactly the kind of practical help to which he refers.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The right hon. Lady may be aware that some three weeks ago I was fortunate enough to obtain an Adjournment debate on the state of the national health service in east Kent, to which the Minister concerned gave a characteristically complacent reply. Yesterday, it became known that East Kent Hospitals NHS trust had commissioned its own report, which concluded, in respect of accident and emergency facilities:

> "It is remarkable that no major clinical catastrophe has occurred in recent times arising directly out of the clinical environment within which staff are operating."

In view of that direct rebuttal of the Minister's response, will the right hon. Lady arrange for the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House and make a statement on the current state of crisis in east Kent's hospitals?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman's concern on behalf of his constituents. I was not aware of the report to which he referred, but clearly it makes serious points. I am aware that there is long-standing concern about hospital provision in east Kent because I used to get letters about it before the general election. I fear that I cannot undertake to ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House to make a statement or to find time for a debate in the near future, but I certainly undertake to draw the report to his attention.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The Leader of the House has already been asked twice about the need for the Government to make an early response to the Senior Salaries Review Body, but I want to press her on the matter. Apart from anything else, arranging for the House of Commons to put in place new systems during a dissolution would be a massive advantage, enabling the new Parliament to start in an efficient, professional and organised way. Will the

Government be able to make a public response to the package of measures in the near future, and how long does the right hon. Lady think it will be before they decide whether to bring those measures to the House before the election?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot add anything further to what I have already said about timing, but I certainly take on board the hon. Gentleman's point. From my understanding of the report, I do not think that we should nurture the illusion that implementing the proposals would be easy and speedy, and that if there were a general election the whole IT system in the House would be transformed during the dissolution. The SSRB makes the point that there is a lot of work to be done and a new framework to be established, but of course I accept the point that Members elected to a new Parliament would need to know that a new system might be introduced.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we please have an urgent debate in Government time on the conditions at Winson Green jail in Birmingham, which have been described by the chief inspector of prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham, as some of the worst that he has ever seen? Given that the inspection of the prison found soiled mattresses, unemptied buckets and prisoners who were allowed out on association for only five hours a week, does the right hon. Lady agree that the fact of a £860,000 budget cut at the prison and no fewer than 300 recommendations for urgent reform makes it essential that we should have a proper debate on conditions that by any standard should be regarded as totally unacceptable in a civilised society?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the serious point that the hon. Gentleman makes. I am aware of the chief inspector's report, although from memory I believe that changes were made to the demands that were initially made of the prison for reductions in the budget. I seem to recall having seen a response from the Director-General of the Prison Service that made points about the way in which resources could be better used at the prison. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the issue in the near future, but I undertake to draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary the fact that concern about the matter has been expressed in the House.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): May I support the comments made by the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) about Iron Trades Holdings Ltd. and Chester Street Holdings Ltd.? I have a constituent, Mr. Donald McCreery, who is dying of asbestos-induced lung cancer: his prognosis is desperate—he will be dead within a very few months. He was awarded more than £100,000 in court as a result of contracting his illness following his employment, yet those two organisations have behaved in what I would describe as a fraudulent, dishonest and disgraceful fashion—maladministration is an understatement. Could the appropriate Minister come to the House to make a statement about what action the House can take in respect of the insurance industry, which is suffering as a result of that dreadful case, and what it can do to help those who deserve compensation?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful case. The whole House will sympathise with his constituent and the concern the hon. Gentleman expresses on his constituent's behalf. He asks what the House can do to draw attention to the issue, but, in a sense, he has already done that by raising it with me. I certainly undertake to draw it to the attention of the relevant Ministers, who I am sure are as anxious as he is to bring such matters to a speedy resolution.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we please have an urgent debate on the quality of the advice available to the Prime Minister? I saw the Prime Minister on television yesterday saying that his hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) had been "cleared" by the Standards and Privileges Committee in the matter of the complaints made against the hon. Gentleman, yet my reading of the report tells me that while eight complaints were indeed "Not upheld", eight were "Not completed" and one was "Upheld." The report also states:

"we have not found answers to all outstanding questions".

It strikes me that, for the right hon. Gentleman to say that his hon. Friend had been cleared, either he is receiving extremely poor advice from people who have read the report, or he somehow failed to understand the report himself. One way or another, we need a debate to winkle out whether the Prime Minister is badly advised or dyslexic.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman was not here last week when some of those issues were raised. I can only repeat what I said on that occasion. It is extremely important that the House has proper systems to ensure that there is no corruption, or that if there is, it is discovered and stamped out. However, it is also important to remember that every Member of Parliament is vulnerable to frivolous accusations, whether made for reasons of personal spite or political advantage. The House should treat such matters with great seriousness and care.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): May I welcome the debate that we are to have on Monday on the Adoption and Children Bill? The measure will command support throughout the House. Why have the Government changed their mind? I understood that the Bill was to have been produced in draft form for pre-legislative scrutiny. What has led to the change in the Government's plan?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his words of welcome for the Bill. I do not think that there was any recent decision to publish the Bill specifically in draft. As I have said before, the Government are mindful of the fact that this area of legislation is complex and in need of thorough overhaul, and that it involves difficult and sensitive issues on which there is no right answer, so the balance of decisions and the handling of legislation will always be important. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is right to say that there has been a recent change of approach to the matter.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is the right hon. Lady aware that the fourth anniversary, more or less, of the publication of the Labour party's manifesto to modernise the London underground by means of a public-private partnership is to be celebrated by a strike, which will cause still further inconvenience to many long-suffering users of the service? Is she further aware that on 1 February she promised that she would make it

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known as soon as a constructive end had been reached to the dialogue on the public-private partnership? What has gone wrong? Was the pledge fraudulent, or was there a glitch between the mayoralty, the Government and Mr. Kiley? The travelling public need to know.

Mrs. Beckett: I wish that Members would be more cautious about the way in which they fling around words such as "fraudulent".

Serious and detailed negotiations are continuing between the Government, Mr. Kiley and the mayor. I understand that the mayor has said recently that he is optimistic about progress. The Government are more than keen to see a resolution of the matter.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Lady will have heard the Prime Minister say yesterday that he is willing to consider representations on the propriety of holding local and other elections on 3 May. Would it not be a good way to inform the Prime Minister to have a debate on the subject next week? It would enable us to express our anxieties about, for example, farmers who are candidates or who wish to work in support of individual candidates, but are either confined to their farms or are in exclusion zones, and will thus be denied the opportunity to participate? All those affected should have the right to receive an application for a postal vote, so that they will not be deprived of the franchise?

Mrs. Beckett: Under legislation that the Government recently put on the statute book, everyone has the right to a postal vote. Although that is not why the change was made, undoubtedly the right to such a vote is beneficial in present circumstances. I can only repeat what I said earlier. Of course my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is considering extremely carefully the representations that he is receiving on this matter.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman will know that the advice to the farming community, as I understand it, is that provided proper and sensible precautions are taken, people are free to move from their farms. I remind him that the Government are receiving substantial and concerned representations, not least from the tourist industry and other businesses about the impact that the handling of the issue is already having on the economy as a whole. There is great concern in that industry and other businesses that the Government should not postpone local elections. There are weighty arguments on both sides.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): The right hon. Lady may be aware that my constituency resides under the approach flight path of Manchester airport. The airport is a great asset to the area, but many of my constituents suffer from aircraft noise, especially when planes stray from the designated flight path.

The right hon. Lady may also be aware that I have raised this matter throughout this Parliament, in the knowledge that Ministers, in letters to me, have made it clear that they would favour the introduction of regulations to allow airports such as Manchester to have the statutory power to fine airlines whose aircraft stray. Will she explain why the matter has not been brought before the House during this Parliament, despite Government support for the idea?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not armed with an off-the-cuff response. I think that the entire House understands the position facing the public and Members such as the hon. Gentleman whose constituencies contain airports. He will know that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has introduced a substantial amount of business during this Parliament. His proposal might not have found its way to the top of the Department's agenda, but I will draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Conservative Members know that the nation is over-taxed. It is sad, therefore, that in the next two weeks of business, the Leader of the House has not been able to announce the Second Reading of a Finance Bill. Has she considered the fact that the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, which enables the Government to raise revenue, is time-limited? If we do not have a Finance Bill soon, the Government will lose their power to raise a large amount of wholly unnecessary tax on the nation.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Government are well aware of the need to introduce the Finance Bill; no doubt, the Treasury will announce when it hopes to be able do so in due course. The right hon. Gentleman may claim that the country is over-taxed, but, within the memory of ever Member, the Government have lowered rates for personal taxation and business taxation.

I understand that the shadow Chancellor made some proposals today whereby, if for some extraordinary reason the Conservatives were elected, they propose to do what they never managed to do during their last period in government—change the way in which the top rate of tax bites. I am also aware that the shadow Chancellor is quoted as having said that he did not choose to specialise in maths at school, and that it was not one of his favourite subjects. All that I can say is that it shows.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The Leader of the House said that Bills are already coming back from the other place. We have one of the lightest legislative programmes in recent history and Bills have been rigidly timetabled. Assuming for a moment that the Government do not hold an election because of the foot and mouth crisis, will the Leader of the House share with us her plans for the Session until next October? The Government are concerned primarily with the good workings of Parliament, not general elections, popularity and things like that. I know that the Leader of the House will have a wallchart in her office showing how Bills will progress through Parliament in the coming months. Will she assure the House that there is work for us to do until next October?

Mrs. Beckett: I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that with absolute confidence. I try very hard to educate Opposition Members to check their statistics before they repeatedly make assertions. In the previous Session, they asserted that the legislative programme was the heaviest in history, which was rubbish. Now the tune seems to

have changed and we have the lightest legislative programme in history, which is also rubbish. We have a perfectly normal and adequate legislative programme, which we believe can be well managed in the House. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have plenty of business to keep us going until next autumn.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Do the Government intend to introduce a Bill before Easter to amend the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, thus legitimising millions of pounds worth of Labour election literature that is currently illegal because it has an illegal imprint?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that concerns have been expressed, although my impression is that those who would have the biggest bill if that goes wrong would be the Conservatives.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): No, it would be you.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is being optimistic. I am aware that concerns have been expressed and the Government are looking at the matter to see what, if anything, needs to be done.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It has been estimated that the foot and mouth crisis will cost the economy more than £9 billion in the coming year. That loss will fall disproportionately on rural businesses and country towns. Following yesterday's debate on the disease, it is obvious that things are going to get worse. Businesses involved in activities outside agriculture such as haulage, equestrianism and consultancy are now experiencing a catastrophic drop in turnover. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition proposed an imaginative scheme for loans of £10,000 to afflicted businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) has kindly been granted a one-and-a-half hour debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday. Could that be upgraded to a full day's debate so that we can discuss the national crisis properly?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not think that anyone could argue that the House has not discussed the issue properly. We are discussing it repeatedly and at length, and it is right and proper that we should. The hon. Gentleman made a point with which no Member would quarrel: the impact of the crisis will be substantial and expensive. However, he may be slightly in error. I understand why he thinks that, initially, the effect on rural businesses may be disproportionate, but as he may have heard in the House yesterday—I understand that it continues to be the case—there is already a substantial impact in areas where there is no cause whatever for it. I believe that the city of Bath was mentioned; in London, I understand that takings are substantially down at the London Eye, Madame Tussaud's and other such attractions. Although rural businesses are bound to be affected and everyone is conscious of that, the crisis is having an effect on the whole economy.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister indicated to the Leader of the Opposition that we would look at any proposals that are submitted. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) will know that issues are being considered along the lines of the Conservative proposals which we hope will be even more effective. The Government have already spent substantial sums—millions of pounds—and continue to expect to do so.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Twelve months after the Government were condemned by the Commissioner for Public Appointments for their systematic politicisation of the national health service, the commissioner has now felt it necessary to bring in independent auditors to investigate the fact that that practice has continued unchanged in appointments to primary care trusts. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on the Government's failure to observe the Nolan rules on public appointments in the national health service?

Mrs. Beckett: The Government have not failed to follow the rules. We follow the Nolan procedures implemented by the Conservative party. It is a source of slight regret to me that the hon. Gentleman continues to condemn procedures that have ensured the appointment to health boards of far more women and people from minority communities.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): This week, the Environment Sub-Committee published its report on sustainable waste management. In view of the Government's gyrations in their policy on incinerators, which have caused a spate of speculative applications and have been a source of disquiet in many communities, including that in Guildford, may we have an urgent debate on incineration policy? Will the Government consider the Conservative proposal for a moratorium to ensure that the many questions about incinerators can be sorted out?

Mrs. Beckett: Yet again, the Opposition react opportunistically by proposing steps that they would never have thought of taking when they were in government. I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a special extra debate on the matter to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and I do not accept his animadversions on the Government's approach. I announced a Westminster Hall debate on renewable energy. With a little ingenuity—which has occasionally been demonstrated by Opposition Members—the hon. Gentleman might manage to work his concerns into that debate.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the right hon. Lady make time next week for a debate to discuss compensation for the consequential loss suffered by farmers who are caught by form D and exclusion zones? As such farmers are unable to move any of their animals, they have not had any income for almost six weeks and are living hand to mouth. With the greatest respect, I do not think that the package that the Government have so far proposed does anything like enough to keep those people in business.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot undertake to find time for a further special debate on that issue, although I recognise the gravity of case that the hon. Lady makes. However, I can undertake to draw her specific point to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture.

Points of Order

1.22 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In response to comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) about the problem of aircraft deviating from approved take-off and landing paths, the Leader of the House may inadvertently have misled the House. She said that she was not sure why it had been impossible to bring measures before the House, and suggested that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions might have been too busy to do so during the current Session. I tabled an amendment to the Transport Bill that would have ensured such provision, but it was not possible to debate it because of a Government programme motion.

Mr. Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. It has come to my attention that in the Budget debate on 13 March, column 902 of *Hansard*, I suffered a slip of the tongue and referred to "all" rather than to "many" schools in my constituency. I am grateful for the opportunity to make any necessary correction.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for that point of order.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I think that the hon. Lady said that she had visited all the schools in her constituency twice in the past year. It is a pity that she did not read the daily *Hansard* and correct the record immediately after the event. I know that her comments have created a lot consternation in her constituency.

Mr. Speaker: I think that it was very nice of the hon. Lady to correct her comments now.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Consolidated Fund Act 2001

Capital Allowances Act 2001

Alliance & Leicester Group Treasury plc (Transfer) Act 2001

Colchester Borough Council Act 2001

Orders of the Day

Election of a Speaker

Mr. Speaker: We now come to the main business, which will continue until 4 o'clock. I have selected the amendment in the name of the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, and the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). I may have to declare an interest in the matter!

1.24 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That—

(1) This House approves the recommendations contained in the Second Report of the Procedure Committee, Session 2000-01, Election of a Speaker (House of Commons Paper No. 40) relating to the election of a Speaker.

(2) Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker) be amended by leaving out paragraph (4); and the title of the Standing Order shall be 'Election of the Speaker: Member presiding'; and

(3) The following new Standing Orders No. 1A (Re-election of former Speaker) and No. 1B (Election of Speaker by secret ballot) be made:

Re-election of former Speaker

1A. (1) If at the commencement of a Parliament the Member who was Speaker at the dissolution of the previous Parliament is returned to the House, the Member presiding in accordance with Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker: Member presiding) shall, when the House meets to proceed with the choice of a Speaker, ascertain whether the former Speaker is willing to be chosen as Speaker, and, the former Speaker having submitted himself to the House, shall call upon a Member to move that he do take the Chair of this House as Speaker; and the question thereon shall be put forthwith.

(2) If the question is agreed to, the former Speaker shall thereupon take the Chair as Speaker-elect.

(3) If the question is negatived, the Member presiding shall forthwith adjourn the House to the following day at half-past Two o'clock, and the House shall proceed in accordance with Standing Order No. 1B (Election of Speaker by secret ballot).

Election of Speaker by secret ballot

1B. (1) If the question put in accordance with Standing Order No. 1A (Re-election of former Speaker) has been negatived, and on any other occasion when it is necessary to proceed with the choice of a new Speaker, the election shall be by secret ballot.

(2) Preparatory arrangements for a ballot shall be made under the supervision of the Clerk of the House.

(3) (a) Nominations of candidates shall be in writing and shall be received by the Clerk of the House between half-past Nine o'clock and half-past Ten o'clock in the morning on the day on which the House is to elect a Speaker.

(b) Each nomination shall consist of a signed statement made by the candidate declaring his willingness to stand for election accompanied by the signatures of not fewer than twelve nor more than fifteen Members, of whom not fewer than three shall be Members elected to the House as members of any party other than that to which the candidate belongs or members of no party. No Member shall sign more than one such statement and if any Member does so, his signature shall no longer be valid.

(c) As soon as practicable following the close of nominations, lists of the candidates shall be placed in the Members' lobby and published.

(4) If only one Member is nominated in accordance with paragraph (3) above, the Member presiding shall, when the House meets to elect a Speaker, invite the Member so nominated to submit himself to the House, and shall then put forthwith the question that that Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(5) Paragraphs (6) to (13) of this Order shall apply if two or more Members are nominated in accordance with paragraph (3) above.

(6) When the House meets, the order in which candidates may address the House shall be determined by lot; the Member presiding shall then invite each candidate to address the House; and after all candidates have been given an opportunity to speak, the Member presiding shall direct the House to proceed to a ballot.

(7) The Member presiding may not vote in any ballot.

(8) (a) A ballot shall take place in the lobbies unless the Member presiding directs otherwise.

(b) Each Member intending to vote shall be provided with a ballot paper bearing the names of the candidates listed in alphabetical order.

(c) Each such Member may vote for only one candidate on the ballot paper.

(d) A ballot shall be declared closed after the expiration of half an hour and counting shall take place under arrangements made by the Clerk of the House.

(e) The Member presiding shall have discretion to vary the timings given in this Order and power to give final directions on any matter of doubt arising from the conduct of a ballot or from an individual ballot paper.

(9) As soon as practicable after the votes have been counted the Member presiding shall announce to the House the numbers of votes cast for each candidate.

(10) If a candidate has received more than half the votes cast in a ballot, the Member presiding shall forthwith put the question that that Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(11) If no candidate has received more than half the votes cast in a ballot the Member presiding shall direct the House to proceed forthwith to a further ballot to which paragraph (12) below shall apply.

(12) In any further ballot no new nominations may be received and the names of—

(a) the candidate who received the fewest votes in the previous ballot;

(b) any candidate who received less than five per cent. of the votes cast in the previous ballot; and

(c) any candidate who, within ten minutes of the announcement in the House of the result of the previous ballot, shall have notified the Member presiding of his intention to withdraw,

shall be removed from the ballot paper, except that where two or more candidates received the same number of votes, their names shall remain on the ballot paper unless paragraph (b) applies.

(13) If the effect of paragraph (12) above is to remove from the ballot paper the name of every candidate except one, the Member presiding shall forthwith put the question that that Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(14) (a) Notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Orders Nos. 10 (Wednesday sittings) and 11 (Friday sittings), on any day on which the House meets to elect a Speaker, it shall meet at half-past Two o'clock.

(b) No amendment may be offered to the question that a Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(c) If that question is agreed to, that Member shall thereupon take the Chair as Speaker-elect.

(d) If that question is negatived, the Member presiding shall forthwith adjourn the House to the following day at half-past Two o'clock, and the provisions of paragraph (3) above shall apply in respect of a fresh ballot.

Before I address the motion, I want to do what I think is proper and express publicly our thanks. First, our thanks are due to the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who weathered the storms around the recent election of Speaker with such good sense and aplomb that several hon. Members gave substantive evidence to the Procedure Committee in support of the current system, despite the widespread anxiety that was expressed at the time. It is also worth noting the conclusion of the Committee's report, with which I believe all hon. Members will agree. It states

"that the outcome of the election on 23 October 2000 would have been the same regardless of the particular electoral system employed".

Secondly, our thanks are due to the Procedure Committee, which examined the procedures for election of Speaker with thoroughness and dispatch, and produced a report which, I believe, provides the basis for a potential new system, which might avoid the anxieties that were expressed about our previous method.

Let me stress at once that the motion has been tabled in my name simply to allow the House to reach a decision on the recommendations of the Procedure Committee, as has the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary. I shall deal with that shortly. The motion and the amendment have been drawn up with the assistance of the Clerks. The detailed process of drafting has, as is often the case, created the need for minor amendment and to expand the Committee's precise recommendations, so that the Standing Orders do, in some places, flesh out the detail of the Committee's recommendations. I believe that the Committee expected that. We have been greatly assisted by the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who has been consulted on our detailed interpretation of the recommendations.

There is no Government position on the issue, just as there was no Government position on the election of a Speaker. It is a House of Commons matter and Labour Members are not subject to any party Whip.

The first part of the motion simply approves the recommendations that the Procedure Committee made about the election of a Speaker. They include matters that probably cannot adequately be put into Standing Orders, but should nevertheless guide the House in future. For example, the Committee noted that it perceived no need for hustings or manifestos, but did not recommend their formal prohibition. It deprecated strident campaigning and noted that it should be possible to carry out the whole electoral process in a single sitting day. Those are important guidelines, which should be put on the record, but they need not be written into Standing Orders.

The second paragraph of the motion provides for leaving out paragraph (4) of existing Standing Order No. 1. That paragraph sets out our existing procedures for electing a Speaker. The rules about who should preside over any election, and the powers that they should exercise, are left unchanged.

The meat of the motion is in the two new Standing Orders proposed under paragraph (3). The first, entitled "Re-election of former Speaker", simply provides that if the Speaker in the previous Parliament is re-elected to the Commons, the House should, at the beginning of the Parliament, be given the opportunity to re-elect him or her

[Mrs. Margaret Beckett]

by acclamation. That has been the long-standing tradition of the House, and I would expect it to be maintained in all but the rarest circumstances. That was also the Procedure Committee's view. The Standing Order provides that the question on re-election should be put forthwith. It is my view, and I understand that it is shared by the hon. Member for Macclesfield, that that should emphasise the formality of the procedure.

However, it is conceivable, although always extremely unlikely, that a previous Speaker might no longer be acceptable to the House. In that rare case, and in all other cases when a new Speaker is elected, the procedure in the second proposed Standing Order for the election of a Speaker would come into play. I want to highlight one or two details in it.

The report recommends that each nomination should be accompanied by 12 signatures. It does not suggest what should happen if an hon. Member signs two candidates' nominations. It seems to have been intended that the signature of any hon. Member who signed twice should properly be disregarded. Again, that was confirmed by the Chairman of the Procedure Committee. However, there was no wish for candidates to be disqualified through no fault of their own but as a result of a duplication of signatures. The draft Standing Order therefore specifies that nominations may contain up to 15 signatures. That gives some room for manoeuvre. It is the Committee's view that the nominations should not be publicly revealed. That is not written into the Standing Orders, but it would be covered by the House's general endorsement of the Committee's proposals.

Paragraph (6) provides that the order in which candidates address the House should be determined by lot in the House, to ensure that the process is as transparent as possible. After that draw, each candidate will, as the Procedure Committee recommended, be given the opportunity to address the House before the ballot takes place.

Paragraph (7) provides that the presiding Member will not have a vote in any ballot, just as at present.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I was very pleased to see the provision in paragraph (6) of the proposed Standing Order, because when my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) had a meeting in Committee Room 14, at which all the candidates were asked to speak, albeit only briefly, the proceedings were criticised for perhaps providing a hostage to fortune in trying to get votes for the candidature. I was asked to be the chairman and, having considered the matter, I thought that holding such a meeting was a sensible thing to do, and that if any candidate were to go beyond what was expected of a Speaker, it would be to their disadvantage—and so it proved.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my right hon. Friend took part in those procedures. One of the concerns that was expressed—I speak from memory—on at least the previous two occasions of a Speaker's election, was that under our former procedures it was not necessarily the case that every potential candidate was heard. I know that that was part of the difficulty that my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) was seeking to overcome in the procedure to which my right hon. Friend referred. I think that it is one of the virtues of the proposals of the Procedure Committee that such a procedure would now allow all potential candidates to address the House without any being excluded.

The concern is for transparency and fairness in these procedures. Paragraphs (8) to (13) set out the provisions for an exhaustive ballot. Paragraph (14) sets out the general principles that the House should meet at 2.30 pm on any day on which it is to elect a Speaker; that the question that a Member becomes Speaker shall be unamendable, as the Procedure Committee suggested; and that, in the unlikely event—one hopes—of the House rejecting the Member who comes top of the ballot, the whole process will be repeated on the following day.

I turn finally to the amendment tabled separately in the name of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary. The Procedure Committee recommended that the House should be given the opportunity to decide whether the ballot for the Speaker should be open or secret. The Government have tabled the amendment to ensure that the House has the opportunity to make that decision. I recognise there are strong, genuine arguments on both sides. This is a matter on which there are bound to be legitimate differences of opinion.

The Committee considered, on balance, that the ballot should be secret and that is why that provision is in the substantive motion. However, I stress that it is for the House to decide, and the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary enables that choice to be made by giving the House something on which to vote.

I conclude by repeating that the Procedure Committee has done an excellent job, and done it as speedily and effectively as anybody could possibly have wished. I believe that this has given the House an opportunity to change our system for electing the Speaker if we so choose, but it is for the House to choose. I commend the motion to the House.

1.33 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I join the Leader of the House in paying tribute to the Procedure Committee. Its report is comprehensive and has been put before the House in good time, before the Easter recess. I would like to say how much I appreciated the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee. It took wide-ranging evidence, and that has helped to steer the direction in which the report has gone.

I would like to put on record the fact that the evidence that I gave to the Committee drew on certain themes that were of importance to a broad spectrum of Conservative Members, but I also made it clear when I was giving my own personal opinion. None the less, I am pleased to see that many of the recommendations of the Procedure Committee have focused on issues that were of broad concern to hon. Members. When we debate across the Floor of the House, particularly when the right hon. Lady and I speak from the Dispatch Box, what we mean by modernisation of the House is often misunderstood—but considering the rules for electing a Speaker is a most appropriate subject, and is certainly in line with what I regard as modernisation.

As the Leader of the House said again today, this debate will focus on House matters. Individual Members of Parliament will be able to have a say in how we shape, form and reform our structures and proceedings—and none of those is more important than the position that you hold, Mr. Speaker. I hope that later we will engage in further discussions about the powers of the Speaker. Personally, I would like the Speaker to be able to support us even more in holding the Executive to account. Perhaps the Procedure Committee will consider that in due course, as the next stage.

The debate is important and timely. I do not intend to go through the detail again, as the right hon. Lady has given a good summary of the report, which also contains the record of all the oral evidence we gave. This is a matter for individual Members. It should be appreciated that what was once considered to be the province of what are euphemistically called the usual channels, which held so much power, is being challenged. That is what the report does. It has been put on the record that we should look into many aspects of our procedures, particularly how we decide who should be brought forward as a suitable candidate for Speaker.

I suppose that I now have to regard myself as part of the usual channels, but I have been doing the job for only six or seven months, and I still find it a strange job in some respects. Indeed, it took me about four months before I stopped calling the usual channels "the other channels".

The more transparency there is, and the more Members can challenge what happens, the more I welcome it. It is important that there be a clear record of decision making, especially in important matters such as the election of a Speaker, and that Members should be able to participate rather than leaving things up to the usual channels. I respect and recognise that as modernisation, even if I am critical of some other aspects of modernisation that are brought before the House.

1.37 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I begin by thanking the Leader of the House very much for her kind remarks about the Procedure Committee's report. Indeed, I would go further and thank her for her tremendous helpfulness throughout the inquiry. She gave excellent evidence to the Procedure Committee, and I appreciate personally, as does my Committee, the speed with which she has arranged today's debate.

The right hon. Lady was courteous enough to let me, on behalf of my Committee, see a draft of the new Standing Orders, and to adopt some of the changes that I suggested, also on behalf of the Committee. I am happy with the text of the Standing Orders, which embodies the Committee's recommendations well.

I thank my colleagues on the Committee, some of whom are here today, for their work and support, and for the dedication that they put into producing the report. I say openly that we worked very well as a team on the inquiry; such an inquiry shows how Members from all parties can work well together to produce a report that will improve the procedures of the House.

The subject was sensitive and complex, and we were working to a tight schedule. None the less, we reached consensus on almost all our conclusions, and agreed the report at a single meeting. The Leader of the House has given a very fair summary of the contents of our report, and I shall not take up the time of the House by repeating that. The report sets out its arguments clearly, and I shall simply make a few comments arising from the inquiry.

The Procedure Committee carried out the inquiry because it was the clear wish of the House that we should do so. As we say in the report, there was a lot of unhappiness among Members about the way in which our procedures operated last October. A review was obviously necessary and it was important that we consult as widely as possible within the House.

As the Chairman of the Committee, I wrote to all hon. Members and received 130 replies. Within the constraints of our timetable, the Committee also took oral evidence from as wide a cross-section of hon. Members as possible. A number of the hon. Members who gave that evidence are in the House today, hoping to participate in the debate—and I hope that they do.

We went into the inquiry with an open mind. The report sets out the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the existing system. We certainly did not feel that all the criticisms of that system were justified. Many of the comments made in the press were simply what I would describe as the product of sloppy and malicious journalism of a kind that is now regrettably all to common in the field of parliamentary reporting.

In particular, we concluded that it was wrong to criticise the procedures because of the length of time that it took to choose a Speaker. The decision is a very important one. It is made only once every seven or eight years. It matters more to get it right than to do it quickly. Many Parliaments around the world take an equivalent amount of time to choose their presiding officers. In fact, only some seven weeks ago, our sister House of Commons in Canada took four and half hours to elect its new Speaker, using a system based on a secret ballot.

We also supported the decision of the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), not to accept the motion tabled by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). Although that was not a popular decision—and we say in the report that we understand the frustration that it caused—it was right in procedural terms. My right hon. Friend had no alternative.

However, we conclude that the existing procedures are unsatisfactory. That is not because they were wrong when they were drafted, which was as recently as the 1970s, but because the House has changed since then. For many years, the House was content to let the usual channels referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning)—and in particular the Government—make the running in choosing a Speaker. Even if the leaderships of the Government and Opposition parties disagreed over the choice, as happened occasionally, the House was still presented with a choice between only two candidates.

We should be careful not to be too scathing about that arrangement. The report describes it as being based on "benevolent paternalism"—a phrase that I use carefully. It is striking that, when the chairman of the parliamentary Labour party gave evidence to the Procedure Committee in 1971, he was content that the Government should put forward a candidate for the Chair—even though the Government of the time were Conservative. Under the old

[Mr. Nicholas Winterton]

system, there was usually a genuine attempt by Government to pick a candidate who would be broadly acceptable to the House

We can also judge the system by its results. Over the years, the House has had many fine and distinguished Speakers, so the system by which they were chosen cannot have been all that bad. However, Governments have not always been successful in reading the mood of the House, or in predicting what Back-Bench Members would find acceptable.

In the report, we show that there is another tradition that runs back through the centuries—a healthy suspicion by the House of candidates whose links with Government are too strong. That attitude has grown in strength in the past 20 or 30 years. We have now reached a situation where not one of our witnesses was prepared to support any involvement at all by the usual channels—the party machines—in the process of choosing a Speaker. It follows that the traditional system of sifting out candidates to leave the House with a choice of only one or two has broken down.

That became obvious last October when 12 candidates, myself included, stood for election. The current voting system was not devised or designed for such a situation. We do not mince our words about this in the report. We say that in a multi-candidate election, the current rules are unfair because the order in which the names are put forward before the House may help to determine the outcome. The election last October disguised that because the size of the winning candidate's majority—your own, Mr. Speaker—meant that all other candidates were easily beaten. So the order in which the House decided upon them was, in that instance, irrelevant. In other circumstances, that might not be the case.

The Committee gave serious consideration to the proposal by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), the former chairman of the Procedure Committee, to modify the existing system. However, we decided that although it was a valiant attempt, it ultimately failed to address the criticisms that had been levelled at the system, and that root-and-branch reform was therefore necessary.

We agreed that the existing system, in the circumstances of a multi-candidate election, was unfair, at least potentially, and should be replaced. We had no difficulty in concluding that its replacement should be a ballot-based system. That was the logical, obvious alternative. We did, however, have divided views on two questions relating to the operation of the ballot.

The question of whether the ballot should be open or secret raises important issues of principle. A majority on the Committee concluded that the ballot should be secret, as is the case in similar elections in most of the major Parliaments in the Westminster tradition. A minority of colleagues, I have to confess, dissented, and although they did not formally divide the Committee, we felt that it was right to recommend that the House should have an opportunity to make a separate decision on that point. The amendment in the name of the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office will enable the House to do that, and I am grateful to the Leader of the House and her ministerial colleague for allowing that to happen.

The other issue on which there was a difference of views within the Committee was the voting system itself. The choice was between the exhaustive ballot and the alternative vote. Both were recommended by the Electoral Reform Society as suitable systems by which to elect a Speaker. The arguments for and against each are well set out in the report, and even more fully in the evidence from the Electoral Reform Society, printed with the report. My preference—which was shared, I am pleased to say, by a majority of the Committee—was for the exhaustive ballot.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Hear, hear. Quite right.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support from a sedentary position.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Noise does not carry the day.

Mr. Winterton: My right hon. Friend rightly says that noise does not carry the day. Despite my preference, I think that both systems—the exhaustive ballot and the alternative vote—would function satisfactorily.

We considered whether there should be a run-off, according to the existing rules, after the ballot. We decided that there was little point. The ballot would give a decisive result, while a run-off would add nothing and might lead to confusion or an erosion of the legitimacy of the ballot.

Even with this radical proposal, some of the elements of the existing system will be retained. For instance—and I address this remark specifically to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon—the Father of the House will normally preside over the proceedings.

Sir Peter Emery: Is that in the Standing Order, or is it just my hon. Friend's wish?

Mr. Winterton: It is the wish of the Committee on whose behalf I am speaking today. I am outlining and stressing that wish in my remarks. I repeat that the Father of the House will normally preside over the proceedings. There will still be an opportunity for congratulatory speeches after the election and for some of the ceremonial surrounding the election to be retained.

We recommend that there is one set of special circumstances in which there should not be an automatic ballot. That is when a sitting Speaker seeks re-election to the Chair after a general election. As we show in the historical section of the report—which is a valuable part of it—there has been a strong convention for many years that in those circumstances, a sitting Speaker is not challenged.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I should be interested to hear my hon. Friend's comments on that section of the report, in particular in the following respect. It is clear that, for the election of a new Speaker, the nomination system that the Committee has proposed requires a degree of cross-party support. One could envisage circumstances—this may have happened although it may not have been clear because no nomination system existed—in which such support did not exist. Should the House fetter the rights of a majority

of Members of Parliament to elect whom they want, and why does that not apply to the re-election of a former Speaker?

Mr. Winterton: As I develop my argument I think that my hon. Friend will realise that it is possible for the re-election of a sitting Speaker to be challenged, but the Committee and I, as its Chairman, do not believe that that is desirable. I will highlight that in a moment. We show in the historical section of the report that there is a strong convention that in such circumstances a sitting Speaker is not challenged. We support that convention and I hope that the House will also support it today.

I point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) that that convention helps to safeguard the office of Speaker against the politicisation that might follow if it were felt that a change in the composition of the House following a general election might lead to a change of Speaker. The new Standing Order provides that in those circumstances a single Question should be put to the House, "That the former Speaker do take the Chair." In theory, it would be possible to vote the motion down and to hold a ballot the following day, thus preserving the House's right to change its Speaker, but we think that that is highly unlikely to happen and that it would be undesirable if it did. I speak on behalf of the Committee as a whole in making those comments.

Among other issues, we considered the desirability of candidates campaigning, issuing manifestos or speaking at hustings meetings. Here, I must mention the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), whom I commend for his initiative at the last election, which enabled a number of the candidates, including me, to present themselves to a large number of Back Benchers and to be assessed on their suitability for this vital job. I found the experience exhilarating and the initiative taken by the hon. Gentleman served the House well.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I recall the hon. Gentleman at the hustings describing himself as a "traditionalist moderniser" and then correcting himself and saying that he was a "modernising traditionalist". Which is he?

Mr. Winterton: I think that I am the latter—a modernising traditionalist. I believe that many people in this Parliament have found me to be so and I am happy with that.

The broad conclusion of the Procedure Committee was that a limited amount of campaigning is only to be expected and, indeed, is healthy, but that it should be regulated by what we describe as the hallmark of this House, common sense. At the start of a Parliament, with many new Members in the House who will not know the candidates personally, it would be helpful to have some way of judging differences between candidates. We provided for candidates to make speeches in the Chamber before the ballot. That is probably the most effective form of hustings. However, we came to the conclusion that speeches by proposers and seconders—however good they may have been or might be—do not serve much useful purpose and should be discontinued.

There would be a danger if personal manifestos set out a detailed platform of policy commitments. The nature of the Speaker's office is such that he or she has to implement the policies decided by the House and its Committees. A new Speaker could be in an awkward position if it were known that he or she was personally opposed or dedicated to changing any of those policies which had been decided on by the House. That is not to say that candidates should not indicate their broad sympathy with certain policies, such as the modernisation of the House, which is widely talked about today, as the Leader of the House knows. My feeling is that any candidate who went too far down that road or indulged in over-frenetic campaigning would probably find it counter-productive. I think that that was the purport of the earlier intervention of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon).

We provide for a system of nomination, including the requirement that each candidate should have the support of at least 12 Members, three of whom do not belong to his or her party. We did not want to go too far in the direction of discouraging Members from standing, but we thought it reasonable that there should be a minimum threshold of eligibility. We set out a step-by-step proposal for a new system, but we have not attempted to prescribe every last detail.

Mr. Grieve: If I may, I will pick up on my previous point, the thrust of which I think my hon. Friend misunderstood. Will he clarify why he regards it as necessary to have cross-party support for the nomination for the speakership, when the decision must ultimately be taken in accordance with the majority view of the House? Could that not lead to a situation where there is a clear majority view of the House about who it wants as Speaker, but where, because of that mechanism, it is deprived of having the opportunity of that choice?

Mr. Winterton: My hon. Friend asks a hypothetical question. I do not believe that that situation will arise. Any serious candidate for the highest office of this House, that of Speaker, will always attract cross-party support. In my view and from 30 years' experience in this House, if appropriate representations are made by the individual concerned or those representing the interests of that individual, there will be absolutely no doubt whatever that such a candidate will receive cross-party support. To have merely three out of 12 Members not belonging to the candidate's party is modest indeed. It will be for the House authorities to work out the operational details of conducting a ballot within the clear framework established by the new Standing Orders.

Finally, the Committee comments on matters relating to tradition and ceremonial. We say that it should be up to the successful candidate whether he or she wishes to continue with the tradition of being dragged to the Chair. My view is that it is a pleasing piece of theatre with a serious message. It reminds us, as you know only too well, Mr. Speaker, that the new Speaker is taking over a heavy responsibility and may be called on to show courage in standing up to the Executive—perhaps not the physical courage that was needed in the past when after the Speaker's Chair could come the executioner's block, but certainly moral courage.

The Leader of the House said in evidence to us that the outcome was more important than the process. She was right. By that she meant that what mattered was that we continue to elect good, able, impartial Speakers who will defend the rights of this House and the people. Voting systems and Standing Orders are only a means to that end.

[Mr. Winterton]

I pay tribute again to my Committee for its work. Although it is somewhat unusual, I also wish to express appreciation on behalf of my Committee of the staff who helped us throughout this important inquiry. They undertook valuable work and were much appreciated by all the Committee's members. I hope that my Committee has put together a sensible package of proposals that will enable the right outcomes to be reached and so strengthen the speakership and the House of Commons. I hope that the House will support the proposals.

1.59 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I ask the indulgence of the House. This may be my last speech, so if I am out of order, Mr. Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to range widely.

I support the report of the Procedure Committee and the motion proposed by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. The report is scholarly and historical; it considers all the arguments. My only difference with it is over the question of a secret ballot. I have always understood that if one votes as oneself, it must be secret. Years ago, when I was canvassing in Bristol, I asked a woman to support me and she replied, "Mr. Benn, the ballet is secret". I thought of her dancing alone in the bedroom, where no candidate was allowed to know about it. However, when we vote in a representative capacity, people must know what we have done, so I shall vote for the amendment. The Committee has done very well. I hope that the House accepts the report.

The old system had serious difficulties. Although I disagreed strongly with the Father of the House, he carried out his duties with exceptional skill—with panache! I felt that he was the only Member of the House who could have turned the Beefeaters into a fighting force—he showed such passion and commitment to the rules. We got the Speaker we wanted and I hope that, as a result of today's proceedings, we shall get the system we want—the one that I advocated, as the House will recall.

As I have done on previous occasions—when we were electing a Speaker—I want to look a little more broadly at the role of the Speaker. Often, we tend to think of the Speaker in relation only to the Chamber, but the Speaker's role is of much wider importance. Relations between the legislature and the Executive go through the Speaker of the House.

We live in a strange country: we do not elect our head of state; we do not elect the second Chamber. We elect only this House, and even in this House enormous power is vested in the prerogatives. The Prime Minister can go to war without consulting us, sign treaties without consulting us, agree to laws in Brussels without consulting us and appoint bishops, peers and judges without consulting us. The role of the Speaker today compared with that of Mr. Speaker Lenthall is that you, Mr. Speaker, are protecting us from the triple powers of Buckingham palace, the Millbank tower and central office, which, in combination, represent as serious a challenge to our role.

Then there is the link between the Commons and the people. I have seen many schoolchildren taken around the House, and have talked to some of them about how it has been a home of democracy for hundreds of years. In 1832, only 2 per cent. of the population had the vote. That may seem a long time ago, but it was only 18 years before my grandfather was born. When I was born, women were not allowed the vote until they were 30. Democracy—input from the people—is very, very new. The link between popular consent and the decisions of the House can be tenuous.

Furthermore, nowadays, Parliament representing the will of the people has to cope with many extra-parliamentary forces—very threatening extra-parliamentary forces. I refer not to demonstrations, but to the power of the media, the power of the multinationals, the power of Brussels and the power of the World Trade Organisation—all wholly unelected people.

The House will forgive me for quoting myself, but in the course of my life I have developed five little democratic questions. If one meets a powerful person—Adolf Hitler, Joe Stalin or Bill Gates—ask them five questions: "What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you?" If you cannot get rid of the people who govern you, you do not live in a democratic system.

The role of the Speaker has another importance. When the political manifestos are yellowing in the public libraries, a good ruling from the Speaker in a footnote in "Erskine May" might turn out to be one of the guarantees of our liberty.

There are two ways of looking at Parliament. I have always thought that, from the beginning—from the model Parliament—the establishment has seen Parliament as a means of management: if there is a Parliament, people will not cause trouble, whereas, of course, the people see it as a means of representation. Those are two quite different concepts of what Parliament is about. The establishment wants to defuse opposition through Parliament; the people want to infuse Parliament with their hopes and aspirations.

I have put up several plaques—quite illegally, without permission; I screwed them up myself. One was in the broom cupboard to commemorate Emily Wilding Davison, and another celebrated the people who fought for democracy and those who run the House. If one walks around this place, one sees statues of people, not one of whom believed in democracy, votes for women or anything else. We have to be sure that we are a workshop and not a museum.

My next point, if I am not out of order, is that all progress comes, in my judgment, from outside the House. I am in no way an academic, but if I look back over history, I see many advances first advocated outside the House, denounced by people in power and then emerging. Let me use a couple of non-controversial examples. Twenty years ago, Swampy would have been denounced as a bearded weirdy; he will probably be in the next honours list, because the environmental movement has won. Similarly, when that madman, Hamilton, killed the children at Dunblane, the then Conservative Home Secretary banned handguns within six months, because public opinion had shifted. So we are the last place to get the message, and it is important that we should be connected effectively to public will.

There is a lot of talk about apathy, and it is a problem, but it is two sided. Governments can be apathetic about the people, as well as people being apathetic about Governments. For me, the test of an effective, democratic

Parliament is that we respond to what people feel in a way that makes us true representatives. The real danger to democracy is not that someone will burn Buckingham palace and run up the red flag, but that people will not vote. If people do not vote, they destroy, by neglect, the legitimacy of the Government who have been elected.

May I finish with a couple personal points? I first sat in the Gallery 64 years ago, and my family have been here since 1892—five of us in four generations, in three centuries—and I love the place. I am grateful to my constituents who have elected me. I am grateful to the Labour party, of which I am proud to be a member. I am grateful to the socialists, who have helped me to understand the world in which we live and who give me hope. I am also deeply grateful to the staff of the House—the Clerks, the policemen, the security staff, the Doorkeepers, librarians, *Hansard* and catering staff—who have made us welcome here.

May I finish, in order, by saying something about yourself, Mr. Speaker? In my opinion, you are the first Speaker who has remained a Back Bencher. You have moved the Speaker's Chair on to the Back Benches. You sit in the Tea Room with us. You are wholly impartial, but your roots are in the movement that sent you here, and you have given me one of the greatest privileges that I have ever had—the right to use the Tea Room and the Library after the election. Unless someone is a Member or a peer, he or she cannot use the Tea Room or the Library, but you have extended the rules by creating the title of "Freedom of the House", so that the Father of the House and I will be able to use the Tea Room. You will not be shot of us yet. I hope in paying you a warm tribute, Mr. Speaker, that you do not think that I am currying favour in the hope that I might be called to speak again because, I fear, that will not be possible.

2.7 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): It is great privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) in the debate. This is not the first occasion on which I have found myself, rather unexpectedly, agreeing with him. Indeed, the first time that I did so was when I canvassed for him, as a young Liberal, as did many of my colleagues, in that famous by-election in Bristol, when he demonstrated a commitment to democracy which we all admire.

I want to take up just one word from his very eloquent speech—"infusion". I am not referring to his favourite beverage, although I am sure that we will all welcome him back in the Tea Room after the general election. He has been an infusion of real-life democracy in the Chamber, which has not been as evident with many hon. Members in our own work here.

I, too, pay tribute to the Committee and, indeed, to its Chairman for the balanced way in which he has presented its report this afternoon. I particularly want to underline the fact that, throughout the report and the debate, it has been recognised that times have changed and that, whatever else we do, we must prevent such matters from slipping back into the hands of the usual channels. The election of a Speaker is a matter for the whole House.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield may recall that, on a previous occasion, I moved a motion stating that the power of the parties has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished. That is, of course, a reflection of the famous Dunning motion, moved in the House in the 1780s, which referred to the Crown. It is extremely important that the House owns the system by which the Speaker is elected and, thereby, shows that the speakership is in its ownership and under the control and influence of nobody else. That is why I take a slightly different view from the right hon. Gentleman about the ballot.

The election of the Speaker is an unusual ballot; it is not like a normal Division, when, as the right hon. Gentleman said, we are here in a representative capacity. However, on a matter of this sort, we do not act in that capacity; we are here as members of an institution saying how we as individual Members—and not the parties or external bodies—want it to be run. We all take part on a completely equal basis—none higher and none lower—and according to exactly the same terms. That is why, as I shall explain in a moment, I strongly support the proposal for a secret ballot.

The Parliamentary Secretary is a past master at getting things right, but his amendment appears to be somewhat defective. It refers only to line 28, when the word "secret" also appears in lines 24 and 25. No doubt, that can be corrected by the usual channels.

We are all here as individual Members and I am speaking in a personal capacity. However, I have undertaken extensive consultation with my Liberal Democrat colleagues in the parliamentary party, so I may refer to the fact that, on some matters I have the unanimous support of my colleagues.

First, I want to make a point of principle. The fact that an outcome is satisfactory and something that we all applaud and recognise as right does not necessarily mean that the route by which we reached that outcome was satisfactory. The fact that the successful candidate on 23 October was broadly welcomed in the House and is very acceptable—I am sure that, with the passage of time, more people have come to that view even if they did not take it at the time—does not mean that the process by which we came to that conclusion was satisfactory. I am grateful to those who gave evidence to the Committee and to the Committee itself for making that point so clearly in the report.

Nevertheless, it is also true that if we had had more time, it might have been possible to have made the inquiry more effective. It is curious to decide who one wants for a job before one writes the job specification. We would never interview someone without deciding what the job was for which we were interviewing him. I therefore regret the fact that it is not been possible, within the time constraints, for the Procedure Committee or any other Select Committee to examine the role of Speaker. I was grateful for the support that was given to that view by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning).

In a memorandum to the Committee and to the Modernisation Committee, we made suggestions for the modernisation of the role of Speaker as well of the process by which we choose from the candidates.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The Procedure Committee is very keen to undertake an inquiry into the role of Speaker. No doubt it will consider the subject in the next Parliament.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful for that assurance. When the time comes, I hope that we shall be given an opportunity

[Mr. Tyler]

to expand on the memorandum that already appears on pages 34 to 39 of the report. There is unfinished business, but I put it no more strongly than that. None the less, I pay tribute to the Committee for producing a report to enable the House to come to a decision before any possible election.

The Committee's report contains a persuasive argument for a secret ballot. The only possible argument against it—I have already referred to it—is that of precedent. However, this place is evolutionary and it would be a useful precedent to establish that there may, in exceptional circumstance, be a good case for a secret ballot—the exception proving the rule.

The point is not that the Speaker will examine the Division lists and think, "Ah, well, the hon. Member for Bolsover did not vote for me, so I'll make sure that he does not get in at business questions again." That is not the issue. I have complete faith in the integrity of the Chair; the problem is perception.

Mr. Speaker: Never hold a grudge against the hon. Member for Bolsover.

Mr. Tyler: I am sure that is true, and I hope that you, Mr. Speaker, and the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great affection, will not hold a grudge against me.

The point that I was about to make is not that the Speaker might examine the Division list, but that the Whips might. I am a member of the usual channels club, so I think that, on a matter of such importance, we should not know whether our colleagues have voted in one way or another. It might be very damaging to publish the list.

On the electoral system, the Chairman of the Committee very fairly set out the arguments for and against exhaustive ballots and the alternative vote. I regret that it is not been possible to put that choice before the House today. As the Chairman said, there was a balanced argument in Committee.

I am particularly disturbed by a paragraph in the report that compares the two systems. Paragraph 66 states:

"The Exhaustive Ballot has the advantage over AV that Members can amend their preferences in each round after the results of the previous round are known."

I do not regard that as an advantage. It is a disadvantage, because Members might run with the herd—we have all seen that happen. Indeed, those Members who are worried about tactical voting should examine very carefully that recommendation, because it is a recipe for tactical voting. Members might see which way the wind is blowing and vote tactically. One of the great advantages of the alternative vote is that it makes unnecessary any form of tactical voting.

It is true that the Committee tended to dilute the argument that one disadvantage of the exhaustive ballot is that it takes a long time. I accept that. I do not think that it is necessarily a disadvantage that the House should take its time in reaching a conclusion. Therefore, I take the Committee Chairman's advice on that.

I want to draw attention to the letter that the Bishop of Woolwich sent to the Committee. Although it did not appear in the report, it was circulated to Committee members and in it he spells out in full the advantages of the alternative vote. He writes:

"1. It does not matter how many candidates stand;

2. No candidate can 'split' a vote, or come under pressure not to stand because he or she might do so;

3. It does not matter if several candidates of the same view or outlook stand;

4. There is no possibility or need of the compromise known as 'tactical' voting;

5. It is possible to express all sorts of different kinds of preference within the preferential voting—e.g. party political ones, gender ones, geographical ones, individual personality ones;

6. No recrimination of any sort is possible afterwards as justice has been done and has been seen to be done, and can be checked out in the various stages of the counting."

The bishop then refers to the fact that not only the Church of England—quite a respectable body—but many political parties use the alternative vote for their internal elections. I regret, therefore, that we shall not have an opportunity to vote on that issue. My Liberal Democrat colleagues would all support the alternative vote.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's argument for the alternative vote, but why did he not table an amendment to that effect?

Mr. Tyler: That is a fair point. I stand reprimanded by the hon. Gentleman. I felt that it was important this afternoon to deal with the big issue of the secret ballot. I did not want to complicate matters by tabling an amendment. However, I draw the House's attention to the figures on page xxvii of the report, which show how many Members support the different types of voting. When I gave evidence to the Committee, I said that all Liberal Democrat Members should be included in the figures, but they have not been. Therefore the figures and the percentages in the report are wrong.

I am determined—I hope that the House will be—to get away from first past the post. It clearly is totally inadequate for the decision that we had to take last October and that we might need to take in future.

Page 34 of the report refers to Deputy Speakers. I hope that the Committee will move on to consider that issue, because the present arrangement is not satisfactory. It is no reflection on the current occupants of the post of Deputy Speaker—no complaint has been made against them—but the arrangement by which they emerge like a butterfly from a chrysalis without anyone knowing why, how or who made the decision is unsatisfactory. Not even a motion that is amendable or debatable is put before the House. I hope that that will change.

I return to the eloquent speech of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield. The flummery that follows the election of Speaker gives the impression that the decision is conditional on approval from up there in the other place or up there at the other end of the Mall. That must go; it is not right. It is proper for us to ask the other parts of the tripartite constitutional arrangement to acknowledge that we have taken a decision, but we do not want their approval. After the last election of Speaker, I was dumbfounded by the extraordinary way in which the British constitution finds it difficult to catch up.

On a personal note, I have no problem with the hustings and manifestos. I recognise that they have a purpose, but I have a substantial plea. It is in this Chamber that we make the decision: candidates make their case by addressing Members on equal terms. I hope that we will not move the centre of gravity to another part of the Palace where the manifesto is published or issued, or where people make hustings speeches. I have great pleasure in supporting the report's main recommendations because it brings the centre of gravity back to this place, where it belongs.

2.21 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I beg to move, in line 28, to leave out the word 'secret'.

May I say a word or two about the fine speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn)? I hope that it was not his last. As on so many occasions, he dwelt on the way in which democracy evolved in this country. Some illusions can be held about the fact that we lacked freedom and democracy for centuries. I have two responses to that. First, with all its imperfections, our democracy and House of Commons survived when many Parliaments in the last century did not because they gave up to fascism and tyranny.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend mentioned his family's long tradition of serving as Members of Parliament, and I am glad that his son will continue that for many years. However, those of us who come from a different background also recognise that this democracy attracted many people, including my ancestors. In the early years of the 20th century, when my grandparents wanted to live in a country where they could have security and safety, it was to this island that they came. Perhaps they did not see the imperfections in the same light as I did, because many years later I began to have left-wing views and have held them since. We need to make it clear that often over the centuries, long before my grandparents came here, this island provided safety and security for those who wanted to live their lives without tyranny.

I, too, congratulate the Procedure Committee on its inquiry, which was held after the election of the Speaker. It was conducted promptly and efficiently. I am glad that paragraph 42 rightly states that the criticism about the proceedings on 23 October was not justified. We did take seven hours, but that probably displeased the sketch writers because they like to be in the Gallery for only half an hour on a Wednesday. I see no reason why we should apologise for taking our time in doing the important job of electing a Speaker. There is no reason why anyone who stood for the job, including the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, should apologise. It is an honour to be in the Chair, as you have explained several times, Mr. Speaker, and we hold those hon. Members who wanted to occupy that position in no less respect.

I accept the thrust of the report. Even though I do not believe that the procedure was especially defective on 23 October, I have no illusions about the fact that the majority of hon. Members want to adopt a different system, much along the lines recommended by the Committee. On ballots, I am usually in favour of first past the post, but I accept that some processes, including the selection of Labour candidates, use other forms of balloting. Given the two choices, I believe that the exhaustive ballot should be used even though it will take more time. I do not think that we need to hurry things up unnecessarily.

I oppose, however, a secret ballot, but I do not want to exaggerate the problems associated with it. One Conservative Member who gave evidence to the Committee argued that if we have a secret ballot for the election of Speaker—which may well be the wish of the House—we might end up having them for other purposes. I do not accept that a secret ballot means that one, two or three years down the road we would be arguing for a secret ballot on policy matters.

I object to the principle of secret ballots, even for the election of the Speaker. Like other hon. Members, I take school parties around the House. In the No Lobby, I point out what was said in 1642 by the Speaker to the King. I also show them copies of *Hansard* and tell them that every word we utter in the House and every vote we cast is duly recorded. If they are primary school children, I usually get them to go through the procedure of voting. I also explain that if their parents write to me to ask how I voted and I want to mislead them for opportunistic reasons—which I would not dream of doing—all they need to do is go to the local library and check. We carry out our business in public.

I do not accept that a Speaker calls people on the basis of who voted for him or her. If the Speaker decides that that is a criterion for calling Members at Question Time or in debates, we have chosen the wrong person. In giving evidence, Lady Boothroyd said that she did not look at the voting list for her election for a year. Had she been so biased, I would have been safe because I voted for her in 1992.

Mr. Grieve: Would the hon. Gentleman have a different view if, in addition to the secret ballot, we had the Canadian system in which there is no announcement of the votes cast in the ballots? That removes tactical voting in the next round because people are simply told that the last person has dropped off the list.

Mr. Winnick: It is the principle of a secret ballot in the House of Commons to which I am opposed. If there are enough troops, I shall press my amendment to a vote and let us see how far we get.

I do not accept that pressure is put on Members to vote. Paragraph 55 explains that such pressure has often proved counter-productive. I am glad to hear it. If Members are subject to pressure when there is a free vote, then it is likely that the wrong people have been elected here. It is the principle that matters. All our votes need to be duly recorded even when we vote on an internal matter that is of little concern to constituents. Perhaps other hon. Members have received letters about what happened last October, but I have not. I want everything to be above board. Our votes on major and minor issues are recorded. That should be the case for all our actions, including the election of the Speaker.

My last point concerns the remarks of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). I hope that this will not be seen as in any way disrespectful to Her Majesty, but I find it distasteful and odd that in this day and age we require consent for the election of the Speaker. In many respects, it contradicts all that we say about 1642. I hope also that I will not be misunderstood when I say that I would be much happier if Black Rod, when he comes here, used the word "request", instead of "command", because that would demonstrate the authority of this

[Mr. Winnick]

House. I am concerned about other matters, although I know, Mr. Speaker, that you would not want me to stray from the subject of the debate. In this day and age, it is not necessary for someone to come here with a stick to give us a message from the Queen. Earlier today, you announced measures to which Her Majesty had given her Royal Assent, and there is no reason why you could not inform the House that a message had been duly received from the Queen.

Whichever party is in office, it is always keen to say that the country should modernise and restrictive practices should be stopped, but so many of our own restrictive practices continue. I know that some people say that it is not necessary to object to them, but they give an impression of the way in which we conduct our business. I refer to pantomime performances, such as my colleague coming in with a stick. At one time, the Whip concerned had to walk backwards and wear morning dress.

If we are to modernise—if one likes that term—the method for electing a Speaker, we should not be afraid, at the beginning of the 21st century, to bring our practices up to date so that those who look on do not say, "That's odd. What has it got to do with the way in which business should be conducted?" This is a serious place and we should conduct ourselves in a serious manner.

2.32 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and I have been here together for many years. Indeed, we started together at the Oxford Union way back just after the war, and the fact that we are both leaving at the next election brings back certain memories. I can think of no Member during that time who has won for himself as wide a reputation outside the House as he has done, and I pay tribute to him for the way in which he has achieved that. Much of the time, I disagree with him—I did so way back at Oxford and I do so even today. None the less, the reputation that he has been able to obtain deserves immense applause from hon. Members of all parties.

I will return to the right hon. Gentleman and the fact that he has stirred up this matter unnecessarily, but first I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, which I had the pleasure of chairing for 14 years. He has produced a thorough report, as we would expect of him, and made specific recommendations, most of which I disagree with.

As for the role of the Speaker, once a man or woman has been brought to the big Chair as Speaker of the House, they have the right to expect to be able to continue in that role irrespective of a general election, unless they commit some unforgivable nonsense. The Speaker can stand for re-election in their constituency, which they usually do as Speaker, and they are not normally properly opposed. It would be wrong if they could then arrive back in the House to find themselves knocked out of the Speaker's Chair, perhaps for no other reason than politics. What would happen then? Would that person sit on the Back Benches? That would be quite impossible. Presumably, they would have to go immediately to the House of Lords, but they may well not want to do that. That person will have given a great part of their life to being Speaker, and they have the right to expect the House to allow them to continue in office unless, as I said, they have made a remarkable error or committed a semi-criminal offence.

As Labour Members have said, the role of the Speaker has changed and continues to change. When the right hon. Member for Chesterfield and I first came to the House, the Speaker was like a High Court judge. One did not speak to him or see him socially. No one was ever invited to Speaker's House, and his role had no social aspect. The person who changed all that was Lord Thomas of Tonypandy, formerly George Thomas. He said that he could retain the respect of the House while being friendly with Members of Parliament on social occasions in Speaker's House, and he proved that that was true. The role of the Speaker in entertaining members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and visiting delegations enhances the role of the House itself. That should be encouraged, and I believe, Mr. Speaker, that you are moving in that direction most admirably.

Finally, I turn to an aspect of the Speaker's role which will become more important. It is becoming more difficult to hold the Executive to account in the House. In the past three or four years, developments have moved against the House, and that process needs to be stopped. We have to ensure that the power of Parliament is moved from No. 10 Downing street back into the Chamber. We will have to rely on the Speaker in different ways to try to ensure that that is brought about. You have the power, Mr. Speaker, to direct the Executive in certain ways and to ensure that the House is not done down or put to one side. We will have to rely on the person sitting in the big Chair to help the House to perform its role. The next Parliament will have to consider that matter most carefully.

On the proposals themselves, the idea that there is a general opinion among Members of Parliament that the current method of electing a Speaker is wrong was brought about by the excellent publicity that the right hon. Member for Chesterfield was able to obtain for the motion that he tabled and the lack of understanding of many of the newer Members who had never gone through the process of electing a Speaker. That had not happened for two Parliaments, so their incomprehension is hardly surprising. There was also a lack of understanding about the opaqueness that could exist in other systems, whereas the present system is absolutely open and could not be thought to be more democratic.

Every candidate has a supporter and a seconder who make a speech in their favour and the candidates themselves can make a speech. The House then votes on the candidates. How much more democratic can one get? To sweep that away for a system that is not proven is very strange indeed.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I believe that my right hon. Friend is inadvertently misleading the House. In fact, the old system—the system that we currently have—could result in a number of candidates for the office of Speaker not having an opportunity to speak as individuals and be heard by the House, and their proposers and seconders not having an opportunity to put their name forward. Uniquely, on the occasion of the last election of a Speaker, through the skill of our right hon. Friend the

Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), every candidate had that opportunity, but that has not been the case in the past.

Sir Peter Emery: My hon. Friend makes a procedural point. As he knows, I put to his Committee certain suggestions for simple alterations to the Standing Orders governing the proceedings of the House. If, under the old system, an amendment to the original motion is carried, that becomes a substantive motion and must be put to the House immediately, so that no further amendments can be made to the already amended motion. However, it is the simplest thing in the world to take the amended motion not as a substantive motion, but as an ordinary motion to which further amendment can be made. The resulting system could not be more democratic or more open.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Under our current system, a different test is applied to each candidate, depending where he or she appears in the order. That is why I think that the conclusion drawn by the Procedure Committee is a good one.

Sir Peter Emery: I have heard that argument and read it in the Committee report, but I see no proof that it is right. I see no reason why someone who wanted my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield to be Speaker could not have voted for another candidate and then returned to vote for my hon. Friend when his turn came. There is no proof that the order altered the result, as people have argued it did. Lady Boothroyd was not the first nominee, but the second; her name was carried and no one wished to stand against her, with the result that her name was carried unanimously from then on.

It is proposed that we change our system and adopt a voting structure whereby the House will make a decision using a method that we have never used before. I am concerned that if we go down that road there is a risk that in future, in respect of other amendments, we shall be tempted to drift towards the use of a similar system—a poll, rather than a vote—which would do great damage to the rules and procedures of the House. I am sorry that the Committee has decided to cast away the system that resulted in the election of the man whom the House wanted. No one disagrees with that statement. When we have a system that is so transparent and democratic, I am dubious about making change merely for its own sake.

I certainly oppose any vote being kept secret. The moment we have secret votes, a terrifying scenario arises wherein Members tell every candidate that he or she has their support. We have all seen that happen in Committees or heard it from people who have stood for office. They say, "I counted heads and was certain of the majority that I needed to get elected—but I didn't get elected! Isn't that strange?" In fact, the moment a secret vote is in the offing, people cease to be directly honest and are friendly to all the candidates, and when the results of a secret vote are made known, no one knows who has been telling the truth and who has not.

I am massively in favour of retaining the open vote. Every vote in the House of Commons is open. No vote is secret. Why should we adopt a secret ballot for the election of the Speaker? It is right that Members should be able to stand and say which candidate they support—on the most recent occasion, the candidates included my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), and the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin), who was eventually elected to the office of Speaker. The process should be as open to public gaze as every other aspect of the House's business.

Mr. Winnick: It is a principle.

Sir Peter Emery: I agree absolutely.

The remarks made by the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) hark back to a Procedure Committee report that was published when I was the Chairman and the hon. Member for Walsall, North was a member of that Committee. In that report, we stated specifically that the first thing that a Parliament should do on assembling is elect a Speaker. That is not meant as any criticism of the monarch—no one is a greater royalist than I. However, one can, while remaining a royalist, want the House to be what it is: the independent voice of the people, who have a right to elect who will be their Chairman or their Speaker.

Once we have done that, I do not mind traipsing down to the other place to tell them what we have done. That is fine—it is announcing what we have done, not asking permission to do it. I urge the current Leader of the House to point out to her successor, whoever that may be, that in future we must take the role of the Speaker into our own hands: it must be we who elect the Speaker, without needing any permission so to do.

2.47 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I read in the newspapers that it is quite likely that a few weeks from now we shall be campaigning in a general election. I look forward to doing so. When we campaign, we tell all the voters whom we encounter, whether by canvassing or in other ways, that they are sovereign, that they are wise and that their decision will determine the future of the country; yet in the report and in the debate, the electorate have no place. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said that the debate was about how we want this place to be run. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) said that we are debating an internal matter. That, in my view, is precisely what is wrong with the debate.

I have been a Member of Parliament for almost 31 years and I hope to continue for a good deal longer, but if there is anything that I dislike about the House, it is the smug club atmosphere that is cultivated here—the notion that this place is a gentleman's club and that debates such as this one, as distinct from party political debates, are conducted within some sort of cosy consensus. So far today, we have heard a very cosy debate—even when people have disagreed with each other, they have done so on a cosy basis. If this were not a Chamber televised throughout the nation for those who want to watch it, we might well this afternoon not be discussing how a great Parliament—the second oldest Parliament in the world—should be presided over. We might as well be discussing how a private club elects its president, because it is all about what goes on in this club. That is what the debate has been about so far.

There have been references to the electorate. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) mentioned the people. That was the sole reference to them. When my

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right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) referred to what goes on outside this place, so far as I could tell he was not referring to the views of the 45 million or so members of the electorate. Instead, he was referring to small pressure groups that make their wishes felt and attempt in various ways to persuade the House to veer away from the decisions that it makes as a political assembly.

I disagree strongly with the tenor of the report and its proposals. Most of all, I disagree with the motivations that lie behind it. Some members of the Procedure Committee have been in this place for a long time. They have been sucked into the club atmosphere, which can smother the place. I thought that many of the new members of the Committee had come to the House because they wanted to change things a great deal and make them absolutely different. I am dismayed that somehow they have been sucked into the vacuum of smug consensus. As I have said, that is one of the things that I dislike intensely about this place.

I do not mean that we cannot have good personal relationships with one another across the Floor and even, on occasions, within our parties. However, that is different from believing that we must not speak up and that we must not in any way disrupt the atmosphere when the House is at its best—which I suppose is what the debate so far will be described as—and on display. For me, it is not the House at its best; it is the House at its most deterring.

If there were two reasons why I would not seek re-election to this place, the first would be Virgin trains, which make my travelling to and from Manchester such an utter nightmare. The second would be the idea that the House is still some sort of gentlemen's organisation which reluctantly had to admit women and was smothered when a sixth of Members were part of the majority within the electorate.

I shall say why I do not like the report and why I wish that the Government were not presenting it to the House for adoption. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North declares himself with pride as a socialist. I, too, declare myself as a socialist. However, that does not mean that we change things for the sake of changing them. As a socialist, I want to change things where they matter. I want to change things so that my constituents have a greater voice in the way their lives go. However, when things are working perfectly well in the House, I do not see why we should have a huge disruption of the sort that is proposed.

The report states that if the system that is proposed for adoption had existed earlier, our present Speaker would still have been Speaker. That is despite the fact that what might be called the establishment did not want the present Speaker to be elected. Newspapers jeered, and continued jeering a good deal after his election. There was the uncouthness of the fact that he had a Scottish accent. There was the fact that he came from the working class. Even my good friends on the Government Front Bench were reluctant to see him adopted. That was because of the inferiority complex that had grown in the Labour party that somehow Labour Governments should not allow a Labour Member to be elected when a Labour Government were in power.

I did what I could—

Mrs. Beckett: I suppose that it is a dangerous game to remind Mr. Speaker that one did not vote for him.

With great respect to my right hon. Friend, who is advancing a legitimate argument, there was no Front-Bench view. There was no cosy conspiracy on the Front Benches. I began rather to regret that there had not been a conspiracy. I took the view, which I think others took—although obviously not in sufficient numbers—that the speakership should alternate between the two sides of the House. I have held that view for about 20 years. I held it especially strongly when the Conservative Government tried to breach what I thought was an important principle. That was the basis on which I made my decision.

Mr. Kaufman: I always accept what my right hon. Friend says. However, I felt obliged to write what I regarded as a decisive letter to *The Times* to point out that the principle of alternation was bogus and had never been observed when Conservative Governments had been in power. I made the point in all friendliness to the principal candidate who emerged from the Conservative party that he had not accepted any such system of alternation, as he voted against Betty Boothroyd and for the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) when Speaker Weatherill went on his way.

Mr. Winnick: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I shall continue. I do not want to take up too much time.

The report says that although matters turned out all right in the case of Speaker Martin, in other circumstances that might not have been the case, depending on who was proposed first. However, in the only other contested election under the system that is now being got rid of, the person who was proposed first—the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster—was decisively defeated. The House knows what it is doing. It may make stupid decisions from time to time, but that is done on the basis of rationality. Stupidity can be based on rationality. Good decisions can be based on rationality, too.

I concur with what my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North says about the secret ballot. This is a House where we are rightly held to account by our constituents. We cannot deceive our constituents about how we vote. My hon. Friend is old-fashioned and says that they can go to a library to see how we have voted, but now they can use the internet as well to obtain the information speedily. If the amendment is carried, that will alleviate the situation to some extent, but not entirely. Those who nominate the candidates for Speaker will be part of a secret cabal, and I do not see why they should be.

It is not as though crossing the Speaker is the end of the world. When I was elected in 1970, there was an election for Speaker Selwyn Lloyd. I voted against him because I did not believe that an ex-Cabinet Minister should be Speaker. Not too long afterwards he threw me out of the Chamber. I am convinced that he did so because

I was disorderly rather than because I voted against him. The House was brought to a standstill by protesting Members until I was brought back again, in great triumph.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that very point?

Mr. Kaufman: I will, but I do not want to give way too often. I have already been speaking for quite a long time.

Mr. Bercow: I, for one, am enjoying the right hon. Gentleman's speech. I note what he says about being strongly opposed as a matter of principle to a former Cabinet Minister becoming Speaker. I agree with him on that. Does his opposition to such a person becoming Speaker extend to opposition to his or her not being nominated?

Mr. Kaufman: No. I believe that every Member has the right to put herself or himself forward. Who is chosen depends on the wisdom of the House. On the whole, the House makes quite wise decisions. If we look back, many Speakers in the post-war period emerged from the Front Benches rather than the Back Benches. That is one of the reasons why I believe it is a good thing that we have a Speaker who has never been a Front Bencher of any sort or for any party.

I believe that the method of election that we use has worked perfectly well. I am always suspicious of any system proposed by the Electoral Reform Society; I am surprised that Charter 88 did not poke its nose into this, as it does into everything that it possibly can. We are all hon. Members—although no doubt some will try to change that before long and we shall have to call one another by name—and I wish that we were not taking this decision in an atmosphere of cosy mutual self-congratulation. I wish that there had been a bit of nastiness in our debate.

Mr. Winnick: We can always rely on you.

Mr. Kaufman: With his customary bitterness, my hon. Friend has misrepresented me; there is not a better-natured person in the House than me.

If I felt that I had sufficient support, I would divide the House on the adoption of the report and the Government motion. Since that is not so, the least that I can do is vote against the secret ballot, which I shall do.

3.1 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), although I do not agree with what he said about our debate or the report. We have had a serious, high-quality debate on a serious, high-quality report, marked by what may turn out to be swan songs from two distinguished parliamentarians: my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), whose work on the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons has made him an outstanding servant of the House, and the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). There is simply no other right hon. Member like him. I have never heard him make a bad speech, and this afternoon he made a glorious speech on the House, a subject about which he feels strongly. For consistency, passion, eloquence, originality and sincerity, he is impossible to beat.

I want to make a brief contribution, and shall begin by complimenting the Select Committee, which made a thorough analysis of the problem, saw a wide range of witnesses, many of whom are in the Chamber, and produced a well-argued report. As Chairman of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) has done a service to the House. I compliment him on performing a post mortem on his own candidacy as well as that of many others.

I agree with the Committee that change is necessary; the previous system was simply not designed for the circumstances that confronted us five months ago. As my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said, it ran the risk of placing premiums on tactical voting and the order in which candidates were presented. What happened in October was not a shambles. In some ways, it was no more unusual than other quaint procedures in the House, but it was certainly not ideal and the system needs an overhaul.

I agree that the outcome would have been the same regardless. There was a certain inevitability as the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) dragged the tumbrels to the guillotine and candidate after candidate was dismissed. However, the conclusion that the outcome would have been the same sits uneasily with the report's subsequent recommendation of a secret vote in future. I shall return to that in a moment. Personally, I am against the hustings for the reasons set out in your memorandum, Mr. Deputy Speaker; it runs the risk of an auction for the speakership.

I am sure that all those who stood were grateful to their proposers and seconders, but I do not think that they influenced the outcome. I do not think that the candidates' speeches influenced the outcome either. Again, that is not unprecedented in the Chamber. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon that all candidates should speak and formally present themselves to the House; that is important and symbolic.

The controversy is about the proposition that there should be a secret vote in future which, if I may use an economist's phrase, hits me right on my indifference curve. I do not go along with the argument that Speakers will discriminate against those who do not vote for them. The risk that the opposite will happen is more likely. Speakers will over-compensate, as home referees often do regarding the other side. I understand the arguments for a secret vote, but my view is that while a secret vote is as valid as an open vote, it is not as valuable. The argument for a secret ballot rests on the proposition that people will vote differently in secret from how they vote in public. It may make life more difficult for the Speaker if there is subsequently a perceived loss of confidence in him. Support for the Speaker and his authority may be greater if the ballot is open, not closed.

If there are valid arguments for a secret ballot, why is the Division to re-elect the Speaker at the beginning of a Parliament—when a Division can be called—open and not secret? Exactly the same arguments could be applied to that. What is to happen if there is a censure motion? I assume that there will be an open vote, as there is at the moment. Having conceded the argument on electing the Speaker in private in the report, the Committee may not

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have followed the logic through to other circumstances in which the authority of the Speaker may come into question.

I hope that we can dispense with delay after the election, and therefore agree with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). I am not sure why we had to hang around for three hours while the Great Seal was dusted down. I hope that we can streamline that process and make it clearer that the authority of the House is supreme.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield about continuity of office and having a different procedure for re-electing a sitting Speaker. It is not right that the Speaker's position should be put into play every time that there is a general election. I therefore accept the argument for a different, streamlined procedure when a sitting Speaker is re-elected.

Mr. Bercow: At the beginning of his speech, my right hon. Friend said how strongly he approved of the speech of our right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery). Did he agree with our right hon. Friend, as I did, that it is one thing to notify the sovereign of our decision, but another to seek approval for it?

Sir George Young: I agree with the consensus in the House that one needs to remove ambiguity about who is charge of the process.

My final point is about paragraph 86, which I regard as the most important paragraph in the whole report. It states:

"Had time allowed we would have wished to consider a number of connected matters as a follow-up . . . for instance, the role and functions of the Speaker".

That is expressed as a hope, rather than a recommendation, but I hope that it will be followed up.

The House may be aware that the Hansard Society will soon produce a report on parliamentary scrutiny. There is widespread concern on both sides of the House about the role of the House. Indeed, that was part of the context in which the debate on the speakership took place last year. I understand all the difficulties involved in an inquiry into the role and functions of the Speaker, who is both the servant of the House and, in many ways, its master. As several hon. Members have said, if the terms of trade are to tilt back to Parliament from the Executive—as many of us believe they should—the Speaker is going to be involved. I am sure that the Speaker would want to be assisted by an inquiry by the House into that important subject.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for referring to paragraph 86, which deals with future inquiries. May I repeat the Committee's strong view that, had there been time in this Parliament, we would have undertaken an inquiry into the Speaker's role and functions? However, it was clear that the House wished us to reach a decision on the procedure governing the election, which is why we have a rather short-circuited inquiry. We cannot bind our successors, but we hope that they will take that up.

Sir George Young: On a consensual note, I conclude by expressing the strong hope that that will be the first task of a new Parliament. It could set the context for the on-going debate about the terms of trade.

3.9 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I rise as a member of the Select Committee on Procedure to speak in support of the motion. I have been a member of the Committee throughout the current Parliament. In my view, the report to which the motion relates is the most memorable that it has published during that time. That is not to say that the Committee has not conducted a number of other important inquiries. Indeed, it has done very good work, but the second report is memorable for a number of reasons not least of which are the evidence taken from hon. Members and the depth in which we investigated the subject.

I thank the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) for the way in which he has chaired the Committee during this Parliament and while the report was being produced. Furthermore, it is a privilege to speak in this debate while standing next to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), whose speeches in the House I have always admired. His words just now recalled to my mind a visit that he made some 30 years ago—he will probably not remember it—to a Labour party function in my constituency. When we spoke after the event, I could not have imagined standing beside him now, and I shall remember today if for no other reason than that.

I am convinced of the need for change, which is clearly set out in the report. To that extent, I disagree with the contribution made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman). The investigation was thorough, and the written and oral evidence submitted to us reflected the different views expressed in the House—not only during the inquiry itself, but as points of order and during our discussions following Madam Speaker's announcement.

What struck me most clearly while those views were being expressed was that the election of the Speaker had become more important to Back Benchers during the past 30 years. That is a sound reason for us to examine the procedure that it involves. Notwithstanding the contribution made by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) and others, the need for us to do so emerges clearly from detailed analysis of the report. In my view, the proposed changes will strengthen the role of Speaker, as its authority will derive from Members of Parliament. I believe that there is little support for returning to the system that prevailed early last century, when the influence of the usual channels and the political parties manifested itself in the way in which candidates were dealt with. I would be surprised if Back Benchers ever wanted to return to that position. It is a good thing that that important view is entrenched in the Procedure Committee's proposals.

Two controversial matters have been dwelt on this afternoon. First, many important issues were raised about nominations and the way in which the debate on the candidates should be conducted in the House. The views that were expressed will help to develop a procedure that ensures that the election will be a little more streamlined. I am not suggesting that we should cut short the time spent on the election, but I hope that the debate about it will be focused and that all candidates will be able to speak. Other hon. Members have mentioned the importance of the occasion, but the fact remains that last time the House was not as packed at the end of the debate as it was at the beginning. I believe that there should be

greater interest during the whole debate. If it continues for four or five hours, that will be all to the good. I think that it will still be a most important occasion.

The question that was going through my mind was whether the ballot should be secret or open. The issue is finely balanced and there are good reasons both for and against. That became clear during the Procedure Committee's deliberations, in which two arguments were advanced in favour of keeping the open ballot. The slippery slope argument was advanced in the evidence given by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who suggested that there would be pressure for other matters to be dealt with secretly once the principle of a secret ballot had been conceded. I reject that argument, as I do not think that hon. Members would want to extend such secrecy. Indeed, there would rightly be an outcry outside this place if we ever did so. Little evidence was given in support of that argument, other than that of the right hon. Gentleman.

Another argument was advanced on the basis of historical convention. As Members of Parliament are representatives of constituents and constituencies, any decision that we take should be recorded so that those who elect us can see how we vote. I believe that that is a stronger argument. If we are to move away from that principle, there must be strong arguments for doing so. That is why I should like to summarise the arguments that were advanced in favour of a secret ballot. The decision on electing a Speaker is unique because the role does not relate to any particular policy decisions that will affect our constituents. It has been argued that the choice of Speaker is therefore a decision that relates only to how we organise our affairs.

It has also been suggested that the current system allows hon. Members to be pressurised. There are arguments for and against that view, with regard to which my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) gave some interesting evidence. He said that he was in favour of a secret ballot because he did not want to vote against anybody. In other words, he said that we are all friends in the House and that he voted for individuals on that basis. Of course, there might be pressures in both directions, which is why I believe that there is a sound argument for adopting the principle of a secret ballot in this particular case, although I appreciate that the matter is finely balanced. Indeed, the Committee recognised that, which is why it said in its report that the matter should be one for the House.

The second controversial issue that has been dealt with relates to the voting system and the question whether to introduce an alternative system or to conduct an exhaustive ballot. The Committee favoured two particular views about the exhaustive ballot. First, it accepted that such a ballot would enable candidates who obtained a small number of votes to exit the process at the first stage. Although candidates can take soundings, they will not necessarily be aware of how much support they have until the first round is completed. An exhaustive ballot would ensure that such candidates could withdraw their nominations immediately. Secondly, an exhaustive ballot would enable hon. Members to assess support for candidates and adjust their preferences accordingly in the second round. I believe that that would be of some help, although I acknowledge that the two views are finely balanced. The Electoral Reform Society gave evidence in support of the exhaustive ballot, which is contained in an annexe to the report. For those reasons, the Procedure Committee accepted the balance of those arguments.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) spoke about the need for deep consideration of the future role of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers. The evidence given by Liberal Democrats supported that view, for which there was much backing in the Committee. I agree with the hon. Member for Macclesfield that the Committee should consider the matter, and the suggestion that it should be a future priority has my full support.

3.19 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): It has been an afternoon for farewell speeches, some perhaps more voluntary than others. It is therefore a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), who is defending a majority of 2,770, and who may discover in a few days' or weeks' time that he, too, made a farewell speech this afternoon. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said that the debate lacked edge, and I am trying to provide it.

On a more serious note, I concur with the point of the hon. Member for Upminster that the subject of our debate has become more important to Back Benchers over the past 30 years. That is a sign of hope in the institution. The Liaison Committee report on "Shifting the Balance" and the Procedure Committee's report on electing a Speaker are signs of a change in Back Benchers' attitude towards how much they will take from the Executive.

People look back to a golden age, but let us consider what happened in the 1960s and 1970s, which some hon. Members experienced in this place, when the usual channels sorted things out. The procedures used in 1972 exemplified the way in which the House was run in those days. I therefore congratulate the Procedure Committee on the report and support the broad thrust of its recommendations.

I should perhaps apologise to the Parliamentary Secretary. We held a debate a few weeks ago about the timetable. At some ungodly hour, I said that the time allowed for today's debate was insufficient. It appears that the hon. Gentleman will be proved right and I will be proved wrong. That may have something to do with the scheduling of a debate on free-vote business on a Thursday afternoon, but it is up to hon. Members who care about this place to attend and speak up for it. There is no more important decision in this institution than the election of a Speaker.

I take slight issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) about secret ballots at various stages in the cycle of electing a Speaker. There is a difference between the election of a new Speaker, the re-election of a sitting Speaker and a censure motion on a sitting Speaker. I want to use myself as an example.

I rose when the Father of the House sought to put the question on electing our current Speaker. I believed that there should be a Division. I felt strongly that as far as possible every candidate should be subjected to the same test under the rules that pertained then. I wanted to apply the test that I applied to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to every other candidate, to the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn. Ultimately, I could not do that

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because by the time every other candidate had been eliminated, the choice was between voting for the right hon. Gentleman and voting for nobody.

It has been stated with certainty in the report and the debate that the current Speaker would have been elected under different arrangements. That is wrong; such an assumption should be tested. We cannot know what would have happened if your name, Mr. Deputy Speaker, had appeared not in the first amendment but in the main motion, and if the current Speaker's name had appeared in an amendment rather than the motion. We shall never know because hon. Members made different judgments according to the candidates lower down the list whom they supported. I welcome the report's recommendations on the voting procedure because it is now palpably fair.

Our main consideration is whether we should hold a secret or an open ballot. I strongly believe that it should be secret. As I rose at the crucial moment and triggered the vote on that occasion, I suppose that I should be most paranoid about influence from the Chair. I want to put it clearly on the record that I have been treated fairly by the Speaker. I do not believe that he has over-corrected and called me more often than he should, or that he has called me less often than he should. As hon. Members have said, one would expect those who hold the office of Speaker to be blind to the opinions of hon. Members about their candidacy. However, we cannot know whether that is the case.

I cannot know whether being called last on several occasions to ask questions about a statement is a reflection of my lack of seniority in the House or of the occupant of the Chair's bias against me. On several other occasions, I have been called extremely early to ask questions on statements. That is simply part of the cut and thrust in the House, and I do not believe that I have been discriminated against.

Paragraph 55 of the report states:

> "The Clerk of the House told us that there was a concern that 'a vote cast against the Speaker is remembered', although he added that he did not know whether this was 'paranoia' or had a foundation in fact."

Ultimately, we shall never know. It would therefore be better to conduct a secret ballot simply to avoid such a suspicion.

A secret ballot is preferable also because of the influence of the usual channels. It has been reported to me that a Labour Member, who was elected in 1997, was overheard having a conversation with a Whip on the election of the Speaker. The hon. Member asked for guidance and the Whip reportedly said, "Well, it's a free vote; we can vote for anybody as long as it's not Gwyneth." Such influence is unwelcome, but it exists.

On the point about setting a precedent and establishing a secret ballot for the first time, I agree with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that the election of Speaker is an issue for the House of Commons. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) said that we should be accountable to our electorate in this matter. I disagree. Hon. Members should be able to exercise their judgment free from influence from the usual channels, and from fear about the attitude of the occupant of the Chair as a consequence of their actions.

Mr. Kaufman: Does the hon. Gentleman genuinely believe that a decision that he makes as an elected Member of Parliament is no business of the people who sent him here?

Mr. Blunt: I do not say that it is no business of theirs. We must make a judgment, and I believe that it is important that I am able to make the most important decision on House of Commons business free from influence.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will my hon. Friend invite the House to consider carefully the fact that Australia, Canada, South Africa, France, Italy, the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales hold secret ballots when electing their Presiding Officers? The Committee took evidence from other Commonwealth countries and other democracies.

Mr. Blunt: My hon. Friend makes the point perfectly. When people examine the case carefully and have the opportunity to restructure systems, they will favour secret ballots. Decisions about the chairmanship of an assembly are for its members. This is the one occasion on which I believe that there should be a secret ballot. There is a distinction between this and other occasions, such as those on which the Speaker is to be re-elected, or on which there is a vote of censure against the Speaker.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): My hon. Friend argues for a secret ballot. If he were to get his way, and one of his constituents were to write to him after the election of a Speaker and ask him which way he had voted, would he tell them? If so, why is he arguing for a secret ballot?

Mr. Blunt: The answer is no, I would not tell them. I would tell them that this was a secret ballot and that I had exercised my judgment as to a matter concerning the House. The reason why it should be secret is precisely that I would not then be accountable for it to the electorate.

In the end, this is a question of judgment. Other hon. Members will come to a different judgment, saying that we should not break with precedent and that we have to be accountable for absolutely everything that we do. I believe that, in this one respect, we owe it to ourselves to be able to take the power to ourselves to make this decision free from the influence from the usual channels, and without being influenced by what the consequences might be for the future occupants of the Chair. That is why I hope that the amendment in the name of the Minister, which would delete the word "secret", will not be carried.

3.31 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I was prompted to rise to my feet by the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman). He said that when the House was at its clubbiest, it was at its worst, as if every speech that we make must drip with

vitriol. It is not like that. I think that this has been a very good debate, and I completely disagree with almost everything that I heard from my right hon. Friend.

I want to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) about the influence of the Whips. He said that he had heard one of the Whips say to a Member who came into the House in the new intake, "It's a free vote, but don't vote for Gwyneth." The Whips have an influence, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, as a member of the Liaison Committee, put his name to a report that made it perfectly clear that hon. Members were kept off Select Committees because of their views. That must, therefore, be my right hon. Friend's view.

Mr. Kaufman: I did not put my name to that report.

Mr. Prentice: I was under the impression that the report of the Liaison Committee was a unanimous report, agreed by all the Committee members. From the documentation that I read, I was quite sure that that was the case, but perhaps other hon. Members will intervene to correct me.

Mr. Kaufman: I honestly know what I did, and I know what I think. I did not put my name to that report.

Mr. Prentice: Well, there you go. I have been going round telling people that if an old Labour warhorse such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton could put his name to the report, it must carry some weight.

Mr. Sheldon: May I clarify the position? The report was on the agenda of the House, but my right hon. Friend did not attend.

Mr. Kaufman: What is more, I did not sign the motion. There was nothing to sign.

Mr. Prentice: Of course I give way to my right hon. Friend!

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) had a copy of the report. The fact that he was unable to, or saw fit not to, attend the meeting when it was agreed was his decision, but he did not send any amendment or objection to the report to the Chairman of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must make it clear that that is not the report that we are debating.

Mr. Prentice: I am not taking any more interventions on this point, Mr. Speaker. I want to get to my main point, but I was distracted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and his colleagues on the Procedure Committee on producing this excellent report. I agree with it all, and I think that the House ought to endorse it and support it. Exhaustive ballots are not new: they are part of the Labour party's internal election mechanism, and I feel wholly comfortable with them.

The question of the secret ballot seems to be exercising Members' minds. I agree, not for the first time, with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), the Chief Whip for the Liberal Democrats, that the election of the Speaker is unique. A secret ballot need not be seen as a slippery slope that would lead to secret ballots on other policy issues. If that were the case, I would speak out against the proposal. The election of the Speaker is unique and the ballot should be secret.

I do not want to sound prissy, but if the message were passed down that the Prime Minister or leading members of the Cabinet were hostile to a particular candidate and did not want to see that person elected Speaker, an hon. Member looking for preferment or a job in the Government—perhaps if he or she were ambitious and wanted to become a Minister—might think twice about voting against the perceived preference of, say, the Prime Minister.

When the Leader of the House made it clear that she was in favour of candidates alternating between the political parties, alarm bells rang. Many Labour Members thought that that was the Leader of the House speaking by proxy for the Government, and were, I am sure, determined not to be caught up in the notion that we should alternate between parties. They may have been persuaded by the letter in, I think, *The Times*, penned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton. Alternatively—I am not being personal when I say this—they may have been persuaded by the fact that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) did not vote for the Labour candidate, Betty Boothroyd, in the 1992 election. I do not know.

The Government are generally anything but neutral. In my experience, the Government of the day have a view on everything. Matters come before the Modernisation Committee on which the Government are supposedly neutral: the Government are not neutral on them. If someone were to propose—as I did, to the Modernisation Committee—that private Members' Bills should be moved from the ghetto of Fridays to Wednesday mornings, when the Chamber is empty, the Government might say that they were neutral on the issue. Like hell they are. They have a position on everything. I am sure the Government would also have a position on who should occupy your Chair, Mr. Speaker.

The report touches on the hustings that I organised. There was a tremendous pressure for change. When the number of candidates ballooned from five to seven, eight, 11 and 12, I asked myself why we were getting so many candidates. The speakership brings instant celebrity, nationwide recognition, a nice house and probably quite a big salary, but something has happened recently. It might have something to do with the way in which Betty Boothroyd carried out her role as Speaker, but no one envisaged that so many candidates would compete for the speakership. Within a few hours, down on the Terrace, I had more than 100 names of Members—more than one sixth of the membership of the House of Commons—calling for the system to be changed and for an opportunity to quiz the individual candidates.

Under the old system—the present system, until we change it—we could never hear from the candidates, which was an absurdity. I also found it an absurdity that only nine of the 12 candidates for Speaker participated in the hustings, which were conducted in a very comradely, collegiate way. Nothing that was said embarrassed

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anyone; nothing that was written in any of the nine so-called manifestos that were sent out would have embarrassed anyone. I thought that the hustings were a worthwhile exercise. We shall not need hustings in future, because the proposals made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield include the opportunity for every candidate to speak here in the Chamber of the House of Commons.

I would like to underline to my colleagues on this side of the House who have not quite made up their minds the fact that we need not fear the secret ballot. It is not the beginning of a slippery slope, and I hope that the House will endorse the Procedure Committee's report.

3.40 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am delighted to be called in this important debate. Indeed, there is nothing more important in this House than who is elected Speaker. One of my forebears was Speaker, from 1943 to 1952. When he was elected Speaker, it was through the usual channels, and he was unopposed. He had a very difficult time because this Chamber had been bombed and the sittings were transferred to the House of Lords, and then in 1945 the Labour party had a huge majority, largely consisting of new Members who did not respect the authority of the Speaker. In 1950 a Labour Government were elected with a majority of six, and in 1951 the Conservatives had a majority of 65. Throughout that time Mr. Churchill thought that he was still Prime Minister, and behaved with disdain towards my forebear in his role as Speaker.

Whoever is elected Speaker is the guardian not only of the House but of Back-Bench rights. That is the most important thing to bear in mind. It is important that we select and vote on the best possible candidates, and I argue as strongly as I can that we should have an exhaustive and open ballot.

If we are honourable Members, as we all purport to be, there should be no difference between the way we vote in secret and the way we vote when the vote is open and recorded. My intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) got to the kernel of the matter. I am quite prepared to look anybody—including you, Mr. Speaker—in the eye and tell them how I voted and why I voted as I did. As it happens, I did not vote for you in the final vote; I abstained. But it does not matter how I voted; even if I had voted against you, I would expect you to treat me in the same way, and I would have exactly the same regard for you, whether I had voted in an open ballot or a secret ballot. That is the way things ought to be.

In this Parliament, the Executive are getting more and more power. The standard and stature of the Speaker is therefore critical. I have no doubt, Mr. Speaker, that you will be Speaker for a long time, and that you will have to make landmark judgments against this Government, or any other colour of Government, to ensure that the House and its traditions are fully upheld, and that Back-Bench Members of Parliament have a full say in how they control the Executive.

We need to examine the rules about how we elect our Speaker very carefully. Those who argue for a secret ballot are arguing for something that they would not be prepared to uphold in public to their constituents. That is the nub and kernel of the matter.

3.43 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate, to welcome the report and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

As usual, I enjoyed the speech of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), but I do not agree with him. This has been a good and constructive debate, with worthwhile contributions from both sides of the House, and it is singularly appropriate that it should have been graced with what might prove to be the valedictory address to the House by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn).

I first read the right hon. Gentleman's writings when I was 17. I recall reading "Arguments for Socialism", and subsequently "Arguments for Democracy". Both those tomes are on my bookshelves at home. I was not particularly persuaded by either of them, although I was rather more impressed by the latter than by the former. There is a widely held view that the right hon. Gentleman is both the greatest living socialist, and the greatest living parliamentarian, in this country. When we hear him contribute to our debates we all, whatever our views, realise how much the House will lose when he ceases to be a Member of it.

My second point is that, having reflected carefully on the arguments, I have—not for the first time, and probably not for the last—changed my mind. I had some sympathy for the idea of the secret ballot, but the more I have listened to the arguments deployed, the less persuaded of the case for it I have become.

It is always a joy to listen to the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), but I strongly disagree with him. His invocation of the views of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) was singularly unpersuasive. I am a great admirer of the hon. Member for Linlithgow, but the argument seems to me to come down to this: if it were a matter of the more effective operation of the House, or the more satisfactory service of our constituents—although I know not how that could result from a closed ballot—there might be a good case for a secret ballot. However, if, in the final analysis, we are merely anxious to protect ourselves and to devise a mechanism to appease our own sensitivities, that is not a good argument for a closed ballot.

I am in a similar category to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). Indeed, I voted against two rather prominent candidates for the speakership. First, I voted against you, Mr. Speaker. I make no apology for that; I was perfectly entitled to do so. You have been scrupulously fair ever since, and the matter has never been discussed. I also voted against the candidature of one of the Deputy Speakers, Sir Alan Haselhurst. I make no apology for that, either; I was perfectly entitled to do it.

I would not seek to cloak my decisions, or the reasons for them, either from my colleagues or from the electorate. There is a powerful case for stating what we believe and being prepared to defend it.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's argument with great care. What is it about us as hon. Members that means that we do not

need the protection, in respect of the vote for an individual, that we give our electors when they choose whether to send us here?

Mr. Bercow: I shall answer the hon. Gentleman, because he has raised an important point. When the electorate vote they are deciding who they want to represent them. They are not the custodians of public office, so their entitlement to vote in secret, and not to be obliged to reveal their decision or to defend it, should be absolute. In that respect, we are in a different position: we are custodians of public office.

Mr. Kaufman *rose—*

Mr. Bercow: I shall not give way, simply because the Front Benchers are about to respond to the debate. I mean no disrespect to the right hon. Gentleman.

We do not have the right to protect ourselves in that way. I go for an open vote. We should explain our decisions and defend them, and then be prepared to be judged by them.

3.48 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): This has been a fascinating debate, and I found myself quite troubled by it. I certainly found myself disagreeing with what my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) said about the authority of the House being supreme—a matter that I hope to be able to pursue in the Tea Room.

Also rather dangerously, I found myself agreeing with the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) when he said that what we were called upon to decide today was not a private matter. I entirely agree with him about that; this goes well beyond the bounds of this House, and beyond questions about being clubbable.

We have had a varied debate, and in the time available it would be difficult to do justice to all the contributors. In response to what my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said about the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), I may add that it has been customary in this House to say that the right hon. Gentleman has usually been wrong about some of the great issues facing the country. That is a bit unfair to him, and I hope that on this occasion he was wrong when he said that this was likely to be the last time that he would speak in the House. His contributions will be greatly missed.

There are several small points and several themes that can be picked out of the debate. The themes have crossed parties. Anybody coming into the House and listening to the debate would find it impossible to see a particular line, or a majority view, emerging in any part of the House—except, perhaps, on the Liberal Benches, where the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) has, I think, been the only representative of his party to speak.

I have a few small points to make. The key issue is about simplifying the procedures by which the Speaker is chosen. In that respect, I find a great deal to commend in the report presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), as the procedures used in your election, Mr. Speaker, were unnecessarily ponderous and did the House little credit. I wish to draw attention to some of the elements in the motion that caused me concern.

First, there is the question of nominations. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield made the powerful point that the selection of the Speaker is, in part, a matter of democracy in action. However, although the intention that Speakers should be elected with a consensus of support across the House is entirely commendable, the requirement that there be a cross-party nomination procedure before a candidate can stand introduces a fetter on democracy.

I hope that any hon. Member putting his or her name forward—or who is asked to do so—would command cross-party support, but what would happen if 450 members of a party with a huge majority in the House wanted a specific person as Speaker, and the other parties did not? Would those 450 hon. Members be prevented from having that choice? That is the potential effect of the relevant provision in the motion.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield accepts that I fully understand the intention behind the report, but I find the conclusion slightly strange. I draw attention to it, as I think that it may cause problems in the future, and that the House may need to look at it again at some time in the future.

It is notable that the procedure is not used in the re-election of a former Speaker. I have no difficulty with that, but I am worried that the nomination proposals would be a fetter on the democratic procedures of the House.

The other matter that has exercised the House is whether the ballot should be secret. I have discussed the matter with some of my hon. Friends, and I have been impressed by the Canadian system. There, the ballot is secret, and the voting numbers in each vote while the decision is being reached are not revealed. That has the advantage that it prevents tactical voting, as it invites people to make a choice and stick to it. It also means that people do not run around between ballots trying to decide who has the advantage.

Without such a provision, I find it difficult to see the advantage of secrecy. I shall therefore vote against the proposal for holding secret ballots, as I believe that the people who vote for me would be entitled to know what I decided to do. If they asked me, I would feel constrained to tell them.

I end on the question of flummery: we are lucky that we have not had to discuss that today, as I am sure that hon. Members would have differing views. Some of the ceremonial in the House is very important, and if we ever came to consider it, I hope that the views of all hon. Members would be heard.

With that caveat, I welcome the report. I shall be interested to discover what the House decides.

3.54 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The clearest thing to have emerged from the debate is that the Committee and its members have done the House a great service in providing a very thorough, thoughtful and excellent report. It has given the House a good framework for discussion.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who chairs the Committee, spoke of the support given by his team, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) will win many more elections and be in the House for many years to come. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) has been very involved in the Committee's work, although he did not have the opportunity to speak today.

When I first read the report, I was struck by the questionnaire in appendix 1. There were 130 responses to the Committee's canvass of opinion, and they differed greatly. However, despite a very tight schedule, the report has provided an excellent framework for discussion.

The tone of the debate, which involved hon. Members of all parties, has been that change is necessary and that there is broad support for the report. Two caveats need to be entered, however. The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) warned us to take change cautiously and slowly, and said that we should not rush into it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said that the report was clubbish and cosy. However, I think that my right hon. Friend realised that his objections were shared by too few hon. Members to warrant pressing the matter to a vote.

A number of small questions were posed. The right hon. Member for East Devon asked who would chair the election proceedings. I can tell him that the existing Standing Orders specify the Father of the House.

A number of hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), pointed out the importance of paragraph 86 of the report, which is headed "Future Inquiries". In that paragraph, the Committee recommends that the role of the Speaker, and of the Deputy Speakers, should be examined at some point in the future.

A number of hon. Members said that the rights of the House against the legislature were being eroded. I have read the history books, and I know that that is a persistent argument that has run throughout the ages. However, the report makes it clear that a subsequent Committee may well revisit the matter.

I remind the House of the importance of the Speaker, and of what the Duke of Wellington said about the fear inspired by his men—that they may not have frightened the enemy but that, by God, they frightened him. As a member of the Government Front Bench, I can tell the House that my colleagues and I are frightened of the Speaker, and that we take what he says very seriously indeed. A good deal of discussion takes place to ensure that the procedures of the House are followed properly.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) talked about flummery, and I confess that, like the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), I am a reluctant moderniser. I, too, would be sad to see some of our ceremonies go.

Two major issues came before the House today, and the first was the question of exhaustive as opposed to alternative voting. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), on behalf of his party colleagues, argued the point strongly. The matter was discussed in Committee, and was voted on. I am in favour of an exhaustive ballot, and I think that that was the tone of the debate today.

The second major issue had to do with open as opposed to secret ballots. The hon. Member for North Cornwall chided me that my amendment was not in order. I think that it is, as it is the first appearance of the word "secret" in the text of the Standing Order which the amendment would change. If the amendment is agreed, the titles would change automatically.

However, the substance of the argument is the question whether the ballot should be open or secret. Again, the Committee considered the matter and it has asked the House as a whole to do the same. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), I take a very principled position on the matter. I do not want us to go down what has been described as a slippery slope, and I hope that my hon. Friend presses the matter to a vote, as I believe that the House will give good support to the proposal for open ballots.

It is possible that two farewell speeches have been made this afternoon. The right hon. Member for East Devon did not call his contribution that, but he is nonpareil in the work that he has done with regard to the procedures of the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) has got himself a good redundancy deal. He is going outside the House to take part in active politics, because that is where the real change occurs. Along with my right hon. Friend, I know that the green movement is stronger outside the House. However, he told us that he is coming back to use the Library, so he has got the best of both worlds.

This report is the best of both worlds. Its recommendations ensure that our long tradition of independent Speakers will continue.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 82, Noes 84.

Division No. 165] **[4 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Allen, Graham
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bercow, John
Betts, Clive
Brady, Graham
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burnett, John
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clelland, David
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Corbett, Robin
Cranston, Ross
Dismore, Andrew
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Foulkes, George
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Galloway, George
Garnier, Edward
Goggins, Paul
Grieve, Dominic
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jamieson, David
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Khabra, Piara S
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Levitt, Tom
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Linton, Martin
McDonagh, Siobhain
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Miller, Andrew
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Oliner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris

Rapson, Syd
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Spellar, John
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Tynan, Bill
Wells, Bowen
White, Brian
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wyatt, Derek
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Dennis Skinner and
Mr. David Winnick.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Austin, John
Baldry, Tony
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Boswell, Tim
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Dawson, Hilton
Drown, Ms Julia
Fabricant, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hancock, Mike
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heppell, John
Horam, John
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laxton, Bob
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
McWalter, Tony
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Ottaway, Richard
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruddock, Joan
St Aubyn, Nick
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spring, Richard
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Welsh, Andrew
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Crispin Blunt and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

(1) This House approves the recommendations contained in the Second Report of the Procedure Committee, Session 2000–01, Election of a Speaker (House of Commons Paper No. 40) relating to the election of a Speaker.

(2) Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker) be amended by leaving out paragraph (4); and the title of the Standing Order shall be 'Election of the Speaker: Member presiding'; and

(3) The following new Standing Orders No. 1A (Re-election of former Speaker) and No. 1B (Election of Speaker by secret ballot) be made:

Re-election of former Speaker

1A. (1) If at the commencement of a Parliament the Member who was Speaker at the dissolution of the previous Parliament is returned to the House, the Member presiding in accordance with Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker: Member presiding) shall, when the House meets to proceed with the choice of a Speaker, ascertain whether the former Speaker is willing to be chosen as Speaker, and, the former Speaker having submitted himself to the House, shall call upon a Member to move that he do take the Chair of this House as Speaker; and the question thereon shall be put forthwith.

(2) If the question is agreed to, the former Speaker shall thereupon take the Chair as Speaker-elect.

(3) If the question is negatived, the Member presiding shall forthwith adjourn the House to the following day at half-past Two o'clock, and the House shall proceed in accordance with Standing Order No. 1B (Election of Speaker by secret ballot).

Election of Speaker by secret ballot

1B. (1) If the question put in accordance with Standing Order No. 1A (Re-election of former Speaker) has been negatived, and on any other occasion when it is necessary to proceed with the choice of a new Speaker, the election shall be by secret ballot.

(2) Preparatory arrangements for a ballot shall be made under the supervision of the Clerk of the House.

(3) (a) Nominations of candidates shall be in writing and shall be received by the Clerk of the House between half-past Nine o'clock and half-past Ten o'clock in the morning on the day on which the House is to elect a Speaker.

(b) Each nomination shall consist of a signed statement made by the candidate declaring his willingness to stand for election accompanied by the signatures of not fewer than twelve nor more than fifteen Members, of whom not fewer than three shall be Members elected to the House as members of any party other than that to which the candidate belongs or members of no party. No Member shall sign more than one such statement and if any Member does so, his signature shall no longer be valid.

(c) As soon as practicable following the close of nominations, lists of the candidates shall be placed in the Members' lobby and published.

(4) If only one Member is nominated in accordance with paragraph (3) above, the Member presiding shall, when the House meets to elect a Speaker, invite the Member so nominated to submit himself to the House, and shall then put forthwith the question that that Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(5) Paragraphs (6) to (13) of this Order shall apply if two or more Members are nominated in accordance with paragraph (3) above.

(6) When the House meets, the order in which candidates may address the House shall be determined by lot; the Member presiding shall then invite each candidate to address the House; and after all candidates have been given an opportunity to speak, the Member presiding shall direct the House to proceed to a ballot.

(7) The Member presiding may not vote in any ballot.

(8) (a) A ballot shall take place in the lobbies unless the Member presiding directs otherwise.

(b) Each Member intending to vote shall be provided with a ballot paper bearing the names of the candidates listed in alphabetical order.

(c) Each such Member may vote for only one candidate on the ballot paper.

(d) A ballot shall be declared closed after the expiration of half an hour and counting shall take place under arrangements made by the Clerk of the House.

(e) The Member presiding shall have discretion to vary the timings given in this Order and power to give final directions on any matter of doubt arising from the conduct of a ballot or from an individual ballot paper.

(9) As soon as practicable after the votes have been counted the Member presiding shall announce to the House the numbers of votes cast for each candidate.

(10) If a candidate has received more than half the votes cast in a ballot, the Member presiding shall forthwith put the question that that Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(11) If no candidate has received more than half the votes cast in a ballot the Member presiding shall direct the House to proceed forthwith to a further ballot to which paragraph (12) below shall apply.

(12) In any further ballot no new nominations may be received and the names of—

(a) the candidate who received the fewest votes in the previous ballot;

(b) any candidate who received less than five per cent. of the votes cast in the previous ballot; and

(c) any candidate who, within ten minutes of the announcement in the House of the result of the previous ballot, shall have notified the Member presiding of his intention to withdraw,

shall be removed from the ballot paper, except that where two or more candidates received the same number of votes, their names shall remain on the ballot paper unless paragraph (b) applies.

(13) If the effect of paragraph (12) above is to remove from the ballot paper the name of every candidate except one, the Member presiding shall forthwith put the question that that Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(14) (a) Notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Orders Nos. 10 (Wednesday sittings) and 11 (Friday sittings), on any day on which the House meets to elect a Speaker, it shall meet at half-past Two o'clock.

(b) No amendment may be offered to the question that a Member do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

(c) If that question is agreed to, that Member shall thereupon take the Chair as Speaker-elect.

(d) If that question is negatived, the Member presiding shall forthwith adjourn the House to the following day at half-past Two o'clock, and the provisions of paragraph (3) above shall apply in respect of a fresh ballot.

Kent County Council Bill *[Lords]*
(*By Order*)

As amended, considered.

4.11 pm

Mr. Speaker: The House is to consider the Kent County Council Bill followed by the Medway Council Bill. It may be helpful if I draw the attention of the House to the fact that the two Bills and the amendments thereto are virtually identical. The Chair will allow reference to the Medway Council Bill while we are debating the Kent County Council Bill, but thereafter any debate on the Medway Council Bill should be limited to matters peculiar to that Bill.

Clause 2

APPOINTED DAY

Mr. Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) to move amendment No. 15, which is grouped with amendments Nos. 18 and 16.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I seek clarification, Mr. Speaker. I have been told that the amendments are acceptable to the promoters of the Bill. Is that true?

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): As the sponsor of the Bill, I inform the House that the promoters are willing to accept this group of amendments.

Mr. Wyatt: Do I need to move the amendment, Mr. Speaker? I am unsure of the form.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman needs to move the amendment. Other Members may wish to speak to it.

Mr. Wyatt: I wish to move the amendment formally, Mr. Speaker.

Amendments made: No. 15 in page 2, line 6 leave out

'a newspaper circulating in the county'

and insert—

'at least two newspapers circulating in the county and at least one national art and antiques trade periodica'.

No. 18, in page 2, line 11 leave out 'three' and insert 'six'.

No. 16, in page 2, line 15, after 'newspaper', insert—

'or of any such art and antiques trade periodical'.—[*Mr. Wyatt.*]

Clause 4

INTERPRETATION OF PART 2

Mr. Paul Clark: I beg to move promoters amendment No.1, in page 3, leave out line 42.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take the following: promoters amendment No. 2, in clause 6, page 4, line 29, leave out 'his business' and insert—

'the business in respect of which he is registered'.

Promoters amendment No. 3, in clause 8, page 7, line 18, at end insert—

'(e) a person engaged in business as a dealer in second-hand books, in respect of his business as such; or

(f) a person engaged in business as a dealer in animals, in respect of his business as such; or'.

Amendment No. 41, in clause 11, page 8, line 11, after 'trading', insert 'in the county'.

4.15 pm

Mr. Clark: I shall be brief, as the three promoters amendments are all linked and will rectify a problem with book dealers. The intention of the Bill was to exempt such dealers from legislation, in so far as the business is related to books. As drafted, the effect of the Bills on dealers who sell other goods, for example, maps or prints, would be to require records of the transactions relating to books also to be kept.

These promoters amendments would make it clear that no record-keeping would be required for books, even if the dealer is registered to sell other types of second-hand goods. The information held by Kent police did not reveal that there was a problem with stolen books. In fact, only five thefts of valuable books were recorded in a 12-month period. In addition, no consumer complaints about second-hand books can be found on the records, so there does not seem to be a problem with that side of the trade.

Mr. Wyatt: I seek clarification about the wording. I am confused as to whether the "squat trading" referred to in clause 11(1)(c) refers to trading in the county. We hope that it does and, if so, I am happy to accept that.

Mr. Clark: The promoters are willing to accept amendment No. 41 as they have no problems with it.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 5

REGISTRATION OF DEALERS IN SECOND-HAND GOODS

Mr. Wyatt: I beg to move amendment No. 25, in page 4, line 19, leave out 'three' and insert 'four'.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to take the following: amendment No. 26, in page 4, line 20, at end insert—

'(4) The council may not impose a charge for registration under this section'.

Amendment No. 45, in clause 12, page 10, line 33, leave out first 'business address' and insert—

'his business address or business telephone number'.

Amendment No. 46, in clause 12, page 10, line 33, leave out second 'business address' and insert—

'the business address or business telephone number'.

Amendment No. 47, in clause 12, page 10, line 39, leave out 'business address' and insert—

'his business address or business telephone number'.

Mr. Wyatt: My only concern is that we do not want the antiques trade to be charged for registration. We want to ensure that there will be no charge to traders and that the council will pay the charge. I understand that that is acceptable to the promoters.

Mr. Paul Clark: After some consideration, the promoters have decided that the amendments in the group are acceptable.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 26, in page 4 line 20, at end insert—

'(4) The council may not impose a charge for registration under this section'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Clause 6

INFORMATION TO BE KEPT BY REGISTERED DEALERS IN SECOND-HAND GOODS

Mr. Paul Clark: I beg to move promoters amendment No. 5, in page 4, line 26, leave out (7) and insert (8).

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following: amendment No. 28, in page 4, line 42, leave out from 'entry' to 'by' in line 43.

Amendment No. 29, in page 5, line 17, leave out '£10' and insert '£100'.

Promoters amendment No. 6, in page 5, line 17, leave out from 'than' to end of line 19 and insert—

'the relevant amount'.

Promoters amendment No. 7, in page 5, line 23, at end insert—

'(4) For the purposes of subsection (2) above "the relevant amount" is—

(a) £10 in the case of vehicle parts, jewellery, watches, photographic equipment, sports equipment, equestrian equipment, boating equipment, musical instruments, tools, bicycles, optical equipment, firearms and gardening equipment; and

(b) £50 in the case of all other articles to which that subsection applies;

or in either case, such other amount (being no lower than the existing amount) as the council may, with the approval of the Secretary of State, determine.'

Promoters amendment No. 8, in page 5, line 24, leave out '(7)' and insert '(8)'.

Promoters amendment No. 9, in line 36, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Amendment No. 33, line 36, leave out from 'amount' to end of line 44 and insert—

'is £500 or such other amount (being no lower than the existing amount) as the council may, with the approval of the Secretary of State, determine'.

Amendment No. 30, in page 5, line 38, leave out 'jewellery, watches'.

Amendment No. 32, in page 5, line 38, leave out 'photographic equipment'.

Amendment No. 31, in page 5, line 40, leave out ', musical instruments'.

Promoters amendment No. 10, in page 6, line 2, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 11, in page 6, line 3, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

Promoters amendment No. 12, in page 6, line 21, clause 7, leave out '(4), (8) or (9)' and insert '(5), (9) or (10)'.

Promoters amendment No. 13, in page 6, line 39, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 14, in page 6, line 42, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Amendment No. 42, in page 10, line 5, clause 12, leave out from 'him' to end of line 6.

Amendment No. 43, in page 10, line 8, leave out from beginning to end of line 10.

Amendment No. 44, in page 10, line 11, leave out from beginning to end of line 13.

Mr. Clark: Amendments Nos. 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 are drafting amendments as a consequence of various small issues that relate to changes elsewhere.

Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 relate to the levels and items required to be recorded by those involved in the second-hand trade. The Select Committee heard detailed evidence and arguments from the promoters, petitioners and their counsel, and witnesses over some 11 days, so detailed consideration was given. The Committee decided that the Bill should continue but with certain amendments, the most significant of which relates to the records which must be kept by registered dealers in second-hand goods. These two amendments relate to that.

Dealers are required to obtain the name and address of the person from whom the articles were acquired. An exemption is provided for articles which, in the reasonable opinion of the dealer at the time of the transaction, will be sold or offered for sale at a price of less than £10. However, that is not to apply to any electrical or battery-powered goods or to any medium on or by which sound, images and other data may be stored and recorded. This is intended to reduce the bureaucracy, but will not exempt those low value items frequently sold, such as audiocassettes and CDs. It may appear to hon. Members that those are relatively insignificant items, but the recovery of smaller items often leads police to those involved in thefts of more valuable items.

The petitioners argued that antiques should be exempt or that the threshold for record-keeping should be raised to £50. The problem is that antique dealers also trade in works of art and collectors' items, and the existing legal definitions to be found in VAT legislation are too complex and would make the legislation unworkable. Since then, the promoters have introduced an amendment which tackles the problem differently, but will raise the threshold for most antiques to £50. Therefore, the proposals in amendments Nos. 6 and 7 are that the £10 threshold be retained for specified items similar to those requiring records when the dealer sells items for £100 or more. Again, the law of thresholds must be maintained for those items identified by the police as most frequently stolen.

Consequently, as the Bill stands, all electrical and battery-powered items will need to be recorded, together with items for use with electrical items such as CDs and computer games. That will remain the case for the reasons that I have outlined. All other items will need to be recorded if, in the view of the dealer when purchasing them, they would be sold on for more than £10. The effect of our amendment is to raise the financial limit in respect of those goods.

The £10 limit will still apply to goods listed in the amendment, namely vehicle parts, jewellery, watches, photographical equipment, sports equipment, equestrian equipment, boating equipment, musical instruments, tools, bicycles, firearms and gardening equipment. All other items, including most antiques, would not need to be recorded if their onward sale is believed to be at less than £50.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): If, as can happen, on closer inspection the article appears later to be worth a great deal more than £10, does it become an offence for the dealer to sell it for more than £10 if he or she has allowed the vendor to disappear without registering the provenance?

Mr. Clark: That is a valid question. Obviously, a judgment could be made and subsequently the item bought could be found to be more valuable than at first thought. The Bill provides for that not to be a criminal offence. Clearly, if someone consistently undertook that line of defence, one would take the necessary action. I commend the amendments to the House.

Mr. Wyatt: This is the trickiest part for antique traders, the group whom I represent. My comments relate specifically to page 5, lines 36 to 40.

When a house is cleared there are often between 3,000 and 4,000 objects. Their worth will vary from nothing to thousands and thousands of pounds. We are looking for an upper threshold. I wonder whether the sponsor will give some thought to that.

In the antiques trade it is unusual for jewellery, watches and musical instruments to be worth less than £100; the price tends to be much higher—so we are putting in the same bracket objects with different values. It is incredibly bureaucratic for dealers to have to list 4,000 or 5,000 objects, or even fewer, from a house. Will the hon. Gentleman consider raising the £100 threshold to £500?

Mr. Clark: My hon. Friend's amendments are opposed for the simple reason that the effect of raising that limit to £500 would be virtually to annihilate the basis of the Bill. As for excluding specifics, such as jewellery or watches, they are the very items that the police will say are stolen and passed on and that they want to follow through. We must remember that at the end of the day about £110 million worth of goods are stolen every year in Kent. That is last year's figure and it may well have gone up. Only about 25 per cent. is returned.

My hon. Friend's amendments would undermine the main provisions of the Bill, which are to put in place a paper trail that is useful to the police and trading standards officers, and will enable them to return the goods, bring to justice those who have stolen them, and provide some compensation to victims.

4.30 pm

Mr. Wyatt: If the figure cited by my hon. Friend is correct, I guess that it must be for recorded crime and that it must be a valuation. I do not know who carries out such valuations, but let us accept the figure. Less than

2 per cent. of that relates to the antiques trade. The provisions would increase bureaucracy and red tape for a fine profession. That will cause real damage to communities in Kent and Medway. The easiest solution would be to exempt the antiques trade. Will my hon. Friend consider that? The provision seems incredibly unfair.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House proceeded to a Division; but no Member being willing to act as Teller, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Ayes had it.*

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment made: promoters amendment No. 2, in page 4, line 29, leave out 'his business' and insert—

'the business in respect of which he is registered'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Mr. Wyatt: I beg to move amendment No. 27, in page 4, line 29, leave out from 'business' to 'enter' in line 30.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to take the following amendments: No. 34, in page 6, line 3, after 'shall', insert 'not'.

No. 35, in page 6, line 4, leave out from 'county' to end of line 12.

Mr. Wyatt: My concern is that the provision applies to non-Kent crime. It is hard enough that it should apply even to Kent. Will the sponsor consider adding the word "not" to subsection (7), so that it reads:

"Subsections (1) and (4) above shall not apply to transactions which take place outside the county."

That would seem to me to be an extension of the principle of the law. Will the sponsor reflect on that?

Mr. Paul Clark: We do not accept that. The simple reason is that if one takes away the requirement that purchases outside the county of Kent be recorded, a rogue trader could argue—when questioned about a certain item—that he or she had bought it outside the county. That excuse could be used by people who did not want to assist in providing the information required under the Bill. The claim that items were bought outside the county would be a simple way of overcoming the requirement to record the purchase. We cannot accept the amendment—to do so would negate the Bill and undermine its provisions.

Amendment negatived.

Amendments made: promoters amendment No. 6, in page 5, line 17, leave out from 'than' to end of line 19 and insert—

'the relevant amount'.

Promoters amendment No. 7, in page 5, line 23, at end insert—

'(4) For the purposes of subsection (2) above "the relevant amount" is—

(a) £10 in the case of vehicle parts, jewellery, watches, photographic equipment, sports equipment, equestrian equipment, boating equipment, musical instruments, tools, bicycles, optical equipment, firearms and gardening equipment; and

(b) £50 in the case of all other articles to which that subsection applies;

or in either case, such other amount (being no lower than the existing amount) as the council may, with the approval of the Secretary of State, determine.'

Promoters amendment No. 8, in page 5, line 24, leave out '(7)' and insert '(8)'.

Promoters amendment No. 9, in page 5, line 36, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 10, in page 6, line 2, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 11, in page 6, line 3, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 12, in page 6, line 21, leave out '(4), (8) or (9)' and insert '(5), (9) or (10)'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 7

OFFENCES UNDER PART 2

Amendments made: promoters amendment No. 13, in page 6, line 39, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 14, in page 6, line 42, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 8

EXEMPTIONS UNDER PART 2

Amendment made: promoters amendment No. 3, in page 7, line 18, at end insert—

'(e) a person engaged in business as a dealer in second-hand books, in respect of his business as such; or

(f) a person engaged in business as a dealer in animals, in respect of his business as such; or'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 11

NOTICE OF OCCASIONAL SALES AND SQUAT TRADING

Amendment made: No. 41, in page 8, line 11, after 'trading', insert 'in the county'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Clause 12

INFORMATION TO BE KEPT BY HOLDER OF CERTAIN OCCASIONAL SALES

Amendments made:

No. 45, page 10, line 33, leave out first 'business address' and insert—

'his business address or business telephone number'.

No. 46, in page 10, line 33, leave out second 'business address' and insert—

'the business address or business telephone number'.

No. 47, in page 10, line 39, leave out 'business address' and insert—

'his business address or business telephone number'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Clause 17

DEFENCE OF DUE DILIGENCE

Mr. Wyatt: I beg to move amendment No. 53, in page 12, line 41, leave out from beginning to end of line 4 on page 13.

[Mr. Wyatt]

This provision relates to another tough matter for the antique dealers. There is an implication that dealers will be penalised if they do not know or cannot be certain of the information that they were given. For example, if the information is from a stolen credit card or a false driving licence, the dealer will be penalised. With the best will in the world, how is a dealer to know whether such documents have been stolen? It is a tough call to ask dealers to be responsible for that. Will the sponsor consider my amendment?

Mr. Paul Clark: The defence provided under the clause is extremely well precedented in national as well as local legislation—for example, in the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, the Trade Marks Act 1994, the Video Recordings Act 1984 and many other Acts, and all other private Bills would contain such a provision. The amendment could result in courts wasting time and it would allow the person charged with an offence to pass the blame on to a third party, without allowing the council or the police to check the circumstances before going to court. So court time would be wasted and the circumstances could not be checked thereafter.

The provisions are well documented elsewhere. People are not criminally liable if they have in place a generally good system and can prove that fact. The clause, as drafted, will not resolve the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt).

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): If a group of dealers operates in a centre, one dealer may not be in the centre, or shop, on a particular day and may have to rely on the actions of another dealer. That is almost akin to a co-operative, and the dealers may watch one another's stalls and some of them may not go to the centre for two or three days, or two or three weeks. Will the clause on due diligence cover such eventualities?

Mr. Clark: The Select Committee considered in detail the case of someone who owns a permanent antiques fair or market that includes different traders. Obviously, the individual traders will be responsible for recording information and so on, and the provisions allow for those circumstances. Having said that, as I told the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), there will come a time when the number of times that provision is used becomes an issue further down the line. That scenario was discussed at length by the Committee, and it was satisfied that it will ultimately be covered.

Mr. Wyatt: My hon. Friend puts forward a good argument, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Order for Third Reading read.

4.43 pm

Mr. Paul Clark: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I do not wish to take too much of the House's time, bearing in mind Mr. Speaker's earlier ruling. The Kent County Council Bill and the Medway Council Bill are identical and, therefore, the provisions cover the whole county of Kent. We had an interesting debate on Second Reading. I congratulate the Select Committee on its work and its members on their determination—they considered the Bill very carefully for 11 days.

The purpose of the Bill is to regulate the second-hand trade, with the aim of reducing the amount of acquisitive crime, such as burglary, by making it harder to dispose of stolen goods and turn them into cash. Home Office research, supported by police intelligence, shows that a large proportion of stolen property passes through unregulated second-hand dealers.

Hon. Members will know that the provisions will deal with second-hand dealers, occasional sales and squat trading. The provisions will enable the paper trail—the evidence and information required—to be set up to support genuine traders, the vast majority of whom have been involved, through various associations, in consultations with the promoters. That is why several amendments have been drafted by the promoters and considered by the Select Committee. Those amendments reflect the genuine concerns of the trade and the way in which second-hand antique dealers operate. We did not want unduly to increase the burden on businesses.

I honestly believe that the Bills will not increase that burden because many of the records that we want are included in codes of practice that operate in the trade, or have to be kept for VAT purposes. The Bills will reinforce the hard work that has been undertaken by Kent police and the trading standards agencies to reduce the amount of theft and crime.

The Bills are good examples of inter-agency working, and adopt many of the principles that were laid down in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Without taking any more time, I wish to commend the Bills to the House because they will help us to defeat those criminals who wish to cause misery for many residents of Kent.

4.46 pm

Mr. Wyatt: It is fair to say that these Bills have faced greater and more intense scrutiny, debate and amendment than any private legislation that has come before the House in recent years. The reason for that is simple: the Bills are ill-conceived and wrong in principle. The list of amendments tabled by the promoters alone is testament to the fact that the Bills were originally drafted without proper consultation with those affected. The result is that legislation is being created on the hoof, which is not ideal.

Mr. Paul Clark: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Wyatt: I shall give way in due course; I am sure that my hon. Friend will try to intervene again.

The Bills have faced opposition inside and outside the House for many reasons. Although they are aimed at dealers in second-hand goods in Kent and Medway, the United Kingdom antiques trade as a whole has been in the vanguard of opposition. We should be grateful to a small band of organisations and hard-pressed self-employed antiques dealers, especially one from Newington in my constituency and another from Tenham, just outside it.

The Bills have been subject to close examination by an Opposed Private Bill Committee. That is not to say that such actions are not supported and endorsed nationally.

A petition has been presented to the House today that carries the signatures of more than 2,300 antique dealers and members of the public who

"believe that the Kent County Council Bill should be withdrawn and any future legislation aimed at regulating the sale of second-hand goods be created on a national scale and preceded by full and proper consultation of those likely to be affected."

I think that it speaks for itself that the Committee was sufficiently moved by what it heard to publish a special report in which it said:

"We think it appropriate to report the substance of our concerns—which go wider than the bills we were tasked with scrutinising—to the House."

Indeed, such was the level of concern that one member of the Committee—I see my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) in his place—felt moved consistently to block the Bill's return to the House.

The Committee's report succinctly sums up the tenor of opposition to the Bills, and its key findings echo my concerns and those of my constituents and the second-hand goods trade as a whole, but especially the antiques trade. It will be appropriate if I quote the Committee's report further:

"Erskine May tells us that private legislation is 'legislation of a special kind for conferring particular powers or benefits on any person or body of persons—including individuals, local authorities, companies, or corporations—in excess of or in conflict with the general law. As such it is to be distinguished from the public general legislation, which is applicable to the general community.'"

The local and particular nature of private Bills is reflected not only in the way in which they are dealt with on the Floor of the House, but in the powers of, and constraints upon, Committees charged with their close scrutiny.

Committees on opposed private Bills must weigh up the arguments presented by interested parties and determine whether the balance of interest lies with the promoters or the petitioners, as they are directly and specifically affected by the provisions of the Bills. The Committees may not consider the cases of those who have not petitioned and, having no power to summon witnesses other than those presented by the parties, they have only a limited ability to compare the proposals with others previously made.

None the less, our attention was drawn by all parties to the precedent Acts. Although the provisions in the Kent County Council Bill and the Medway Council Bill were precedented, they differed in a number of respects from the earlier Acts, which were not themselves entirely uniform. For example, only one Act provided for the recording by registered dealers of sales as well as purchases.

We have heard from the petitioners that, although the provisions of these Bills are local, they will affect dealers who trade on a national basis. Consequently, there is a concern that, if provisions akin to those in the Bills were introduced in further such Bills, dealers would find themselves grappling with a number of subtly different regulatory regimes as they travelled around the country. We were told that the likelihood of dealers unwittingly committing offences against local legislation was strong. To me, that was a powerful argument in favour of introducing a single national regulatory structure. I do not think I disagree that such provisions will have a crime reduction impact, but I wish them to be fair and equitable across the country.

The promoters told us that national legislation to regulate the second-hand market was desirable but that they understood that there was little prospect of its being introduced in the near future. They therefore argued that the Bills were necessary to deal locally with the markets in stolen goods. It was put to Kent's deputy chief constable, Robert Ayling, that the introduction of such provisions on a local basis would have a displacement effect on criminal activity. He accepted that that might be the result. Sergeant Dan Murphy and Mr. Mark Dalrymple went further in suggesting that, as a consequence of the Bills' being enacted, the adjoining counties might in turn resort to local legislation as a means of tackling illegal trade.

Speculation as to the future activities of other authorities cannot form part of our deliberations today. None the less, we consider that, should an increasing number of local authorities seek equivalent powers, it would be profoundly undesirable in terms of enforcement and the burden on what I consider to be a very honest trade.

Mr. Paul Clark: I recognise the report to which the hon. Gentleman is referring. He will recognise that the Select Committee allowed the Bills to go forward. Although I accept that national legislation may well be preferable, does he agree that it is not on the horizon? Eight other measures, including the City of Newcastle upon Tyne Act 2000, contain similar provisions, so does he not agree that the people of Kent deserve that protection as well?

Mr. Wyatt: As my hon. Friend knows, it is a question of philosophy. I am not sure that we actually fundamentally disagree but, in philosophical terms, I think that the legislation should be introduced nationally and not locally. The antiques trade operates in a national and international marketplace and these Bills penalise it in an unreasonable manner.

The Opposed Private Bill Committee is not the only body in the House to identify a strong need for public legislation. I am a member of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport and our report, "Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade" stated:

"We recommend that the Home Office make a public commitment in the course of this year to establishing a national database of stolen cultural property and cultural property exported against the laws of countries concerned under national police control."

The issue has been debated elsewhere. A national database is a good idea because it would strengthen our hand in the fight against crime and disorder. I gather that inquiries have been made to the Home Office and that some legislation may be forthcoming; perhaps the Minister will enlighten us later.

The question is whether the subject of the Bills—the regulation of the antiques trade in Kent—is appropriate for local legislation. The answer to that question is emphatically no, and the objection that this is not a suitable topic for local legislation underlies my every objection to the principle of the Bills.

In a unified country with one Parliament, which is not a federal united states, it is a powerful argument that the criminal law should be the same in every county. A local Bill creates criminal offences that are unlikely to be

[Mr. Wyatt]

known of by a substantial number of people whom it will affect. It creates anomalies that lead to uncertainty, complexity and injustice. In addition, it enables the promoters not to carry out a cost benefit analysis and even some consultation, which makes it impossible to strike a fair balance between the interests of the public and the police in reducing crime and the interests of the antiques trade. It is disappointing not to have a cost benefit analysis. I find it hard to accept that the measure will not require additional policing.

The Bill creates criminal offences with fines of up to £1,000 which are unlikely to be known by a substantial number of the people whom they will affect. Dealers in the antiques trade who carry on business in Kent are from all parts of the United Kingdom and abroad. Inevitably, some people will carry on businesses in Kent without knowing the local law, will commit criminal offences and will be liable to prosecution.

It is not a sound and satisfactory basis for legislation to create criminal offences that might not be known to a substantial number of people whom they affect. The Bill is not making local byelaws that are published locally for everyone to see, such as the regulation of the use of a park or a library, with a fine of £25 or £50 attached for anyone who disobeys. It is doing nothing of that nature. Instead, it creates serious criminal offences with fines of up to £1,000 that will not be known generally throughout the trade. The Bill traps honest and decent citizens who are unaware that they have committed an offence that is susceptible to criminal prosecution, with all the humiliation that that can imply.

The Bill's principles are not underpinned by a moral consideration, unlike the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, which applies nationally. Everyone is deemed to know national legislation. Anyone who does not and is in business should know that, under the terms of that Act, they must not mislead their customers by the way in which they represent their goods for sale. There is a strong underlying moral theme to the 1968 Act, which is not the case with these Bills. Obligation to register is not underpinned by a moral consideration. The dealer who comes from outside Kent is genuinely an unwary individual, without a reason to suspect or know that the Bill exists.

The Bills' principles are not even part of the culture of the antiques trade. That would change, however, if there were national legislation, which is where I stand on the matter. The Bill, will not become part of the culture of the trade because they will affect only those who come to Kent from time to time.

Mr. Fallon: If there were national legislation on those grounds, would the hon. Gentleman support it?

Mr. Wyatt: I would definitely support it. I am arguing philosophically that it is wrong for just some citizens of the United Kingdom to be covered by legislation.

The promoters are easily content with the notion that Parliament should enact a Bill to create absolute offences that have an impact on innocent and responsible people who will have no defence if prosecution is brought. That is wholly unprincipled and exceptional in our legal system, although I am mindful of similar Bills in other counties.

The civil liberty issues cannot be ignored. They arise because we are dealing with local legislation that purports to regulate a trade that operates nationwide. The issue would not arise so acutely if the exponents of the trade operated wholly within the county of Kent, because such dealers could be targeted and informed about the law with comparative ease. That is not the case with the antiques trade because of the national and international marketplace.

Mr. Paul Clark: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that similar Acts exist in other parts of the country? He seems to be making the case that the Bill will be detrimental to people who come to Kent. Does he accept that of all the registrations under the North Yorkshire County Council Act 1991, sources outside Kent confirm that about 51 per cent. are of traders who run their business outside the county and go into it to operate? There is a 50:50 split between those inside and those outside the county.

Mr. Wyatt: That Act was passed 10 years ago, but crime figures have only just started to fall. Other counties have introduced their own Bills, so the antiques business is regulated differently in seven or eight counties. That does not assist our attempts to deregulate, to help young entrepreneurs to prosper and to enable those who want to trade to do so. We are obfuscating the issue by increasing bureaucracy.

A witness to the Opposed Private Bill Committee, Mr. Tripp, stated that principle succinctly, when he said:

"I would like to see the Bill scrapped because I really do believe that crime is a national problem and it should be dealt with in a national Bill. If I was sitting here today proposing that we have one Bill for Kent for drugs and another one for Sussex, so you could smoke cocaine on one side of the road and not on the other, you would all laugh me out of court and I cannot see that this is any different."

He is absolutely right. The criminal law should be the same throughout the country.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Does my hon. Friend accept that every police force has the right to operate differently and that styles of policing vary? Measures should be available, therefore, that may be particularly appropriate for one force, but not for all the others.

Mr. Wyatt: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. We are trying to encourage best practice in police forces to be used nationally. The fundamental point is that we do not yet have best practice in the culture of policing, but we hope that we will achieve it. My question, which I dwelt on before, is whether we are equal citizens under the law or only under some laws.

I mentioned the Worcester City Council Act 1985. There is also the County of Lancashire Act 1984 and the City of Newcastle upon Tyne Act 2000. I will not read out the whole list of such Acts, but if other local authorities with similar legislation decide to enforce it, dealers will be required to cope with numerous Acts, all of them different. If other local authorities follow suit, as Newcastle upon Tyne has, the position will get worse. The position of antiques dealers in this country will become completely untenable. Do we want that business here or not? It is a massive revenue earner within UK plc and outside the country. The promoters hope and expect that other local authorities will follow suit. That is the wrong way round. Philosophically, if the proposal is right, the Home Office should introduce it nationally.

As many hon. Members know, a local Bill enables the promoter to avoid carrying out a cost benefit analysis and, in some cases, to avoid consulting the trade. The absence of a cost benefit analysis makes it impossible to strike a fair balance between the interests of the public and the police in reducing crime on the one hand, and the interests of the antiques trade in carrying out its business without undue interference on the other.

If national legislation were introduced, a proper scientific study would be carried out with the assistance of trade associations and others to ascertain the effects of regulating the antiques trade in various ways and the benefit in terms of reducing the market in stolen goods. There would be full consultation, initiated by a Green Paper and followed by a Government proposal set out in a White Paper. We all know how that system works. Such a study would inevitably involve the investigation of different types of dealers, their income and expenditure, different methods of business and the nature and extent of the problem—the market in stolen goods. It would investigate traffic in stolen goods at each level of the trade and different ways to prevent it. There would be consultation not only of Kent police but of other police forces.

Mr. Paul Clark: This is not national legislation and there is no requirement for a cost benefit analysis, but does my hon. Friend accept that consultation on the ideas behind the Bill has been extensive and began even before the first draft was started two and a half years ago? Does he accept also that the proposals have been part and parcel of Operation Radium in Kent and Medway, so it is not as though the legislation has suddenly been introduced to the House without any discussion taking place? Do not the amendments show that the promoters have listened to members of the trade?

Mr. Wyatt: I agree in part, but I have attended public meetings and received letters and e-mails from hundreds of people saying that they were not consulted or asked for their opinion. That is a genuine grievance held especially by those in the antiques trade.

A suggestion has been made in some quarters that the opposition to the Bill of the London and Provincial Antique Dealers Association and DMG Antiques Fairs Ltd. implies that they are willing to tolerate trafficking in stolen goods. That is not true. They want properly thought out national legislation that serves the interests of the public as well as the trade—LAPADA has campaigned for that. They strongly oppose the Bill's clumsy sledgehammer approach, which will require dealers to record thousands of transactions involving articles ranging from 18th-century dining tables to tie pins, most of which will be of no value to the police.

Anyone who has visited Detling, which is one of the great antiques fairs, will realise that the Bill carries serious implications for the way in which such fairs operate. Its framing will ensure that Kent dealers have to register transactions whereas non-Kent people will not. That is a disappointment to me and those who share my views.

Many of the records will have nothing to do with reducing trafficking or tracing stolen goods in Kent. In his evidence to the Committee, Mr. Scott, representing Kent county council's trading standards department, conceded as much. His department does not even intend to range outside Kent to inspect the records of registered dealers outside the county. Such records will be inspected only if the dealer brings them to Kent and a trading standards officer happens to run into him. Why impose a requirement to keep such records if it is not going to be enforced? That is yet another anomaly arising from this local Bill. From their evidence to the Committee, it was apparent that the Bill's promoters hoped that if the local Bill was a success, the Government would intervene with national legislation; however, the Bill's enactment will not encourage the Executive to intervene.

I ask the Minister to think again. One might as well give a drink to an alcoholic. The only way to encourage an alcoholic to seek a cure is to withhold drink. If the Government see local authorities enacting local legislation around the country, they will be satisfied that there is no need for them to intervene, but the harm done to the antiques trade in the intervening period will be dramatic.

In their evidence to the Committee, the promoters accepted that if the police case for the Bill could not be proved, there would be no basis for enacting the Bill to serve the interests of the trading standards department. Mr. Scott's evidence made it clear that any benefit to the trading standards department would be purely incidental and that the Bill must stand or fall according to whether the police have made out their case. However, last year, the value of stolen antiquities in the county of Kent constituted only 2.4 per cent. of the total value of stolen goods in Kent. That statistic was thoroughly tested in Committee.

Furthermore, in their evidence, Kent police accepted that the more organised burglar—as opposed to the burglar who is driven by addictive drugs—will transport antiques a great distance to dispose of them. If antiques are taken outside the county before disposal, they will not be affected by the Bill and will fall outside its recording provisions. Antiques that are taken outside the county will have been stolen by the more organised and trained burglar and are likely to be more valuable.

As I have said, the out-and-out rogue dealer is unlikely to register under the Bill, and the Bill will not impinge on goods disposed by those who remain unregistered. If a dealer remains unregistered, the powers of recording conferred by the Bill will be inapplicable to him; equally, the powers of entry and inspection afforded to the police by the Bill will not apply to him. The local unorganised burglar who has stolen an antique will not generally have gone out of his way to steal antiques. He will steal the more usual items, such as video recorders and the latest PlayStation. The Bill deals with an extremely small proportion of the stolen goods in Kent.

The gain to the police to be derived from the Bill in relation to the antiques trade is wholly unproven. The measure of assistance that they can reasonably hope to gain from it, whether in reducing the market in stolen antiques or in tracing such goods, will be very small indeed. In contrast, the Bill will cause dealers in the antiques trade to prepare thousands of different sets of records. Some of those records will cover thousands of transactions. As I explained, a house clearance can involve between 3,000 and 4,000 items. Trying to use such records to trace stolen goods will be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

In the Committee, Kent police were asked how they would know where to start looking if somebody reported a Lowestoft jug stolen. With a list of thousands of names,

[Mr. Wyatt]

where would they start to look? The police response was, "Well, our intelligence-led policing will target certain dealers." From that answer, it follows that the ordinary honest dealer, who has no wish to accept stolen goods, is not going to be targeted by the police unless, by pure chance, the police are tipped off and told that the Lowestoft jug has regrettably ended up with an honest dealer. The out-and-out rogue dealer, on the other hand, will get by without registering. The dishonest antiques dealer will register, but he is unlikely to oblige by recording correct names, addresses and descriptions of articles. Inventive means can be used by the rogue dealer to avoid the provisions of the Bill.

Some individuals may be caught, but they will be liable to fines of only £1,000. The inference is that the burden of the Bill will be borne by the honest dealer—not by the crook or the dodgy dealer—for little gain.

We know from the North Yorkshire experience that for the first three or four years the Act that applied to that area was never enforced. It was then enforced for a period, and resources were diverted and re-prioritised elsewhere. The same will happen in Kent. The police change their tactics to meet the changing tactics of the criminal and resources are reapplied elsewhere. In Sittingbourne and Sheppey, the crime rate has gone down. What happens? We lose five police officers.

Kali Mountford: I accept my hon. Friend's argument that tactics used by the police and burglars change. Burglars who are now taking certain items may be finding it difficult to dispose of them. If antiques were exempted, would burglars not find themselves a new market?

Mr. Wyatt: There is some logic in what my hon. Friend says.

Kent-registered dealers at antiques fairs will lose business, whether in Kent or elsewhere, in the important period at the beginning of the fair when dealers are operating at close quarters and in hectic competition. In such circumstances, a dealer will not stop to provide his name and address or other forms of identification to the Kent-registered dealer, who will therefore lose out on the best available deals. Although in theory the purchaser can take the badge number of the seller, by no means all fairs issue badges.

I shall give the example of an Act that relates to the registration of adults who work with children. The sum involved was £10. The Scottish Parliament said that it would pay that sum. I tabled a question asking whether it would be all right for scouts, football teams and guides in my constituency to register as a PO Box in Edinburgh. As the House will know, there is now no charge in England. Antique dealers and others will find ways of getting round the Bill's provisions. That is why the issue is national and not local.

It is clear from the evidence that business will be lost by dealers at antique fairs, and not merely in the first few hours of trade. Similarly, it will be lost outside antique fairs in the normal course of business, because people will refuse to give their names and addresses. It is equally clear that alternative methods of identification will not be the answer. Not everyone has a driving licence, and not everyone who has a licence carries it. Not many people will produce a credit card to identify themselves. They may pay by credit card, but that is their chosen method of payment, assuming that the dealer will accept one. The dealer will not necessarily have credit card facilities. Most people cannot remember their national insurance number, and who walks around with a passport?

Dealers who buy from abroad or from tourists will, in many instances, be unable to get the names and addresses of the vendors, as a result of which business will be lost. A witness to the Committee, whose plight is by no means unusual, described graphically the difficulties experienced in buying at brocantes and fairs in France, and in buying from Japanese tourists. It is difficult to see how a Kent dealer could continue in business if the Bill were enacted, including the provisions relating to antiques.

The requirement of the Bill to record a description sufficient to identify the article was amended in Committee. If an antiques dealer is asked to describe an antique, he will naturally resort to the method that has been used since time immemorial. We will not change the animal by requiring the dealer to describe the article in another way. It is common to find that one dealer backs his hunch or judgment against another when it comes to the date of an article, who made it and so forth. Such differing views, it is suggested, would be converted into criminal offences.

That is the cause of anxiety to the dealer. Of course, a mis-description could blot out the tracing facility of the records. That could give rise to annoyance on the part of the police or the trading standards officer, for example. No one can predict the extent to which a dealer will be criticised if he makes a mistake in his description of an article.

Some antiques dealers buy goods in lots, whether it be at a house clearance or otherwise; they then sell on in lots. The lots can include 1,000, 2,000, 3,000 or more articles. Sometimes they do not even look at them. They do not want them. They are not interested in the overwhelming majority of the contents of a house, but they notice the odd clock or the odd piece of furniture. That is what attracts them. The dealer will now have to log everything. He will have to make up his mind whether it is worth logging each article and whether an article can go to sale for less than £10. He will have to consider whether he is under an obligation to enter a description of each and every article. That is becoming ridiculous for those in the trade.

Is it right to impose the burden of more book-keeping on the trade, as those people are busy? We have reached the stage in our history where we do not think it justifiable to impose regulations on individuals without real justification. The Bill indiscriminately imposes regulation, regardless of the level of turnover or the number of transactions, which is a grievous imposition. It is not valid to argue that people are required to enter such records under the VAT margin scheme, as the global accounting scheme has been specially provided by Customs and Excise to meet the particular requirements of businesses with a high turnover of low-value articles. They do not have to enter such records in relation to transactions of £500 or less.

If the Bill becomes law, the prospects are bad for antiques fairs in Kent, which will be driven out of the county altogether. The Bill will have a considerable effect on many businesses that attend those fairs. We do not

know to what extent dealers will say, "I am not going to bother with Kent any more; I am going to go elsewhere." No study has been carried out to determine that. A drop of only 20 per cent. in the number of stall holders at Detling, the largest fair in Kent, will turn it into a loss-making enterprise. If it closes, the effect on the local economy will be devastating.

The question of how to exclude the antiques trade from the Bill is a natural progression from my earlier statements. It merely becomes a question of definition; the VAT regulations are an excellent starting point because a great deal of thought has been given to the Value Added Tax (Special Provisions) Order 1995, S.I. 1268, as amended by the Value Added Tax (Special Provisions) (Amendment No. 2) Order 1999, S.I. 3120. I venture to suggest that those regulations contain concise, simple definitions that have been well thought through by those advising Customs and Excise. While not a perfect fit, they require little modification and provide the comfort of being based on a substantial amount of research and consultation. I shall therefore oppose the Bill.

5.16 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I am delighted to have the opportunity to say a few words in support of the Bill. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) was right that, despite our somewhat attenuated proceedings this afternoon, it has received a good deal of parliamentary scrutiny. On Second Reading, we had a good debate on its principles, and the Committee that considered it extremely conscientiously paid close attention to each of its provisions.

I have consistently supported the Bill but not, it is fair to say, without many misgivings. It is true that the Bill imposes significant additional regulation on the traders whose activities it covers. My hon. Friends and I are philosophically predisposed to object to further regulation; there is too much regulation, which ought to be diminished. That is a powerful argument against the Bill, as is the argument deployed by the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey about consistency. I agree that national legislation would have been preferable, but we know that that it is not on the cards and is unlikely to be introduced in the near future.

Those of us who represent the people of Kent therefore have to face up to the question. We all want to do everything that we can to reduce crime in Kent. The question boils down to this: are we prepared to will the means as well as the end? I believe that the Bill will contribute to the reduction of crime in Kent. At least equally importantly, the chief constable, to whom I paid tribute on Second Reading and in whose judgment I have considerable confidence, is strongly of that view as well.

Despite the cogent points made by the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey and the misgivings to which I referred, I believe that the Bill—which, I deeply regret, will impose difficulties on many traders, including many of my constituents—will make a significant contribution to making Kent a place with less property crime. That is an objective of considerable importance, which is why I have consistently supported the legislation.

5.19 pm

Mr. Rowe: I shall be brief. Many of my constituents have, like those of the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), taken a leading role in opposing the legislation and have written and spoken to me about it. I share a number of their anxieties. Their principal concern is that the Bill should be national legislation. The Government came to power on a pledge to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but it is a shame that when they are confronted with an opportunity to introduce relatively modest legislation nationwide, they allow it to grow up piecemeal through a series of private Bills.

It is a poor argument to suggest that there is no room to deal with a measure that controls crime, which impinges on every person in the country, in a legislative timetable that has given so much time to irrelevancies such as hunting with dogs. I would have supported the Bill with fervour if it had been national legislation, but I do not feel fervent about it. Instead, I feel anxious for constituents of mine who work in the trade, as there may be a small transfer of trade—I think it will be smaller than they fear—to other places, where people do not have to keep records.

In an increasingly international world, trade goes to the places where it is best regulated and organised. Most antique dealers in Kent have a justifiably high reputation for honesty and probity. I hope that the Bill will increase that impression, as a good reputation brings trade in its wake. It is for the police to prove that the Bill diminishes crime, however, and I look forward to considering their records during the next two or three years to find out whether it does so.

The other reason why I am keen to support the Bill is that I am outraged to know that there are shops in my constituency that send out thieves to steal to order. They are well known to the police and to some local people, but it is so difficult to catch them in the act that they continue to commit their crimes with apparent impunity. The sending out of youngsters to steal to order was a well-known feature of 19th-century London, but I am outraged by the idea that dealers in my constituency are doing the same thing now. Such crime is a significant way of increasing the drugs trade, as it is drug addicts who are most likely to do the stealing. Any measure that will diminish such activities is to be commended, which is why I support the Bill.

5.23 pm

Mr. Fallon: I, too, support the Bill, for the reasons that I outlined on Second Reading, which now seems a very long time ago. I do not do so with wild enthusiasm, however, as there are issues of bureaucracy and the central question of local or national legislation. As I made clear on Second Reading, a price may have to be paid for the Bill in terms of bureaucracy, as it could bear down heavily on people who are not involved in criminal activity of any sort, but who will now have to put up with some of the red tape to which the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) referred. Those issues have been explored both in Committee and in the House today, and the promoters' original proposals have been substantially amended during the Bill's passage through both Houses. I hope, therefore, that the bureaucratic burden will be less than it might otherwise have been.

[Mr. Fallon]

The only other argument about the Bill is whether it should have been a national measure. I made my position clear on Second Reading. I am not opposed to local innovation in developing the law. It is now for other counties and for police forces to see how Kent gets on and to decide whether to promote their own legislation.

The Bill is slightly different and it builds on experience from elsewhere. That is useful. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey may be right to say that a Bill that applies nationally is preferable. In response to my intervention he said that, despite his misgivings about the lack of a moral framework, he would support it if it applied nationally.

The Bill does not apply nationally, and there is no prospect of such a measure. I do not know what the position will be on 4 May, but there is little prospect of a national Bill in the next few days or weeks. We must therefore deal with the measure as it stands.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey was right when he said that Kent police's case was unproven. That is the nature of such measures; the police cannot prove to Parliament that the Bill will work and make a substantial difference. It is for us to make a judgment. We must assess the likely impact, the bureaucratic cost and the red tape. We must set our judgment against that of those who are in the front line.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) expressed such a judgment today. He has been in the front line as one of the more successful Home Secretaries of recent times. Crime decreased during his term of office. We have also heard the judgment of the chief constable of Kent. The Government acknowledge that he is one of the more successful chief constables in the fight against crime. I am prepared to accept at least those two judgments.

The police believe that the Bill strengthens the instruments at their disposal, and that it will make a difference. Such measures have made a difference in other areas and to other trades—for example, scrap metal. A measure on that was introduced much earlier. It is important to remember that the Bill will apply to trades other than antiques. That is why the police support it.

None the less, we should not forget antiques, which are being stolen. If they could not be cashed in so easily, they would not be stolen. The ease with which antiques can be translated into cash lies behind the extraordinarily high rates of burglary.

If there is a Division, I shall support the Bill, albeit without huge enthusiasm. Its effect may be modest, but at least it will be modest on the right side. I suspect that Kent police will be proved right and the Bill will have a significant, but not huge, impact on the operation of criminals in Kent.

5.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I do not wish to say much; I simply want to deal briefly with the issue of local and national legislation. It is the convention that the Government are neutral on private Bills, and we intend to maintain that. However, Project Radium is already examining ways to reduce supply and demand of stolen goods in Kent. The Home Office is closely associated with the project; indeed, we are providing £462,000 for it and are paying for its evaluation. We are therefore keen to ensure that it is considered with great care. Without wishing to anticipate the results of the evaluation, I understand and sympathise with the view of the promoters of such Bills that voluntary action is not enough.

If the Bill is passed today, the Government must consider whether some of the rules for which it provides need to be introduced nationally. If Parliament decides to enact the Bill, we intend to discuss with Kent county police the best way in which its benefits can be evaluated in a reasonable time. If the Government can demonstrate through experience that the benefits of the measure outweigh the cost that it will impose on second-hand dealers, we will consider carefully whether the Bill and those like it that have already been passed should form the basis for national legislation.

I hope that those points will assist the House without compromising the Government's neutrality on the Bill.

5.29 pm

Mr. Paul Clark: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the debate on Third Reading.

I welcome the comments by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), about looking carefully at the provisions of the Bill if it is passed tonight. He is absolutely right about Project Radium, which, I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), has consistently contributed to the reduction in burglaries and associated crimes in the Medway area. It has been operating on a voluntary basis, but it has rightly been pointed out that that is not enough, which is why we are debating the Bill today.

The records that are being sought are not substantially more than those that would be required under the good practice guidance notes of various associations, the requirements for VAT, and so on. As the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) recognised, we have caught the mood in terms of the requirements and the cash-up limits required for record-keeping. That provision was introduced purely to ensure that we eased the burdens on traders as much as possible, and to ensure that we continue to have a healthy operation in Kent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey referred to removing antique dealers from the scope of the Bill. It is impossible to do that, and I hope that we covered that when we considered the amendments. Antique dealers trade not only in antiques but in many items, some of which—jewellery and watches, for example—have been identified by Kent police as items that are frequently stolen and traded.

Let me add, for the benefit of hon. Members who have expressed concern, that new clause 20, which was added in Committee, provides a requirement for the promoters and the police to report to the Secretary of State on the benefits or otherwise of the Bill, no more than three years after the appointed day.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) referred to the burden of the regulatory effect of the Bill, and to the need to strike a balance between the interests of local businesses involved

in this trade and helping and protecting residents. This is a question of balance, and we have taken steps to try to ease that burden.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) referred to the process of funding the purchase of drugs, and suggested that drugs might lead to much of this type of crime. He is absolutely right. It is believed that when burglaries are committed to fund drug-related habits, the problem is not exported over the boundary into neighbouring counties, because people want to sell the stolen goods quickly in order to get the cash, and they are not going to travel to another county to do that.

We have had a substantial debate on Third Reading that has aired a number of concerns that are shared by all Members of the House. We shall watch closely the effects of the Bill, which I am pleased to support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed, with amendments.

Medway Council Bill *[Lords] [By Order]*

As amended, considered.

Clause 2

APPOINTED DAY

Amendment proposed: No. 16, in page 2, line 9, leave out,

'a newspaper circulating in the borough'

and insert—

'at least two newspapers circulating in the borough and at least one national art and antiques trade periodical'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

5.34 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this we may take the following amendments: No. 19, in page 2, line 14, leave out 'three' and insert 'six'.

No. 17, in page 2, line 18, after 'newspaper', insert

'or of any such art and antiques trade periodical'.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): In view of the fact that our proceedings on this Bill will be a copy of what we have just done with the Kent County Council Bill, can we do it all formally, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, but we shall proceed gently.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 19, in page 2, line 14, leave out 'three' and insert 'six'.

No 17, in page 2, line 18, after 'newspaper', insert

'or of any such art and antiques trade periodical'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Clause 4

INTERPRETATION OF PART 2

Amendment made: promoters amendment No. 1, in page 4, leave out line 5.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 5

REGISTRATION OF DEALERS IN SECOND-HAND GOODS

Amendments made: No. 26, in page 4, line 25, leave out 'three' and insert 'four'.

No. 27, in page 4, line 26, at end insert—

'(4) The council may not impose a charge for registration under this section'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Clause 6

INFORMATION TO BE KEPT BY REGISTERED DEALERS IN SECOND-HAND GOODS

Amendments made: promoters amendment No. 15, in page 4, line 32, leave out '(4)' and insert '(8)'.

Promoters amendment No. 3, in page 4, line 35, leave out 'his business' and insert—

'the business in respect of which he is registered'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Amendment made: No. 28, in page 4, line 35, leave out from 'business' to 'enter' in line 36.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Amendments made: promoters amendment No. 6, in page 5, line 27, leave out from 'than' to end of line 29 and insert—'the relevant amount'.

Promoters amendment No. 7, in page 5, line 33, at end insert—

'(4) For the purposes of subsection (2) above "the relevant amount" is—

(a) £10 in the case of vehicle parts, jewellery, watches, photographic equipment, sports equipment, equestrian equipment, boating equipment, musical instruments, tools, bicycles, optical equipment, firearms and gardening equipment; and

(b) £50 in the case of all other articles to which that subsection applies;

or in either case, such other amount (being no lower than the existing amount) as the council may, with the approval of the Secretary of State, determine.'

Promoters amendment No. 8, in page 5, line 34, leave out '(7)' and insert '(8)'.

Promoters amendment No. 9, in page 6, line 1, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 10, in page 6, line 14, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 11, in page 6, line 15, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 7

OFFENCES UNDER PART 2

Amendments made: promoters amendment No. 12, in page 6, line 33, leave out '(4), (8) or (9)' and insert '(5), (9) or (10).'

Promoters amendment No. 13, in page 7, line 6, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

Promoters amendment No. 14, in page 7, line 9, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 8

EXEMPTIONS UNDER PART 2

Promoters amendment No. 4, in page 7, line 31, at end insert—

'(e) a person engaged in business as a dealer in second-hand books, in respect of his business as such; or

(f) a person engaged in business as a dealer in animals, in respect of his business as such; or'.

—*[Mr. Paul Clark.]*

Clause 12

INFORMATION TO BE KEPT BY HOLDER OF CERTAIN OCCASIONAL SALES

Amendments made: No. 46, in page 10, line 44, leave out first 'business address' and insert—

'his business address or business telephone number'.

No. 47, in page 10, line 44, leave out second 'business address' and insert—

'the business address or business telephone number'.

No. 48, in page 11, line 6, leave out 'business address' and insert—

'his business address or business telephone number'.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Clause 17

DEFENCE OF DUE DILIGENCE

Amendment proposed: No. 54, in page 13, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 16.—*[Mr. Wyatt.]*

Question put: That the amendment be made:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Wyatt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We opposed the same idea when we were dealing with the Kent County Council Bill. May I withdraw the amendment, so that there need not be a Division?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We may get to that stage, but we shall have to ask for Tellers first.

KALI MOUNTFORD *and* MR. MICHAEL HOWARD *were appointed Tellers for the Noes; but no Member being willing to act as Teller for the Ayes,* MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Noes had it.*

Bill read the Third time, and passed, with amendments.

PETITIONS

Public Houses (Portsmouth)

5.41 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I wish to present a petition on behalf of Carol and Mick Frewing, the tenants of the Connaught Arms in Fratton, Portsmouth, and of more than 1,000 local people who want a fair deal for local pubs and landlords. The petition states:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled.

The Humble Petition of Carol and Mick Frewing, tenants of the Connaught Arms, Fratton, Portsmouth.

That Whitbread Plc has decided to sell all its 3,000 pubs to a sole bidder, thereby denying its 1,700 pub licensees the right to buy the Freehold of their premises. The Petitioners believe that this action may seriously jeopardise one's choice and the future of small pubs everywhere, especially in Portsmouth.

The Petitioners pray that your honourable House support the signatories of Early-Day Motion 177 in deploring this decision by Whitbread Plc. The Petitioners further pray that the House note that Many Licensees have invested considerable sums in their pubs and have in the process contributed substantially to Whitbread's profit; recognise also that these licensees now feel betrayed by the company's actions and ask the Honourable House to support their right to buy campaign.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray

To lie upon the Table.

Miners' Compensation

5.42 pm

[The following petition was presented on behalf of the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig).]

The Petition of the residents of South Wales,

Declares that the existing evidence of respiratory disease contracted by miners is sufficient to meet the requirement for immediate payment of personal injury compensation without further testing or administrative delay; and that more than 25,000 readers

of the *South Wales Argus* have called on the Government to make immediate substantial payments to all chronically ill ex-miners and to the widows of men who have died as a result of such illnesses.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to speed up payments to claimants and bring justice to ex-miners and miners' widows.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Illegal Immigrants (Eurotunnel)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

5.43 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The United Kingdom terminal of the Eurotunnel service through the Channel tunnel lies in my constituency. For some time now, I have been disturbed by numerous reports of the frequency with which illegal immigrants into the United Kingdom are being apprehended in my constituency, both within the United Kingdom terminal and elsewhere. I have also been concerned about the increasing frequency of the reports which I read about the ways in which illegal entrants have gained access to Eurotunnel at the French terminal at Coquelles.

Last week, I decided to go through the tunnel to France, to see for myself what things were like on the French side. I travelled through the tunnel in the company of Bill Dix, the managing director of Eurotunnel, and I am very grateful to him and his colleagues for their co-operation.

I looked at the security arrangements at the terminal in Coquelles, and I visited the Red Cross centre at Sangatte. I applied for this debate so that I could report on what I found to the House and, indeed, to the Minister, for, as far as I am aware—no doubt she will correct me if I am wrong—neither she nor any of her ministerial colleagues in the Home Office have yet made a similar trip.

I hope that no one is in any doubt about the seriousness of the situation. I was told, for example, that the number of illegal immigrants apprehended within the United Kingdom terminal was running at a rate that would mean that as many would be apprehended in this month of March as were apprehended in the whole of last year. The number apprehended in the French terminal in the first 12 days of March was no fewer than 1,082. I am sorry that, through a misunderstanding, I gave that figure for the United Kingdom terminal on the radio this morning, but the true number affords no grounds for complacency, and is a matter of grave concern.

At the Red Cross centre in Sangatte, about which I shall say more in a moment, the number of people passing through during the past 18 months was no fewer than 25,000. I do not know whether the Minister was previously aware of that astonishing figure. It certainly brings home the scale of the problem that I want to discuss this evening.

The Eurotunnel terminal at Coquelles is a big place. I was told that it covers roughly the same area as Heathrow airport. It is obviously a very difficult area to make secure. I think that Eurotunnel has made a genuine attempt to do what it can to make it difficult for unauthorised entry to its trains, or the lorries that use its trains, to be obtained. It has not, however, been wholly successful in this endeavour—far from it.

When I talked to Eurotunnel about its problems, it identified two ways in which matters could be improved. First, the fencing of a part of the area is the responsibility of SNCF, the French national railways. SNCF has, I was told, been promising since last June to put up in respect of the area for which it is responsible the same kind of high security fencing that Eurotunnel is in the process of erecting—and, indeed, has now largely erected—in

[Mr. Michael Howard]

respect of the area for which it is responsible. Despite these assurances, no such action has yet been taken by SNCF.

SNCF is a nationalised concern. If there were any political will on the part of the French Government to take action on these matters, they could ensure that SNCF took the necessary action. If relations between the United Kingdom Government and the French Government are anything like as good as we are constantly told they are, it should be an easy matter for the United Kingdom Government to make representations to the French Government to ensure that this is done. I hope that the Minister will tell us during her reply to what representations the United Kingdom Government have made to the French Government on this issue and what response they have received.

I should mention that if this action were taken, it would have a positive effect not only on those who abuse Eurotunnel's services but on those who use the rail freight services through the tunnel. I am aware of the many difficulties faced by the operators of that service, largely caused by SNCF, although they lie somewhat outside the scope of the issue on which I want to concentrate this evening.

The second step that could be taken to improve security at the Coquelles terminal relates to the personnel who are employed on security duties at the terminal. As a result of the combined effect of the agreement under which the terminal is policed and French law, Eurotunnel's own security personnel have, as I was told last week, very limited powers. They are unable to use force in respect of those who seek unauthorised entry to the terminal and they are unable to detain any who are apprehended there. However, British police officers, including the Ministry of Defence police, would, as I understand it, have such powers. Eurotunnel therefore believes that personnel with those powers should be made available to undertake security duties at the terminal. The most obvious candidates seem to Eurotunnel and to me to be Ministry of Defence police. I understand that that option is currently being considered by the United Kingdom Government. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us what progress, if any, has been made in considering that option.

The Red Cross centre at Sangatte is a remarkable place It is evidently well run, and I entirely accept that the provision of the facilities that are available and the work that is carried out are motivated by the highest principles. However, the inescapable—and astonishing—fact is that this large facility exists solely for the purpose of providing food and shelter for those who are seeking illegal entry into the United Kingdom. Those who use the facilities are there only because of the proximity to the terminal at Coquelles. If they were able to obtain legal entry into the United Kingdom, there would be no need for them to stop off at Sangatte in the first place.

I can quite see why no one in France has any incentive to do anything to change the present situation. They are only too happy for these people to leave France, gain entry to the United Kingdom and apply for asylum in this country. They make little secret of that fact. The Minister will know, however, as everyone who pays any attention to this subject will know, that the international convention on refugees, which is the fundamental source of our obligations on this matter, provides that asylum seekers should seek sanctuary in the first safe country in which they find themselves. Self-evidently, for those arriving from continental Europe into this country by any method of transport other than air, that first safe country is never the United Kingdom.

The obvious question that arises is why those who congregate at Sangatte and elsewhere are so determined to seek asylum in the United Kingdom, rather than in France or any of the other countries through which they have travelled on their way to the United Kingdom. I asked that question of those whom I met at the Red Cross centre at Sangatte. Their answers were illuminating. They listed three factors—the English language, more money and better accommodation.

I understand that there is nothing that the Minister can do about the English language, but there is a very great deal that the Government can do to deal with the other factors that attract asylum seekers to this country.

I repeat that this country is never the first safe country arrived at by asylum seekers who use the channel tunnel. They therefore have a wide choice of countries in which they can apply for asylum. By definition, all those who use the Red Cross centre at Sangatte could apply for asylum in France. No amount of statistical obfuscation on the part of the Government can obscure the extraordinary fact that last year, for the first time, more people applied for asylum in the United Kingdom than in any of the other member states of the European Union, including Germany.

The Liberal Democrats say that nothing can be done to affect the number of people who apply for asylum in this country, so they do not propose to do anything at all about the problem. The Government's position, however, is different. They accept that measures can and should be taken to deal with that aspect of the problem. That, indeed, was the purpose of the legislation that eventually found its way on to the statute book last year.

I am on record as wishing the Government well with that legislation. I expressed the hope that it would work. Clearly, if it had worked, that would have been greatly to the benefit of my constituents, but the conclusion is now utterly inescapable that the Government's legislation has not worked. So, far from moderating the number of people who apply for asylum in the United Kingdom, that number has continued to increase.

The evidence that I discovered during my journey through the channel tunnel last week is that this problem is now completely out of control. What is more, the greater the extent to which it becomes apparent that it is out of control, the greater will be the numbers coming to the Red Cross centre at Sangatte and trying to effect illegal entry into the United Kingdom.

There are two other aspects of the problem with which I want to deal before I sit down. On both sides of this House, there is unanimity that genuine refugees should be granted asylum, although it is noteworthy that the Home Secretary has recently called for another look at the international conventions that govern our obligations in that respect.

The residents of the Red Cross centre at Sangatte do not give the appearance of people fleeing from persecution. They were described to me by those who run the centre as, typically, young, single, male and middle class. It costs, on average, £7,000 for them to get to

northern France from their starting point. That is money not readily available to poor, downtrodden victims of persecution.

The truth is that the arrangements that exist in this country for asylum seekers are significantly more favourable to them than those that exist in other member states of the European Union. That is something for which the Government are responsible and which, now that the failure of their recent legislation is apparent, they should address. It is clear that action can be taken to deal with this problem. When I was Home Secretary the effect of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 and the associated benefit changes which we introduced was to reduce the number of asylum seekers to the United Kingdom by 40 per cent. The present Government could have continued with that policy, but chose not to. That is why the number of asylum seekers has increased from 29,000 in 1996—the last full year of the last Government—to more than 76,000 last year. That is why the situation is now out of control.

There is one final point that I should make before I sit down since it is frequently made but distorted by Government spokesmen. Indeed, the Minister attempted to make it on the "Today" programme this morning. The Dublin convention was agreed in 1990. That was long before I became Home Secretary, but more importantly, long before the asylum problem had reached the dimensions with which we are faced today. The underlying principle of the Dublin convention is that asylum seekers should apply for asylum in the first member state of the European Union in which they find themselves. It is a principle, to which, at least in theory, all subscribe.

The convention came into force in the summer of 1997. There is evidence to suggest that it is not working as it was intended to work and that, far from facilitating the application of that fundamental principle to which I have referred, it may in some cases be obstructing it. If that is so, the present Government have had almost four years since the convention came into force to revise it or withdraw from it. They never cease to tell us how warm their relations are with other member states of the European Union. Let this issue be a test of those assertions. If relations are indeed as good as we are always told they are, it should not be a difficult matter for the convention to be applied as it was always intended to be applied, to ensure that asylum seekers make their application for asylum in the first member state in which they find themselves.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Howard: Yes, of course, I give way to my hon. Friend, who is a member of the Home Affairs Committee.

Mr. Howarth: I would have been here at the outset, had the earlier business not broken up sooner than anticipated. I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on drawing this extremely important issue to the attention of the House. Will he address himself to a problem that has arisen in respect of the Dublin convention? The United Kingdom courts are now saying that even if the Government wished to return people to some continental countries, those countries are not deemed to be safe in terms of their future handling of those asylum seekers whom we wish to return to the continent. Is this not a serious issue? What advice can my right hon. and learned Friend give the Government to address the problem vis-à-vis our own courts?

Mr. Howard: This is a serious issue. It is an astonishing development on the part of the courts which say that only they can decide whether France or Germany is a safe country, that only they can decide what the proper interpretation of the convention is to be and that they know better than any other courts in any other European country. The answer is simple: the Government should legislate to overrule the decisions of the courts. If the Government say that they may not be able to achieve their objective in that way because of the Human Rights Act 1998, I ask who was responsible for it.

My constituency is at the sharp end of this problem. The problem is getting worse and must be dealt with. I have made what I believe are constructive proposals to the Minister this evening. The problem is out of control and action must be taken to deal with it.

5.59 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Perhaps I could deal first with the point raised by the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). It refers to an old batch of cases that have now progressed through the courts. My understanding is that the 1999 legislation dealt with that point and that those cases referred to matters that arose before that legislation came into force. If my understanding of the matter is not correct, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members present.

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of offering sanctuary to those fleeing oppression. For genuine refugees, we are committed by the international convention to provide protection from persecution, and we shall continue to do so. Indeed, not only are we obliged to do so by our international convention commitments, but I believe strongly that we have a positive moral duty to do so. The right to seek asylum did not just happen in 1951; it is much more ancient and fundamental than that. It is embodied in all the great world religions and I am proud that we, too, discharge our obligations.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Does the Minister agree that the 1951 convention, which is 50 years old, applied to wholly different circumstances from those that apply at present? Nowadays, someone can get on an aeroplane in Afghanistan, fly to Moscow, hijack the plane to London and, the next thing we know, become the Minister's responsibility at Stansted. What was the Home Secretary saying last year in Lisbon if it was not that the convention was out of date and that the problem of asylum seekers should be dealt with in the nearest safe country to the country where the persecution is occurring? Can the hon. Lady update us on the Home Secretary's comments last year?

Mrs. Roche: Not only did my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary make that speech in Lisbon last year; he spoke on the subject more recently in London. It is appropriate that we should be discussing this matter, as the Select Committee on Home Affairs—of which the

[Mrs. Roche]

hon. Gentleman is a member—considered some of these issues recently and produced a report that gives an extremely helpful background to them.

We continue to abide by the principles of the convention. Indeed, European Union Heads of Government affirmed that commitment at Tampere. Of course, the hon. Gentleman is correct to say that the context in which the framers of the 1951 convention operated was different from present circumstances—my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have made similar points. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recognised that and has initiated global consultation on the convention. The UNHCR says firmly that the convention is not—and was never intended to be—a migratory instrument. I always make a clear distinction between legal migration—on which I have recently made speeches—and asylum, which I strongly believe must be ring-fenced. Such an important concept cannot be undermined.

That is the background against which the Government introduced the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to strengthen immigration control and the asylum system, making it fairer, faster and firmer. The aim of the Act was to improve the asylum process across the board and to tackle the problem of illegal immigration to the UK.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) will forgive me if I do not quite share his analysis of past history on this matter. By the end of the previous Government's term of office, it was clear that asylum applications were rising—as they were across the whole of Europe. Indeed, according to current figures, some countries are experiencing greater pressure than us; compared with other EU countries, we are in the middle of the table showing numbers per head of population.

There was also a tremendous problem with support. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will know that areas such as Kent and London were faced with the difficult responsibilities of support as a result of his own failed legislation, which was struck down by the courts.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Lady will know that that happened as a result of the intervention of the courts, which said that the duty, which had fallen into disuse, on local authorities under the National Assistance Act 1948 was still relevant, and that it was open to the Government to legislate—it would have taken a one-clause Bill—to restore the interpretation that Parliament had always intended under the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, which led to the 40 per cent. decrease in the number of asylum seekers applying for entry to this country.

Mrs. Roche: The right hon. and learned Gentleman puts a good gloss on it, but his legislation was absolutely defective because he did not realise what would happen as a result of the 1948 Act, which was prayed in aid by several authorities, including Westminster council. He was prepared to allow in-country applicants for asylum—men, women and children—to be left destitute, with no support whatever.

Illegal immigration is an international and European problem, which we can solve only through close co-operation with other countries. For that reason, the United Kingdom co-operates within the framework of the EU, as well as bilaterally, to solve the problem of illegal immigration.

One of the major new measures introduced under the 1999 Act is the imposition of the civil penalty, which the Conservative party has resolutely opposed. The measure was brought into force last year to tackle the problem of clandestine immigration in road vehicles. As a result, those held to be responsible are now faced with fines of £2,000 for every clandestine illegal entrant carried. The legislation encourages hauliers to take responsibility for the security of their vehicles and prevents them from being used to conceal illegal immigrants. It has been successful in encouraging hauliers and ferry operators to introduce better security systems.

In response to the growing number of immigrants who attempt to enter the United Kingdom illegally every day, P & O Stena Line has introduced carbon dioxide checks on all freight vehicles using its ferries. Provisional figures indicate that those checks at Calais have contributed to a 37 per cent. reduction in the number of undocumented arrivals found in Kent in the 12 weeks since checks began. However, the recent increase in security at the port of Calais has had a displacement effect in the area, and that is, of course, the subject of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's concern. We have seen an increase in clandestine immigration on the rail freight services and on the shuttle as a result. That not only undermines our immigration control but is highly dangerous to those who seek to enter and gives rise to a public safety issue.

The increased security at Calais has also led to a rise in undocumented arrivals at Cheriton involving people who have boarded open-sided freight shuttle trains. In February, there were more than 400 undocumented arrivals at Cheriton. The Government are co-operating closely with Eurotunnel and the French authorities in sharing intelligence and information to prevent clandestine entry and human trafficking.

My officials maintain close links with the company. On 8 March, I met the then president of Eurotunnel, and other executives, to identify the weaknesses of the site. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right to say that it is a very large site indeed. We discussed how to improve security there, and we have looked at ways in which to achieve that aim.

I am pleased to say that, yesterday, I received a letter from Eurotunnel telling me that it had examined the suggestion that I had made at the meeting on 8 March that the inner cordon at Coquelles should be extended to include the freight reservoir area. We have identified that area as a particular target by those seeking to enter illegally.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: This is a slightly unusual Adjournment debate and the hon. Lady's willingness to give way is much appreciated. I received a letter today from EWS—English, Welsh and Scottish Railways—saying that, since 1 Mareh 1999, it has been fined no less than £182,000 as a result of illegal immigrants being found when they arrive in the United Kingdom. The letter says that

"EWS has installed and operates a sophisticated inspection and detection system at our Dollands Moor yard near Folkestone",

which is, no doubt, in the constituency of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). It points out that that is

"the first opportunity EWS has to inspect Channel Tunnel international freight trains arriving into Britain."

At its own expense, EWS has installed the equipment but, as soon as it finds someone, along comes the immigration and nationality directorate and slaps a £2,000 fine on the company. What incentive is there for private sector companies to invest in the detection equipment if, as a result of the success of the equipment, they get a £2,000 fine for each immigrant they discover?

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Gentleman raises the related but different issue of the rail freight that might come from Italy, pass through the tunnel and arrive in the yard. EWS works in partnership with SNCF in bringing the trains through the tunnel, and we are working with EWS; I have had a couple of meetings with the company. I have also spoken to SNCF about the way in which CO_2 devices can carry out checks in the freight yards.

We are grateful for the partnership that we have with EWS in carrying out the checks at Dollands Moor, but the difficulty is that, by the time they are done, it is in a sense too late because people have already come through the tunnel. That is why we are working with the company to see what we can do about the problem.

We are pleased with the response that we have had from Eurotunnel and it has said that, once the precise details are worked out, it can do as we have suggested to reinforce security. That is to be welcomed.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also mentioned the use of Ministry of Defence personnel.

Mr. Howard: Before the Minister moves on to that issue, will she deal specifically with my first point about the importance of SNCF strengthening the security fencing in that part of the Coquelles terminal for which it is responsible?

Mrs. Roche: I will deal with that point. The issue was raised at my meeting with Eurotunnel on 8 March. We shall certainly see whether we can take the matter forward and we shall work in partnership with SNCF to do that. The issue has been raised, and I accept the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point that it is a serious one.

On the question of military assistance and Ministry of Defence personnel, our clear understanding is that there is no provision in the Sangatte protocol to support the deployment of United Kingdom armed forces at Coquelles. I am afraid that that is the position.

Mr. Howard: As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) said, the Minister has been generous in giving way, but we have some time available. She said that the protocol does not cover the use of United Kingdom military personnel, but is that also the case for the use of UK police officers, including MOD police officers who have been mentioned to me by Eurotunnel and whom I have mentioned to the Minister?

Mrs. Roche: It is our understanding that the permission applies only to immigration officers.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to the Red Cross centre at Sangatte, which is effectively a holding centre for people who are seeking to enter the United Kingdom clandestinely to apply for asylum or work illegally. I accept that people who think that they have a well-founded fear of persecution under the convention should apply for asylum in the first safe country that they reach. We must reject asylum shopping. However, the key consideration is that if we ring-fence asylum as the ancient, noble and honourable concept that it is—I make no bones about describing it in that way—it must not be undermined.

I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will forgive me for making this point again, but we disagree on it. He will recall that from April 1995, we were able to remove all illegal entrants back to France under the gentleman's agreement. Although that still works for non-asylum cases, it no longer works for asylum cases. That is a problem. The Dublin convention was a long time in its implementation, and was signed and imposed by the previous Government. It was always going to be difficult to prove where a claimant for asylum had first entered the EU. We believe that the Dublin convention is not working properly. That is widely accepted in the EU and the Commission is reviewing it.

We are determined to continue to work with our European partners to stamp out people smuggling.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Has the Minister been to Sangatte?

Mrs. Roche *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Howarth: Well, my right hon. and learned Friend, my colleagues on the Home Affairs Committee and I have. If the Minister has read our report, she will know that we were appalled by what we saw. This issue cuts across party lines. Not only are people being kept in less than adequate conditions, but they are being warehoused by the French authorities under the noses of French officials until they manage to make an illegal journey across the channel, where they land on us and become our problem. Those people are the responsibility of the French authorities. If the much-vaunted co-operation that the Government say they have with the French authorities exists, why do they not persuade them that it is their responsibility to deal with those 25,000 people instead of supervising their illegal crossing of the channel?

Mrs. Roche: That is partly the fault of the abject failure of the Dublin convention. We cannot make someone apply for asylum. The hon. Gentleman's point supports my case. We need to clamp down on the people smugglers and the traffickers, who are taking part in an evil trade. That is why our initiative for action in the western Balkans is making good progress and drawing support from other member states. The aim is twofold: to send operational teams of immigration and police officers to work in support of the authorities in Bosnia and Croatia and to create a wider network of immigration liaison officers to gather information and to target and encourage operational activity by host countries. The objective is to break up the networks involved in people smuggling and to prevent smuggling at source and on transit routes.

We are working with the French authorities. I am sure that during their visit to Sangatte, hon. Members were told of the number of successful prosecutions in France and England of the facilitators behind the trade. We have supplied intelligence to the French authorities. Successful prosecutions have taken place and people have, rightly, received prison sentences.

We are determined to do everything that we can to extend that bilateral co-operation. That was confirmed at the successful United Kingdom-France summit on

[Mrs. Roche]

9 February, at which the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and other Ministers had full discussions with their French counterparts. The summit confirmed the introduction of juxtaposed controls at Eurostar terminals. We recently introduced an order on that subject in the House, and in future, there will be a juxtaposed control at Gare du Nord, which will stop people buying a ticket to Calais, getting on the train and staying on it until they reach the United Kingdom, as some have been doing. We are pleased that the French Government have confirmed that they will introduce domestic legislation to ensure that all passengers will have to pass through juxtaposed controls regardless of whether their stated intention is to travel to the UK or to Calais. That will be a major change in French law, and it is a good illustration of the co-operation that exists.

This is an important debate. The legislation that we have passed, especially on the civil penalty, enables us to clamp down on the trading and smuggling of people. We are using the increased resources that we have given to the immigration service to disrupt criminal gangs. We are also reducing the backlog of cases. The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe did not mention the backlog of undecided cases that had been left to us. One of the key factors in encouraging people to make unfounded applications is a system that is mired in delay. We are determined to eradicate that delay. Last year, a record number of decisions, 110,000, were made by the immigration and nationality directorate, and I am grateful to all the staff who have given so much of their time and dedicated effort.

This has been an interesting debate, which has taken place at an earlier hour than most Adjournment debates. It has exposed several issues, but the key point is that the Government are determined to deter those who would make unfounded applications, but will continue to offer sanctuary to those who are genuinely fleeing persecution.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-three minutes past Six o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 23 March 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

National Lottery (Amendment) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I heard on my wireless this morning references to a statement in the House by the Deputy Prime Minister about the Marchioness tragedy. It was obvious that a number of people expected the matter to be brought to the House, and revealed to the House. Can you give us any indication, Mr. Speaker, of whether you have been asked to make provision for a statement by a Minister? It would be helpful to know that at this stage.

Mr. Speaker: There will be a statement at 11 am.

Let us now return to the National Lottery (Amendment) Bill.

9.34 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill seeks to give the National Lotteries Charities Board an additional power to consider and, indeed, award grants towards the endowment of charities under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, as amended in 1998.

The board was established as a non-departmental public body. The Act specifies the share of the national lottery to be received, and regulates the appointment of committees for grant-making. It gives the Secretary of State power to give directions relating to the matters to be taken into account in grant-making, and the conditions on which the money is to be distributed. This, then, is a permissive power, and the board thus has an opportunity to make the grants. The provision raises policy issues, but they would be for the board to consider, both in principle and at the point at which one of its grant-making committees received an application for funds for endowment of a charity.

The Bill has the support of all party members in Norfolk, some of whom are present. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright). I also convey the apologies of the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior), who has supported a charity that I am about to mention to the extent of working his socks off to secure money for it. I pay tribute to him for that: he survived. I doubt whether he will survive a general election, however, as his seat is very vulnerable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) has supported the Bill as well, and others have shown great interest.

Let me begin by explaining how I came to be interested in the issue, and why I think that the 1993 Act needs to be adapted. With the support of the *Eastern Daily Press*, the "We Care" appeal 2000 was set up in Norfolk to endow the Norfolk millennium trust for carers. It aimed to raise £1 million in cash to establish the trust—which is registered as a charity—and enable it to become long-lasting, and to provide financial help for an estimated 130,000 unpaid carers in the county. Its purpose was to respond to the identified need of such carers. It sought to help with the purchase of equipment, and to improve the quality of life for carers.

I need not describe the emotional, financial and physical burden endured by carers, or the loneliness, frustration and sheer exhaustion involved.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the valuable work done by 6 million carers in this country, but does he think that £1 million would be sufficient? He will know of the economic difficulties now being encountered: the country is going rapidly from boom to bust. Would £1 million be enough to generate the same amount of income, given the likelihood of a fall in interest rates aimed at stimulating the economy during the period of bust?

Dr. Gibson: That is a reasonable question, but I think that the sums needed to change the lives of many carers are quite small. I believe that, as long as investments were made properly, with good investment policy and advice, the money generated by an endowment fund over a long period would be enough to deal with many problems.

Investments are not made only by charities, however. The Government also invest money to help carers, and there is a genuine partnership between different organisations. The money does not supplement, but goes along with, other sources of finance. I doubt that we shall ever have enough money to deal with all the problems of carers, but by gosh, the Bill would go a long way towards doing so.

At a meeting that I had with the General Medical Council this week, we had a long debate about the withholding of support and help for terminally ill patients. It was pointed out—surprisingly—that carers would have a crucial role in determining some of the matters that exercise the minds of members of the GMC and the British Medical Association. Carers see, in the front line, the support that they receive from the medical services. In a world in which people are becoming litigious, some of the evidence that they muster and the experience that they gain might be important to the fashioning of the changes that the GMC and the BMA realise are needed. The media have now taken up the issue as well. Carers play an essential role and we must ensure that they are recognised not only as individuals helping others who are having problems but as professionals.

With the help of the *Eastern Daily Press*, the public in Norfolk have responded magnificently. Many events have been held, such as jumble sales and, as I said, walks round

[Dr. Gibson]

the county of Norfolk. Hon. Members distinguished themselves—or did not distinguish themselves—at a concert entitled "Aristosquits". The hon. Member for Mid–Norfolk told a lusty tale or two about his time in this place. I am really hoping that the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) and I will be able to perform at a concert this June, when we shall sing,

"We are public guardians bold yet cheery".

I believe my hon. Friend is up for that, although we may have to adapt the words to reflect the political times. In short, many hon. Members have been involved in the concerts, where our enjoyment of inter-party discipline is magnificent.

As I said, some hon. Members in the Chamber have played prominent roles in the effort, and the money raised has been invested in an endowment fund. The money generated by that fund is given to carers. Yesterday's *Eastern Daily Press* carries the headline, "Justice for Jemima", with the "We Care" appeal symbol underneath. It states that

"Smiling Jemima Hutson's courage and compassion will be revealed to the House of Commons tomorrow".

I am now doing just that.

Jemima Hutson received £100 from the Norfolk millennium trust for carers, which, as I said, was established with £500,000. With that money, she is buying a tumble dryer which, according to the article,

"means no more damp clothes hanging about their Norwich home aggravating Jemima and her brother and sister's asthma while they get on with their remarkable job of caring for their disabled mother.

Every day Jemima, nine, and Jessica, 14, along with four-year-old JB cook meals for the family, bathe their mother and help look after her."

What reason could hon. Members have for entering politics other than to change things for people like Jemima? The support, help and interest in other humans shown by people like Jemima is amazing. If we can help such efforts by providing lottery money, we should do it.

Money is not being provided for every soft case that is presented; there are a fair number of rejections. A serious analysis is made of whether money will really help and support caring efforts. As I said, however, the sums required to change people's lives for the better are often quite small.

The charity has trustees who decide on grants. Paddy Seligman OBE is the appeal's chairman and was a leading light in Norfolk in establishing it. The other trustees are Barry Capon CBE, DL; John Alston CBE, DL, who is known to many hon. Members; Ann Mullender, from the charity Crossroads; and Dr. Jenny Blyth, a consultant in palliative care at the Priscilla Bacon lodge who looks after terminal cancer cases; Peter Furnivall, an eminent local solicitor who has helped me very much with the wording of my Bill; and Alastair Fish, a prominent local accountant. They provide a wide spectrum of excellence and professionalism in assessing applications, and they do a sterling job.

Letters have appeared in many publications describing the professionalism and work done by carers. However, I am sure that many hon. Members are already aware of that work from their surgeries and their daily work. I note that Mr. Speaker has also shown an interest in the functions performed and the role played by carers. The appeal is doing very prominent and important work.

The appeal is also working with other organisations. My Bill has received support from National Schizophrenia Fellowship; west Norfolk carers project; the Families' House organisation, in Norwich, which is concerned with the adoption of young people and the Norfolk Eating Disorders Association. They represent a wide spectrum of good activities. The appeal committee takes no expenses, and administrative help has been provided free by Mills & Reeve, Norwich solicitors and by the Norfolk health authority. Additionally, the National Lottery Charities Board millennium festival has given £23,000 to cover the appeal's running costs.

I need not point out to right hon. and hon. Members that the number of carers is almost certain to increase, largely because of the increase in the elderly population. I should like to quote from a letter to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport from the *Eastern Daily Press* editor, Peter Franzen, who was fully supported by his deputy editor, James Ruddy—both of whom have worked day and night on publicity for the appeal in the *Eastern Daily Press* and on television in the East Anglian region. Peter Franzen writes:

"We appreciate that the Government has in place a highly developed carer support strategy with many facets. Indeed carers are one of the few groups with national standing under the Carers' Recognition and Services Act 1995 and qualify for a specific carer's grant. Their rights and powers will be further expanded next April when the Carers and Disabled Children's Act becomes law.

There are a number of other Government moves geared to supporting the complex array of carers who now exist in our society. The King's Fund initiative is widening the net to further categories, including ethnic minority carers, and the DfEE Challenge Fund is targeting work life balance, giving carers support in, for example, balancing work with caring.

Ultimately, in a country where people are living longer and health advances are restoring the lives of many more of the sick and injured, the Government has carefully developed a partnership strategy in caring which recognises that the statutory services cannot cope fully with delivering all possible needs.

Our appeal is already delivering the social inclusion 'medicine' which the Government has prescribed to ensure carers do not miss out completely on mainstream life. In cost-effective, yet significant, ways we are providing labour-saving and other methods of support to help carers to regain some of their normal life".

I should like to set the appeal's aims against those of the National Lottery Charities Board. Page 1 of the recent annual report from the National Lottery Charities Board talks of

"funding groups which help those at greatest disadvantage to improve the quality of life . . . measures which will have long-term advantages rather than address short term issues",

and of the fact that

"money wisely distributed can make a real improvement to the quality of life for vulnerable people who have little support and have significant needs".

The board has an impressive record, which I shall not cite in detail as it is described in the report for hon. Members to peruse at their leisure. In one year, it has provided £450 million to 11,347 charities and voluntary groups. That is an impressive record and highlights the fact that administering the board's functions must be an awesome feat. I congratulate it on its fine work.

Page 36 of the annual report states:

"The 1998 National Lottery Act gave us the power to delegate our grant making to other organisations. This is an exciting opportunity which could enable grants to be awarded by more specialised or more local groups. We are currently consulting with the sector to see which organisations may be suitable and willing to take on these demanding responsibilities."

There is obviously a case for the "We Care" appeal to be included among those organisations. The "We Care" appeal objective meets the stated funding criteria of the National Lottery Charities Board. The main grant programme criteria include the following statement:

"We aim to improve the quality of life of people and communities experiencing disadvantage and the effects of poverty. Projects we expect to fund include health projects and projects to support carers".

The mission statement of the "We Care" appeal closely, if not exactly, fits those criteria. Its mission is to relieve the elderly, infirm, sick or disabled in Norfolk by providing financial aid and practical support to carers, either individually or through carers' groups.

It is not unprecedented for an endowment fund to be set up with major financial support from the national lottery. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport did just that when, in 1998, he revised the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, providing expanded powers and allowing the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts to be funded by a one-off pay-out of £200 million from the national lottery. That was the first endowment fund of its type to be supported in that manner. The fund derives an income of about £10 million from the trust, and, like NESTA, it was established with the objectives of supporting and promoting "talent, innovation and creativity" in those spheres.

The fund was conceived as an endowment because the Government decided that it should be different from established lottery distribution bodies—which rely on fixed shares of funds held within the national lottery distribution fund that are issued with policy directives on distribution determined by the Secretary of State.

NESTA trustees have considerable scope to establish strategy and policy for an organisation that can be innovative and bold, take risks, act with flair and adapt quickly if necessary. Having endowment status gives it a sense of continuity and freedom from rigid external interference. It can also look ahead. Surely with an increase in the elderly population, carers in the voluntary sector will also increase in number and continue to perform their excellent task for many years to come.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the hon. Gentleman concede that there is at least one possible down side to his proposals? In order to raise the very large amount of money that would be required for such an endowment to be viable and to produce the necessary income stream, one would have to deny many other good causes that money in the short term. So at the very least some difficult choices will have to be made, and in order to achieve long-term benefits many short-term sacrifices will potentially have to be made.

Dr. Gibson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to say that choices and assessments will have to be made to decide who will gain the money and so on. However, my proposals will not deny any organisation the right to apply for those grants, however big or small the need might be. The only factor is the distribution of the money and the competition for it. That will be determined by the trustees and the boards and the information that they receive about different charities—such as how well they are organised and the expertise of their trustees. There will always be such choices and they apply to these issues too.

NESTA is free from regular cash rounds or agreements with any Government Department. The programmes have to be in line with statutory mission statements. NESTA has a board and has tax status similar to a charity's. Its trustees are appointed by the Secretary of State, who has powers to issue directions to the endowment in respect of its financial conduct. The similarity to the "We Care" appeal is obvious. Both organisations target areas, groups and individuals where there is a need for support.

It is interesting that out of eight national lottery distributing bodies, only the charities board is prevented outright from granting endowments, although others are given guidelines that they should carefully consider such requests.

So what precisely is the difficulty, and how should we overcome it? There is an ambiguous clause in the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. Section 38 (1) states:

"The National Lottery Charities Board may make out of any money it receives grants for meeting the expenditure of charities."

The guidelines to other boards state that they may "fund or assist in funding" projects. Clearly, an endowment fund is not regarded as expenditure of a charity.

I have not been able to unearth the reasons for this anomaly, but I understand that when laws are drawn up, consideration of every event and every detail cannot always be scrutinised and we learn by operating Acts over a period of time. The result is that the board can only make specific grants over a specific period of time. The "We Care" appeal sets out to give moneys to various projects without a fixed time dimension.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said:

"The National Lottery will now be able to respond more effectively to the needs of every community. I had two very single aims in reforming the lottery—to ensure people have confidence in the way it is run and to ensure that the money it raises is allocated fairly and goes where it is needed."

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): As we have discussed the matter, the hon. Gentleman knows our view on the Bill and I commend him for his support for the charity that he has espoused. As he is bringing his remarks to a conclusion, can he tell us how far the appeal has progressed in trying to raise £1 million and what sum of money it might apply for in grant from the National Lottery Charities Board were the Bill to be enacted?

Dr. Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. So far the appeal has accrued something like £550,000. Of course it would love to get the rest through a lottery grant. However, it continues to receive support and help and in a month or three months' time after Members of Parliament strut their stuff at local concerts and so on, who knows how much more will come in? *[Interruption.]* Our side will certainly be there. An all-Labour all singing, all dancing Aristosquits concert is a wonderful idea. I think that the appeal will be asking for at least £200,000 to spin out over some time.

[Dr. Gibson]

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport that my proposed changes appeared to be sensible. The amendments would allow endowment-funded charities to apply. We believe that endowments must be restricted to charities rather than extended to similar benevolent or philanthropic institutions. That is because English law does not recognise purpose trusts unless they are also charities and therefore does not recognise gifts to such institutions unless they are used for charitable purposes. Grants to such institutions or charitable projects for immediate expenditure are still acceptable, as countenanced by the 1993 Act, so they are not excluded, but the retention of grants by such bodies for purposes which are not desirable is a problem.

Let me define "charitable", "benevolent" and "philanthropic" as they have been addressed in court cases. There are differences between charitable and benevolent. I have really enjoyed getting into the legal processes and definitions. Thank goodness I never wanted to be a lawyer, and I would never let any of my children be lawyers. There is an absolute mish-mash of definition and counter-definition.

"Picarda", a famous legal publication, contains the following definition:

"The word 'benevolent' is a word of somewhat shadowy meaning. One thing, however, is certain. There is judicial unanimity that 'benevolent' goes beyond what is charitable in law. It is not synonymous with 'charitable'. For that reason, as noted elsewhere, gifts for charitable or benevolent purposes have failed as going beyond what is exclusively charitable, even though gifts for 'charitable and benevolent purposes' have been upheld."

I am absolutely certain that hon. Members understood that perfectly.

Mr. Fabricant: On the subject of "benevolent", I have one little reservation about the hon. Gentleman's Bill, although I broadly support it. He will be aware that there are private benevolent organisations. In his own area, Bonds of Norwich, which is part of the John Lewis Partnership, gives to charity. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that if the Bill is enacted, organisations such as the John Lewis Partnership may no longer feel the need to give, as they will assume that there is already a structure in place to replace the good works that they do?

Dr. Gibson: I should stress that there is nothing to prevent organisations from applying for lottery money. They are not restricted by the provisions of the 1993 Act. That will not change, but the problem will persist. I shall address the hon. Gentleman's point later in my speech.

I return to the standard legal definitions which demonstrate the nonsense of how the whole process operates:

"In Income Tax Comrs *v.* Pemsel (1891), Lord Bramwell, attempting to draw the distinction between charitable and benevolent, said: 'I think there is some fund for providing oysters at one of the Inns of Court for the Benchers. This, however benevolent, would hardly be called charitable'. It may, however, be hyperbole to classify such a purpose as benevolent. And his example of a trust to provide a band of music on a village green is probably charitable rather than benevolent.

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines the word in relation to persons as connoting of a kindly disposition, charitable, generous, and its Latin origins indicate a notion of well wishing. An appeal to send a particular child abroad for a medical operation has been instanced as directed to a benevolent rather than a charitable end."

I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members are now much more aware of the definitions. I dare not penetrate into the definitions of philanthropy as they would confuse us even more at this stage.

Section 38 of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 requires adaptation. I have had advice from Government lawyers and from Mr. Peter Furnivall of Mill & Reeve solicitors in Norwich, which has been most welcome. Section 44 of the Act describes charitable expenditure as expenditure by charities or similar bodies, as compared, for instance, with investment of moneys by charities in order to produce an income stream for future expenditure. Section 22(3)(d) restricts the use of lottery money to charitable expenditure. If we want money to go to charities such as the "We Care" appeal, the definition of charitable expenditure will have to be changed or the terms of section 22 will have to be extended.

The Bill adds a new subsection (1)(b) to section 38. Perhaps there was no need to repeat the whole section, but the key aspect is that the additional words extend grants to endowment, which means a gift that can be used for expenditure or for retention as capital. The Charities Act 1993 says that a permanent endowment is money held by a charity subject to the restriction that it must be expended for the purposes of the charity and that only the income from it may be so expended, and the capital must be retained permanently. That is clearly defined in the Clergy Orphan Corporation case of 1894 and reaffirmed in the Charities Act 1993. The case of Smith *v.* Kerr of 1899 cross-refers to the Charitable Uses Act 1601.

We have amended the definition of charitable expenditure, so there is no need to make any change at all to the wording of section 22. Charitable expenditure will no longer mean expenditure by charitable or similar bodies only but will extend to expenditure on grants to such bodies. That is an essential change, meaning that endowment can be retained as capital rather than spent from year to year. Indeed, if the endowment is defined as permanent, it cannot be spent at all, and must be retained for as long as the charity exists in its present form.

There is a difference between an endowment fund and a permanent endowment fund. When Opposition Members want to endow universities, they had better get the type of endowment right.

This is a complex area, but I have had good legal advice and choices have been made. I want to give the charities board more flexibility. The change may open the floodgates to requests for endowments from a host of charities, but it is already open to all charities or benevolent or philanthropic institutions to apply to the board for money for immediate charitable expenditure. The legal change that I seek makes no difference to that. The board already has complete discretion about what grants to make to which bodies and under what terms. It may be asked how charities are to be dissolved and whether the trustees have legal responsibilities.

The Charity Commission document CC3 defines the trustees' duties very carefully. It refers to trustees' fundraising responsibilities and their powers in respect of investments, property, accounts and so on. If a charity is permanently endowed and the governing document contains no power of dissolution, it cannot usefully be wound up, but if the trustees are satisfied that it no longer serves a useful purpose—the one for which it was established, and which is now fulfilled by other means—

the commissioners can make a scheme to amalgamate it with other charities. The trustees are under a duty to apply to the commission for a scheme to change the purposes of the charity. The five commissioners are appointed by the Home Secretary and are answerable to the courts, the Home Secretary and Parliament.

The Bill gives the charities board more flexibility in supporting both short-term and long-term projects. People will be aware of the problems for carers. As they increase in number, in line with our increasing elderly population, their organisations will need the support of lottery money. People feel that the lottery money is theirs and they want to see it coming their way. It is our duty to find ways of overcoming the restrictions. I am sure that the measure will be popular and will help to support this amazing group of people who do so much for our country. Eventually, it will also open up help to other groups that want to retain their presence in our communities in the long term, providing much-needed support and help.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Norfolk. We thought that he had made his last speech, but I look forward to his making a further speech in support of the Bill. He has done a marvellous job for Norfolk.

I commend the Bill to the House and hope that it will find support.

10.6 am

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I thank the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) for his very kind remarks. He is right, in that when I spoke in the Budget debate, I said that, in common with my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), it might be my last speech in the House. I am delighted that it was not. Indeed, there may be many more—I do not know when the election will be.

The Bill is of great significance to Norfolk, and indeed the whole country. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his success in the ballot, and I am delighted that he has chosen this subject. I agree with everything that he said, apart from two points. In his tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior), he suggested that his seat might be in jeopardy. I assure him that that is not the case. My hon. Friend has done remarkable work for his constituency, which will be well rewarded by an increased majority.

The other point on which I disagreed with the hon. Gentleman was when he said that he hoped to be performing in one of the appeal's charitable concerts in the summer. I do not know when the election will be, but I am sure that he is hoping that it will be way beyond the summer, because I am sure that he will not want to participate as an ex-Member. However, this is very much a bipartisan occasion, so I will not continue on that tack.

I strongly support the appeal, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk would have been here had it not been for their constituency duties. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the latter's remarkable sponsored walk efforts. I, too, have supported the appeal by action as well as words. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) and I took part in what used to be called a variety concert, in Wolterton hall in north Norfolk last summer, and we raised more than £1,000.

In my constituency, in a new restaurant in part of an old agricultural building owned by my constituent Mr. Ben du Brow—a remarkable example of farm diversification—my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) and I did a cabaret last November. She and I have participated in the palace of varieties in St. John's Smith square on three occasions, on two of which we did a mind-reading act. On those occasions we were very much limited in time, because of the number of acts, but I am glad to say that in the cabaret for the *Eastern Daily Press* "We Care" appeal, we were able to demonstrate our mind-reading skills at greater length and managed to raise £11,400. I am deeply grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest for participating in that. I want to pay a warm tribute to Mrs. Paddy Seligman for her remarkable enthusiasm and leadership and to the *Eastern Daily Press* for its constant support, which has been so important.

What is interesting about the nearly £550,000 that has been raised is that it is the result of a variety of fund-raising events. In addition to the event in which I participated, which raised a substantial sum, countless small events have taken place all over the county. They have involved all age groups, including many young people and school children. That shows how remarkably good the appeal and cause are.

Norfolk has an above average proportion of elderly people, because it is an attractive place to which to retire. Many people are dependent on carers. The hon. Gentleman referred to my good friend and constituent, Mrs. Ann Mullender, who for many years has done a splendid job in the caring sector. She has often talked to me about it. All Hallows hospital in my constituency provides respite care for a large number of people and many constituents have told me how that seven-days respite care is enormously appreciated. The service has been under threat in recent years and I hope that the appeal will enable All Hallows to continue to provide it.

I am in no doubt about the importance of the appeal and of its significance to many people in Norfolk. The hon. Gentleman mentioned small improvements, such as a dishwashing machine, which can make a remarkable difference to the lives of the people he described. Respite care is another example. The East Norfolk health authority recently commissioned social research for its intermediate services review. Support for carers was one of the top five priorities for action identified by all the audiences that took part.

The hon. Gentleman has considered the subject in detail; indeed, his legal research was most interesting and enables me to avoid asking the Minister one or two questions, for which I am sure she is grateful. However, I remain puzzled by some definitions in the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 and why a contribution from a charity to an appeal does not count as expenditure for charities. Other charitable bodies are able to provide contributions for endowment funds. It must be an historical anomaly. I have been told that the reason that the National Lottery Charities Board cannot make grants to endowment trusts has been lost in the mists of time. We are talking about not a principle or precedent, but an exception. I did not speak in earlier debates, so I do not understand why that exception has been made.

On NESTA, the House has accepted the principle for a substantial endowment fund as part of the activity of lottery charities. The Bill to establish that got through the

[Mr. John MacGregor]

House quickly and, I think, with all-party support. That might be of interest to the hon. Gentleman. We are dealing with an anomaly and there are clear precedents for what the Bill is attempting to achieve.

Endowment funds are common in charitable activities. John Lewis has been mentioned. Many charitable trusts have endowment funds for the good reason that they are enabled over many years to go on making a considerable contribution for the purposes for which they were established and not just in the early years or in the first year. It is true that current interest rates mean that not a great deal of income is coming from the funds, but that is not an argument against the principle because at other times the returns will be much higher. Many trusts have been set up with such funds, so they obviously fulfil an important purpose.

Mr. Forth: Does my right hon. Friend concede that when the yield from an endowment fund is low—like now, and rates could get even lower—it might bias the difficult decision on the use of such funds towards using the money for the immediate benefit of a much larger number of causes?

Mr. MacGregor: That is an interesting issue. I have been involved in discussions about whether, in the case of educational endowment funds, there should be a relaxation of the restrictions on income, especially in a period of high total returns because of the behaviour of the stock market or substantial capital gains. I accept that there are other issues to consider. There will be fluctuations in interest rates, but the continuation of the funds is more important than the concern that my right hon. Friend raises. If he is right, why, after centuries, would so many endowment funds still be in existence and providing such significant benefits? The Oxford and Cambridge colleges are a good example of that. The principle behind such funds are well accepted and the benefits well understood.

I mentioned the tremendous activities of the *Eastern Daily Press* "We Care" appeal, which are largely due to its splendid leadership and the obvious acceptance of the worthiness of the cause. However, it will not be possible to have a major fund-raising activity every year, because it has involved a massive amount of work by many people. Thus to argue that the establishment of an endowment fund means that it is impossible to direct the moneys raised to a specific cause does not hold water. The advantage of an endowment fund is that it continues to provide income for causes for many years.

The general principle is the need to match funds, which applies to the National Lottery Charities Board. It gives individual grants for one-off purposes for one year only, usually when an organisation to which it is giving the money has demonstrated by its own efforts that it has raised a good deal of the sums itself. That same principle will apply under the Bill; it is not true that organisations such as John Lewis will be prevented from continuing to give. The body to which it is suggested that charitable money should go as an endowment will have to demonstrate, as the EDP appeal did, that it has put a huge effort into the process and has raised a great deal of money. All we are doing is continuing the principle of lottery funding. We are giving the same incentive as we give to endowment funds to those bodies that are trying to secure money from the board.

I am delighted to delay returning to my constituency to support the Bill and, again, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his achievement. For all the reasons that we have given, I hope that if the Bill is not enacted in this Parliament, the winner of the election will pick it up and make it law. The hon. Gentleman has done Norfolk and the House a great service by introducing the Bill.

10.19 am

Mr. Anthony D. Wright (Great Yarmouth): I am happy to support the Bill. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) for introducing it and I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate. It is heartening to see hon. Members from both sides of the House who represent Norfolk constituencies in the Chamber and it is always a pleasure to speak about a Bill that has all-party support. I hope that the Bill also has the Government's support. It has the backing of the local media, and a consensus appears to have been reached.

Having mentioned the media, I should, of course, make it clear that I am talking about the *Eastern Daily Press*, which has already done such sterling work, with its "We Care" appeal. It is through the newspaper's campaigning zeal that the anomaly in the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, which this Bill seeks to correct, has been brought to public attention. I pay tribute to the work that it has done. Clearing up the anomaly that prevents the National Lottery Charities Board from making grants to endowments is long overdue.

Norfolk Members of Parliament have also done their bit. I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North for introducing the Bill, the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) for the large sums that he has raised and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior), who has already raised many thousands of pounds for the appeal with a sponsored walk around his constituency. I, too, was invited to do something along those lines, but I am afraid that I did not at that time consider myself to be at peak fitness—not that I can remember when I was at peak fitness. However, all right hon. and hon. Members may soon have the opportunity to do a lot of walking around their constituencies, and if that is the case, it should prove good fitness training for taking part in a sponsored walk for the appeal in the not-too-distant future, and I certainly intend to be a part of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North listed the reasons for the Bill. I would like to highlight the Bill's relevance to my constituency of Great Yarmouth, particularly to three constituents. Recent statistics have shown that Great Yarmouth is the fifth most deprived area in the United Kingdom. That measure of deprivation takes in many factors, but it is undoubtedly true that many people in Great Yarmouth will benefit from the aim of the Norfolk millennium trust for carers, which is:

"to relieve the elderly, infirm, sick or disabled in Norfolk by the provision of financial and practical support to their carers either individually or through carers' groups."

There are carers the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, all doing a fantastic job, but I know from my experience as Great Yarmouth's MP just how many people there are on my own doorstep, often unseen or

unheralded by the rest of society, who are caring full-time for loved ones. Indeed, only this week I received a letter from a constituent who gave up her well-paid job as a geologist to look after her disabled mother full-time. She asked a perfectly reasonable question about whether anybody could really live properly on the £66.35 a week that she is paid.

There is still much more for the Government to do on this issue, but the Bill could make an immediate impression by allowing endowment trusts for carers, such as that established by the "We Care" appeal, to benefit from lottery funds. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North spoke about carers, but there is no harm in reiterating just how big a contribution the army of carers in our midst makes to society.

It is estimated that nationally one in seven of the population is an unpaid carer. In the county of Norfolk, that comes to approximately 110,000, which translates to around 13,000 in my constituency. Depending on the condition of the individual who is being cared for, round-the-clock care can easily cost £500 a week. Therefore, any carer who is receiving, for example, the £66.35 a week, such as the constituent I mentioned earlier, is saving society more than £400 a week. It has been calculated that, nationally, carers save the Government approximately £34 billion a year.

As a way of illustrating the ceaseless work that so many carers undertake, I would like to concentrate on the experiences of two constituents whom I have come to know very well over the past few years. Even before I became Great Yarmouth's MP, I knew of Tanya and Christine Harrison. Tanya is a bright, intelligent and charming young lady who was tragically struck down with myalgic encephalomyelitis, otherwise known as CFS—chronic fatigue syndrome. It took five years to diagnose her condition. Christine is her mother. Some right hon. and hon. Members will know that I am the chairman on the all-party group on ME, and through that work I have come to know much more about these remarkable ladies. Indeed, only on Wednesday of this week I received a report from the Action for ME charity highlighting the shortcomings in NHS treatment for those who are most severely affected by that debilitating condition. Inevitably, the task of providing full-time care for these unfortunate people, many of whom are still very young, tends to fall on their families.

Tanya is currently completing her degree course at the university of London, a remarkable achievement for someone so severely affected. The only reason that she has been able to do that is because Christine lives with her on the university campus and is there for her 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, as she has been for the past 10 years, since she was forced to give up her job working for Mencap. Tanya has been bedridden for those past 10 years.

I was speaking to Christine about it only this week. There is so much that can be said about the emotional, physical and financial stresses that she, her daughter and the rest of the family have been through. However, Christine said that it is possible to sum it up in one sentence:

"I've given my life up to enable Tanya to have a life."

She said:

"The effects are simply endless; it is just impossible to have a normal family life. I have to cook all her meals and take them to her in bed. There is no such thing as the whole family sitting down together for a meal. If Tanya is lonely I have to go and sit on her bed to talk to her. Christmas time can be very difficult. This Christmas my 80-year-old mother was ill with flu, but I couldn't go and visit her because of the devastating effect it would have if I picked up the virus and transmitted it to Tanya. We live very near the beach, but it is impossible for Tanya and I just to go for a walk on that beach. My son has been marvellously understanding and has a great relationship with Tanya, but as a parent you sometimes can't help but feel guilty that you aren't giving him the same attention."

I could say much more about the physical and emotional stress that Christine and Tanya have dealt with over the years, but I should like to say a little about their financial circumstances, as the Bill could make a difference. As Christine says:

"It's not that you don't want to be a carer for your daughter: of course you do, but the financial impact is very great.

I give her 24 hour care 365 days a year. If I didn't give up my whole life she would be in a home and the Government would have to pay. I receive £40.40 a week for being a carer. Over the 168 hours in a week that works out to 24.05p an hour . . . 168 hours at the previous minimum wage of £3.70 an hour is £621.60.

Giving up your job and career has massive financial implications in itself, but then you face other expenses such as extra heating bills and in our case we've still had to pay for things such as medicines and eye tests at full rate. You also worry about things such as your pension arrangements as well.

We seem to have had a constant battle with doctors and social services to get benefits. It hasn't just been a case of waiting, but of fighting. It can really wear you down constantly having to reiterate to others the seriousness of the situation and always having to explain how ill Tanya really is.

The emotional, physical and financial impact on the carer can be very hard. I think sometimes respite care can be needed as much for the carer as for the patient. It would be great to have a break and to have a meal cooked for me just for once."

There is much more of Tanya and Christine's story that I could tell, but I am sure that I have given right hon. and hon. Members a flavour of it. However, I hope that their story demonstrates not only the terrific devotion and dedication of one particular carer—a story that is repeated millions of times up and down the land—but the need for further financial and practical assistance for these selfless people.

Initiatives such as the "We Care" appeal provide for the endowment of charities. That is so important because it enables secure and long-term funding arrangements to be put in place. There is nothing wrong with the National Lottery Charities Board making one-off grants for various charitable expenditure as it does at the moment, but the continuing and permanent nature of the work of carers requires financial and practical support over a far longer time scale and it is clearly wrong that the lottery cannot at the moment provide that. For that reason, the Bill has my wholehearted support.

10.28 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on having secured a high place in the ballot and on his perspicacity in introducing this Bill.

As other right hon. and hon. Members have said, there has been a touch of common cynicism in the belief that most of the private Members' Bills in this Session would be killed off, not in the massacre of the innocents by the Government Whips on a Friday, but by the onset of a general election. Indeed, I suppose that until almost the beginning of the week, that would have been the

[Mr. Keith Simpson]

inevitable fate of this Bill. However, I suspect that many of us are no longer sure that that will be so. I understand that the Prime Minister is now taking command of the foot and mouth crisis—the advisers and spin doctors have been banished, at least for this week—and if he decides to postpone the election, one plus would be that the Bill may have a fair wind and become law. Most Members present would fully support that.

Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I think that the outstanding work of the *Eastern Daily Press*, and especially of its deputy editor, James Ruddy, and his colleagues, has massively boosted the appeal. I also pay *tribute to the hard graft of* the appeal's director, Paddy Seligman. I do not want to embarrass her, but the analogy that I would use is that she is a larger than life, Mo Mowlam character with a serious dash of Margaret Thatcher on top. She is like a gutsy, explosive culinary dish. It takes such people to drive things through and energise local businesses and voluntary organisations.

We are discussing in general terms a private Member's Bill that will have an effect across the board, but like others who have spoken I want to talk about the particular. The hon. Member for Norwich, North is trying to correct an anomaly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) said. The *Eastern Daily Press* "We Care" appeal has two aspects.

The first is a general principle. As a Conservative, I believe in smaller government and in rigorous control of public expenditure. However, when public expenditure is required, every effort should be made to use it in the most useful and expeditious way. Having established the principle, the practice is also important. The most important practice in this case should be seen from a narrow Treasury point of view. We should make every effort to encourage voluntary organisations.

What makes the United Kingdom different from many other countries is not necessarily language and history, but the marvellous British tradition of volunteering. Without the hundreds of thousands of unpaid volunteers, not only the caring sector but all parts of our society would grind to a halt. Under our current party political organisation, most of us rely on the voluntary spirit at that most narrow basic level.

Attempts should be made to ensure that moneys raised can be used more expeditiously. The irony is that that saves public expenditure in the long term. In Norfolk, there is a core of 110,000 carers—relatives and others. Those people fulfil a fundamental role, as the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright) graphically described. If they did not do so, the people whom they look after would either suffer or, more likely, would be an even greater burden on the local authority social services. The social services budget for Norfolk county council is more than £2 million in the red.

I support the Bill because it addresses both principle and practice. I pay tribute to the work of my parliamentary colleagues in Norfolk. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth and I are both built more for comfort than speed—I hope he takes that remark in the spirit in which it is offered—whereas the hon. Member for Norwich, North is built more like a racing snake and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk has feline body language. I particularly pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior), who is an outstanding MP. His constituents will want to return him with an even bigger majority. He did a long walk along the north Norfolk coast and raised a remarkable £10,000.

I hope that that was not the valedictory speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk. He is a distinguished member of the Magic Circle, and as a magician—pouf, just like that—he may reappear in a few weeks' time if we do not have a general election. He has been an outstanding Member for South Norfolk, and has supported many of the charities that we are discussing.

I hope that my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), will give general and generous support to the Bill. I realise that, as with all private Members' Bills, it is not a belt-and-braces measure and does not meet all the Government's requirements, but the Secretary of State gave warm consideration to the proposals of the hon. Member for Norwich, North when a delegation of us met him several weeks ago.

I hope that the Bill will be given a fair wind by the House. It addresses an anomaly that affects a number of charitable organisations, especially the *Eastern Daily Press* appeal in Norfolk.

10.37 am

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on securing such a high place in the ballot, which many of us would cherish but few achieve, and on using the opportunity to advance support for such a worthy cause, not just in his constituency, but in those of many right hon. and hon. Members, as we have heard.

The issues that the hon. Gentleman raised deserve detailed scrutiny. However, we are not here to discuss the merits of the charity or to second-guess whether, were it able to do so, the National Lottery Charities Board would support that charity. I pay tribute to him for the way he researched the Bill and the issues surrounding it. He mentioned the NLCB's current programme and the work that it is doing to provide funds for various projects that support charitable groups. The question for us is whether the proposed change is desirable, whether it would improve the workings of the NLCB and provide greater equity of opportunity to obtain grants from the board, or whether it would have adverse consequences for the work of the board or the operation of the lottery funding bodies.

Our role in the limited time that we have to look into the matter is to give our views in principle on the aims of the Bill. We should discuss policy on the NLCB funding of endowments, and the impact of any change in the national lottery legislation on the funding bodies and the distribution of funds to them by the lottery.

There is no point in widening the remit of a funding body if the funds available are insufficient to meets its programme of work. We should not oppose a change that would allow the NLCB to provide grants to endowments where the endowment was the vehicle being used to deliver a charitable project that it would otherwise have supported. If the point is that a problem in the current legislation has prevented support for a particular charitable project because it was being funded by an endowment, we feel that a change in law would be entirely reasonable. A difficulty would arise, however, if the NLCB felt obliged to fund endowments that would deal with the money as grant-making bodies.

We all know of charities in our constituencies that have received revenue funding for fixed periods, perhaps three years. I can think of two such charities in my constituency. The Ryedale detached youth work project is a street-level support project for youngsters in rural Ryedale and reaches out to youngsters who take drugs, suffer alcoholism or are homeless. We have received funding for three years, but there is nothing beyond that. Similarly, the NLCB has funded a national charity that happens to be based in Ryedale, the Encephalitis Support Group, which helps families in which a member—often a child—suffers from a difficult virus about which little is medically known. Again, the money will be exhausted at the end of a specified period.

When charities are funded, they usually receive money that will enable them to carry on their work for an appreciable period. That differs, however, from providing an endowment that could be invested and used to provide grants to individuals in perpetuity. The NLCB is right to be concerned that that might be an adverse consequence arising from the change proposed by the hon. Member for Norwich, North. None the less, if the law as it stands prevents the funding of a charitable project simply because the vehicle delivering the funding is an endowment, we should think it wholly reasonable for the law to be changed.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the different legislative provisions of section 33(1) of the 1993 Act, which restricts the NLCB to grants for charitable expenditure, as opposed to funding projects. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) commented that it is difficult to understand why the NLCB was treated differently and why endowments were excluded. In the most charitable way possible, I have to point out that he was a member of the Cabinet at the time, which just goes to show the extent to which the detail of proposals can go beyond what we can possibly cover on Second Reading. These are technical and complex legal issues.

My right hon. Friend also highlighted the success of endowments in general. As we prepare to be the next Government, we think that endowments should indeed be an important vehicle by which to deliver a number of projects. We have drawn up detailed plans on how endowments could be used to fund arts, cultural and sporting organisations in order to give them the financial base that they need.

We are not likely to resolve such technical issues today. The NLCB has had legal advice that there are technical deficiencies in the Bill, particularly as concerns philanthropic and benevolent bodies. The hon. Member for Norwich, North made a good fist of trying to explain the technical difficulties of the law in that area, but the problems reinforce the need to review and reform charity law in general. The lottery legislation reflects charity law and case law, and there is a growing sense that we need to reconsider the position in collaboration with the Charity Commission as well as the NLCB.

We should remember the point about interest rates referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, and about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) expressed his concern in an intervention. That is not an argument against endowments, which we strongly favour. We need, however, to bear it in mind when we consider the best use of the NLCB's limited resources.

In a Committee earlier this week, the Minister and I had a discourse on the Government's proposals for the funding initiatives now available to the new opportunities fund. I mentioned that the NLCB's share of lottery funding had been reduced from 20 per cent. to 16.67 per cent. I understand the Government's view that the lottery was so much more successful than everyone imagined that all the funding bodies received more money than they expected. However, their funding has gone down.

This is neither the time nor the place to debate the way in which lottery funds are distributed among bodies, but we all know of many charities that have applied for lottery funding and been refused. All kinds of reasons are advanced for that—including the argument that a charity is an endowment and, therefore, does not qualify—but one reason why the NLCB must decline many applications is that it simply does not have the funds to meet all the demands placed on it. The resources of the NLCB are by far the most stretched of all the lottery funding bodies.

We should need reassurance on the technical issues if the Bill were to proceed. Normally, such issues could be explored in Committee, but we suspect that they will be left to the next Parliament. The lottery has been a major success, indeed one of the major—in two senses of the word—successes of the final years of the Government of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). None the less, it needs further reform, and I assure the hon. Member for Norwich, North that if it falls to us to be the next Government, as I sincerely hope that it will, we shall take the matters that he has raised into account in the review of lottery legislation that we intend to conduct early in the next Parliament.

10.49 am

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), although I am not sure that he was right to say that these matters may fall to the next Parliament. I suspect that the general election may well be delayed. The Prime Minister has a difficult choice to make. He knows of the crisis that faces farmers the length and breadth of our country. At the same time, he will be conscious of the economic crisis that faces the world and our country. He will be only too aware that, while he has boasted that his Government have presided over boom and boom, if we are heading for a bust, it will not say much for his understanding of economic policy.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the factors that the Prime Minister will have to take into account when considering whether to call a general election will be private Members' Bills such as this one? If he calls a premature election a year ahead of when he need do, this Bill, along with many others, could become a victim of that decision.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There has been so much speculation that there will be a general election in May that people do not realise that constitutionally, under the Parliament Acts, the Prime Minister could leave it until June 2002.

My purpose today is to talk not about the date of the general election but about this admirable Bill. I feel that I have to rise as a non-Norfolk Member of Parliament.

[Mr. Fabricant]

There has been much talk about the importance of the Bill to Norfolk charities, but we should make it clear that the same applies to charities throughout the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it is right and proper to pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). I congratulate him on having the good luck to be drawn so high in the ballot that he can present a Bill, and on his good intentions and good judgment in presenting this one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) spoke about the excellent work of Paddy Seligman. If I were her, I am not sure that I would be so pleased with his description of her as "gutsy but explosive". I am a fan of Indian cuisine, and it sounds like a description of a Sainsbury's vindaloo, which I tried last night and can confirm was indeed gutsy and explosive.

It has been a unique experience for me to see how so many people and organisations have worked together for good common purpose to see this Bill become law. It is extraordinary that the provision applies only to the National Lottery Charities Board. I shall be grateful if the Minister will confirm that only the NLCB is affected by the Bill and that the lottery boards for sports, heritage and the arts are not constrained in the establishment of endowments. If they are so constrained, ought not the Bill to be expanded so that those boards also have the freedom to do so if they see fit?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) raised an important point. He said that, although it might not be wrong to set one up, an endowment would create difficult choices for the relevant lottery board. Interest rates are low at present. We may be heading for a period of economic decline over the next few months as the Stock Exchange collapses and the boom that has lasted since 1993, although the rate of growth of the economy has slowed since 1997, comes to an end. If we are entering a period of bust, interest rates will go even lower, unless of course we join the euro.

If we join the euro, we will not be in a position to decide our interest rates. We will be in a strange position. If Germany were enjoying a strong economic position, the interest rates set in Frankfurt would not apply to the position in the United Kingdom. I digress; I will not further consider whether we should enter the euro.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Surely those who make the decisions, be it anonymous boards of bureaucrats or the charities, to go for an endowment approach to take money now for immediate benefit will have to factor in forecasts of trends in interest rates, which is a hazardous business. Does he think that that has been brought out sufficiently in the debate so far? We have heard glowing accounts of how wonderful endowments are, but there is a down side.

Mr. Fabricant: There is always a down side. Money does not grow on trees, and difficult decisions always have to be made. The NLCB will have to bear it in mind that if it establishes endowments for tens or even hundreds of millions of pounds, that money, as my right hon. Friend says, will not be available to give in grants for day-to-day expenditure in a particular year. However, that is not an argument for saying that endowments should not be established. He is right that there is a down side as well as an up side.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) raised an interesting point when he said that, at a time of economic downturn when interest rates are low, it might be necessary to draw on capital sums from the endowment. Presumably, charities would pay back into the endowment when interest rates were higher. Will the Minister confirm that such flexibility will be possible? Will the boards be able to draw on the capital amounts set on the endowment at times of low interest rates in order to return the sums at times of high interest rates? Such flexibility will be important if lottery funds are not to be irrevocably damaged.

There are many examples of organisations that have been funded with large capital grants by various lottery boards. In my constituency, the heritage lottery fund has given large sums of money to a series of projects. I live next door to the Erasmus Darwin museum in the centre of Lichfield. Erasmus Darwin house was severely damaged by earth subsidence some years ago and lovingly restored with a grant from the fund. It is now an open secret that the museum is having difficulty funding its day-to-day operations.

If a lottery board felt that it was worth continuing with such projects—projects throughout the country are experiencing difficulty with their day-to-day funding—provided that the difficulty was temporary, it would be right and proper to provide assistance with the day-to-day running of an organisation. I make it an important proviso that the difficulties should be temporary. An endowment might be the ideal way to do that, but it is important that endowments should not be used to prop up lame ducks. If they are, the money will not be available to fund programmes such as those that the hon. Member for Norwich, North has already spoken about, or other worthwhile projects.

The Bill has exposed an anomaly in the way in which the lottery funding boards were established. It seems strange that the sport, heritage and arts lottery boards are impeded by the problem. I think that the Minister will confirm that that is the case. This admirable Bill will ensure that the anomaly is corrected and in that respect, I support it.

10.59 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I must admit that I am torn by the Bill. I see a number of aspects to it. It is in many ways the ideal private Member's Bill. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) for presenting it to the House. It is focused and deliberately narrow in its intention, although much broader in its potential effect. It is on the face of it—

It being Eleven o'clock, MR. SPEAKER *interrupted the proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings).*

Marchioness Inquiries

11 am

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the Marchioness inquiries.

In the early hours of 20 August 1989, 51 people tragically lost their lives in the Thames following a collision between the dredger Bowbelle and the pleasure craft Marchioness. Many members of the public were profoundly shocked that such an event could happen in the centre of London, on a warm August night.

Since the tragedy, the survivors and families of the victims have campaigned for a full public inquiry. On 14 February 2000, I reported to the House Lord Justice Clarke's conclusion—from his Thames safety inquiry—that a formal investigation should have taken place soon after the incident. He recommended that I should now order one, and I agreed to do so.

I also established a non-statutory inquiry into the identification of victims following major transport accidents. I thank Lord Justice Clarke for undertaking those difficult tasks so well. At the outset, he clearly indicated that the purpose of the investigation and inquiry was not retribution, but to establish what had happened and to learn the necessary lessons for the future. Copies of both reports have been placed in the Library of the House, together with our response to the 30 recommendations made in the formal investigation report.

The exact circumstances of the collision have been a matter of dispute for more than a decade. Never before have all the relevant documents been assembled and subjected to such scrutiny.

The formal investigation finds that responsibility for the accident lies with the master of the Bowbelle, Captain Henderson; the Bowbelle's owners, East Coast Aggregates Ltd.; its managers, South Coast Shipping Ltd.; the skipper of the Marchioness, Mr. Faldo; and its owners, Kenneth Dwan and William Ludgrove of Tidal Cruises Ltd., because of their failure to establish and maintain an appropriate lookout on their vessels.

The investigation finds that both vessels were in breach of collision regulations and of Port of London authority byelaws. It finds that Captain Henderson of the Bowbelle was in breach of his obligation to broadcast a mayday and to launch life-saving equipment.

The investigation also criticises the Port of London authority and the former Department of Transport. The Port of London authority failed to require vessels with limited visibility forward—such as the Bowbelle—to locate a lookout with an effective means of communication with the bridge. The Department failed to apply its policy that all pleasure craft on the Thames should have all-round visibility from the bridge, and did not give adequate thought to means of escape when the Marchioness was converted in 1980. The Department also failed to ensure that a condition requiring an extra lookout was imposed each time the Marchioness passenger certificate was renewed. As Secretary of State, I apologise unreservedly for the past failings of the Department—especially to the relatives.

The investigation deplores the amount of drink Captain Henderson had taken before he rejoined his ship. However, expert medical advice at the investigation indicated that he would not have been adversely affected by alcohol at the time of the incident, although his rest may have been disturbed. The report concludes that Mr. Faldo, of the Marchioness, who unfortunately lost his life, had not been drinking alcohol that night, although he may have been fatigued by the long hours that he had worked.

During the investigation, Captain Henderson of the Bowbelle admitted that during the 1980s he had forged a signature on watch-keeping certificates and his discharge book in order to gain his masters certificate. Captain Henderson did not volunteer that information to the marine accident investigation branch in 1989.

Having considered the legal arguments advanced during the investigation, including Captain Henderson's entitlement to have his civil rights determined within a reasonable time, Lord Justice Clarke did not take disciplinary action against Captain Henderson. That is a shameful consequence of the failure to hold a formal investigation following the disaster. Nor has Lord Justice Clarke recommended that action be taken against any other party found responsible for the accident.

The preliminary advice that I have received is that there is little prospect of a successful prosecution of Captain Henderson. However, I am referring the entire formal investigation report to the Director of Public Prosecutions for him to consider what action would be appropriate against Captain Henderson or any other party. I have also asked the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to undertake an urgent review of Captain Henderson's fitness to hold a British masters certificate of competency under the Merchant Shipping Acts.

Lord Justice Clarke previously reviewed safety on the Thames and made 44 recommendations; we have acted on all of them. He makes 30 further recommendations in this report; we will take forward all of them and our detailed response to those recommendations has been placed in the Library with the reports.

Lord Justice Clarke warmly welcomes my Department's decision to undertake a comprehensive formal safety assessment of small passenger vessels. Work is already under way.

Although drink-driving is an offence on the roads, it has not been on the river. We recently announced our intention to introduce, in the forthcoming safety Bill, an alcohol limit for those in charge of vessels. We also strongly support the recommendation that all shipping companies should have a clear policy regarding both alcohol and drug taking by their crews and the means to monitor its observance.

We are also putting in place new arrangements to co-ordinate search and rescue and to provide additional rescue facilities on the Thames, including three permanently manned lifeboats provided by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. The coastguard accepts overarching responsibility for search and rescue on the tidal Thames—as elsewhere in the UK.

Lord Justice Clarke singles out the role played in the rescue by the Metropolitan police officers. He commends their efforts and those of members of the public—including the so-called Hurlingham boys—who came to the rescue. I am sure that the House will want to join me in supporting those comments.

I now turn to the non-statutory inquiry that I ordered at the same time. It is hard to envisage the distress that relatives must have felt when they learned that hands had

[Mr. John Prescott]

been removed from the bodies of some of those who died. Lord Justice Clarke considered the concerns of the relatives, including the removal of hands for identification; the failure to inform relatives that hands had been removed; and the refusal to allow relatives to view the bodies.

Lord Justice Clarke finds that the removal of hands for identification purposes should not have happened, except as a last resort. The responsibility for authorising the removal of hands lay entirely with Dr. Knapman, the coroner. He is criticised for failing to make it clear that this was to be an action only of last resort.

Lord Justice Clarke stressed the importance of respecting the dead and their relatives and of working with sensitivity throughout; of ensuring that full, honest and accurate information is given to the relatives at every stage; and of respecting the request of a relative to view the body. I am sure that the House will be in accord with those sentiments.

The Government are acting on Lord Clarke's recommendations. With advances in DNA techniques, it is now rare for hands to be removed. However, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has decided to ask coroners to report to the Home Office any future cases where hands are removed.

The inquiry revealed a failure, in three cases, to reunite the severed hands with the bodies, as Dr. Knapman should have required. Westminster mortuary is also criticised for its procedures. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has agreed that the review of the Human Tissue Act 1961, following the Alder Hey inquiry report, will be widened to cover Lord Justice Clarke's recommendations.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is announcing the terms of reference of a fundamental review of the coroner system, which will now also reflect these recommendations. Moreover, a copy of the report will be sent to every coroner. I ask them to consider it carefully, to see whether existing practices can be improved. The police service is also developing guidelines to improve its own procedures.

After the hearings, it emerged that tissue samples taken from four of the Marchioness victims had been found 11 years later in Westminster mortuary. Post mortems were carried out on all 51 victims after the tragedy and small samples of tissue removed, in accordance with normal forensic practice. Most of the samples were destroyed after six months, but four remained at Westminster mortuary. I should emphasise that, contrary to newspaper reports, these were small amounts of tissue, not the organs themselves, and that the material was not used for research.

Lord Justice Clarke wrote to the Secretary of State for Health about those samples, and my right hon. Friend has agreed to refer the matter to the newly established Retained Organs Commission for further action, in consultation with the relatives. The Home Secretary has also agreed to undertake a review of practice and procedures in all public mortuaries in England and Wales, to ensure compliance with best practice.

After 11 long years, Lord Justice Clarke has provided the definitive account of the Marchioness tragedy. Responsibility has at long last been attributed and laid at the door of the skippers, the owners and the managers of both vessels. Criticism has been levelled at the Department of Transport, the Port of London authority, the coroner and the mortuary.

The lessons of the accident continue to be learned. The Thames is a safer place than it was in 1989. It can and must become safer still. The sinking of the Marchioness profoundly shocked the nation. A full public inquiry should have been held years ago. Lord Justice Clarke states that he hopes that his inquiry will help to ensure that nothing like this happens again. He says that his report may not satisfy everyone, but he hopes that the inquiry will have played a small part in helping the relatives and survivors to put the appalling tragedy behind them and contributed to improving safety on the Thames in future. The reports provide a chilling reminder of the need for vigilance and will stand as a permanent rebuke to those found at fault.

Finally, I am sure the House will join me in paying tribute to the tenacity and courage of the relatives for their tireless campaign to secure a full public inquiry. The improvements that we have seen to river safety are a lasting testament to their commitment. I commend the reports to the House.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of the report and of his statement—and I thank Lord Justice Clarke for his report.

No one can who reads the files and recalls the memories of this terrible tragedy can fail to be moved. The loss of so many successful and talented men and women, destroyed in the prime of their lives, can leave nothing but an inconsolable sense of waste. From the moment that the accident was reported, it became apparent that it should have been avoidable.

There were failings, and I join the Deputy Prime Minister in saying that I am very sorry for those failings, which are underlined in the recommendations arising from the marine accident investigation branch report. Subsequent inquiries have produced further recommendations, including those in the Hayes inquiry under the previous Administration, and Lord Justice Clarke's interim recommendations.

Does the Deputy Prime Minister have confidence in the safety management and procedures on the River Thames today? He has announced further improvements, but river traffic is growing rapidly. Is he confident that safety management is matching that growth? May I ask him to express confidence in the marine accident investigation branch in respect of its role in river safety? Does he think that it has learned the lessons from the episode?

Is not the overwhelming lesson that safety management must be proactive and that every vessel must be constantly capable of navigating safely at all times? Following the recommendations, what procedures will the right hon. Gentleman's Department pursue to keep river safety up to date—for example, to make maximum use of technology? Can he confirm that those recommendations will be extended to other similar waterways in the United Kingdom?

On the non-statutory report, everyone will share the right hon. Gentleman's sense of revulsion at the treatment of the dead and bereaved after the accident. We can ensure that those events are never repeated. I welcome

the action that the right hon. Gentleman proposes and the widening of the Alder Hey inquiry to consider them, but is that expected to delay the Alder Hey inquiry in any way?

Finally, I join the Deputy Prime Minister in paying tribute to the relatives of those who perished. They will never be able to draw a line under the episode. They will live the nightmare of that night for the rest of their lives. The improvements to river safety announced today and since the disaster will provide some comfort, and, as the right hon. Gentleman said, they are a lasting testament to the relatives' commitment to river safety.

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response and for welcoming Lord Justice Clarke's recommendations. May I also say, together with him, how much the House appreciates the very hard work that Lord Justice Clarke put into the inquiry? It was essential that he defined what happened on the night because previous Governments had failed to do so. He restored confidence in the type of investigations that can take place in the event of such tragedies, which we all want to avoid. I am grateful to him for his support and congratulate him on all that he has done. The report is a remarkable piece of work.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the recommendations. Our views on them can be read in the document that has been placed in the Library. We always need to be vigilant about safety management on the river, whatever rules and regulations exist. Individuals often take decisions in difficult circumstances, which can contribute in some way, but we have to be assured that we have a regulatory framework that can ensure that the best standards are applied. Anyone reading Lord Justice Clarke's report will find out about the sloppiness that existed in the companies, as well as on board ship, for which responsibility has to be taken. No doubt we shall come to that argument when we discuss corporate responsibility in the near future.

We all welcome the fact that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is now in charge of search and rescue and of imposing good safety standards. The House will generally welcome the fact that the Royal National Lifeboat Institution is very much involved. We have ensured that the standards are applied to other rivers around the country. A review is taking place to ensure that the same standards are maintained in other rivers.

The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point about whether the marine accident investigation branch has learned its lessons. The report shows what can happen when discretion is involved in deciding whether there should be an interim inquiry and a public inquiry. It is necessary to hold the interim inquiry first. The record of the past 10 years clearly shows that people were making decisions and recommendations, but did not exercise the right to hold a public inquiry.

I would not want people to think that the marine accident investigation branch was the only means of conducting an investigation. It was thought in the Department at the time that the MAIB could act in the same way as the air accidents investigation branch. I am not sure that that is the right way to proceed; the MAIB can be involved but, ultimately, discretion on whether to hold a public inquiry lies with Ministers.

Those who look at the record can decide for themselves, but, frankly, I think the process failed. The marine accident investigation branch cannot be totally to blame. Its terms of reference required it to discover what happened, not to look behind that to find out what the faults were and whether there was any blame. In any inquiry involving a vessel that has gone down with the loss of 55 lives, that should happen. That gives me the opportunity to deal with the controversial issue of whether an inquiry could be held up because of the possibility of legal prosecutions. I think that the inquiry should continue, whatever is happening with prosecutions, but we are discussing that matter at the moment. The Lord Chancellor is addressing himself to that problem, about which the House has from time to time expressed concern.

On whether the Alder Hey inquiry will be delayed, I shall ask the Secretary of State for Health to write to the hon. Gentleman with a response. I do not think it will be delayed, but I would prefer to allow my colleague to respond.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the people who have had to carry this heavy burden for so long. They demanded a public inquiry, and Lord Justice Clarke has responded to them. He has made his recommendations and I have given the House the Government's view of them.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Since 1989, I have been the constituency Member as well as the party representative most associated with the tragedy, and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his unique commitment to ensuring that there was an inquiry. I thank him for that without qualification. He knows that both the families and I respect him greatly.

I join the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) in paying tribute to Lord Justice Clarke and those who helped him. They did an excellent job. I also join in the tributes to the families of those who survived and those who did not. The families did not give in, in spite of the amazing obstacles that were placed in their way. They and the so-called Hurlingham boys—the people on the other boat that night who came and saved lives—deserve unqualified thanks. I hope that this statement is some consolation to them above all.

The conclusion of these two full reports is that terrible and fatal failures took place before, on and after the night of the sinking. Those failures led to the tragic and unnecessary deaths of 51 people with huge potential. I share the view of the hon. Member for North Essex. The obvious conclusion is that this sinking should not and need not have happened, and all those responsible should have been held responsible.

I choose my words carefully, but I think that the previous Conservative Government made the disgraceful decision not to hold the inquiry that was asked for from the beginning. I accept that the right hon. Gentleman played no part in that decision. However, if an earlier inquiry had taken place, many of the remedies that are not now available would have been available. Unfortunately, that failure cannot now be put right.

I shall not do anything other than welcome all the Secretary of State's recommendations—I support them. However, I wish to ask some specific questions. Can he assure the House that, in addition to the referral of the Captain Henderson case, he will satisfy himself that any other legal action that can be properly and fairly taken will be considered and, if appropriate, taken?

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

If there is no election this year or if the Secretary of State and the Labour party are in government after an election, will he undertake that legislation will be introduced at the earliest opportunity to cover corporate responsibility for deaths and manslaughter? Such legislation should have been introduced a long time ago, but the sooner we get a law on the statute book, the better.

The Secretary of State made the welcome announcement that the Home Secretary will consider the provisions for coroner's inquests. However, will he undertake that that consideration will cover the issues to which he referred? Coroner's inquests, calls for a public inquiry and criminal and civil proceedings often all come together, so a co-ordinated and sensible approach must be taken to them.

The Secretary of State said that the coastguard will take responsibility for search and rescue. Does that mean that, in future, in every search and rescue operation on inland waterways, the coastguard will direct the police, the river police and the appropriate port or river authorities? One of the lessons of this case is that no one took ultimate responsibility, but someone should ultimately be responsible for what happens on the Thames and other inland waterways.

The lessons of Lord Justice Clarke's second report appear to be that no one had clear responsibility for looking after the victims and their families from the moment of the accident, and the bodies of the dead were not sacrosanct. I hope that the Government are saying that, in future, anyone who ever loses a relative in such a tragedy will know that limbs, organs and body parts cannot be taken without the authority of the family. That conclusion must be drawn from this and other cases; I hope that the Government will make that the legal position from now on.

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks about my personal involvement in this matter. In these difficult times, we have had to make difficult decisions and have had to ask relatives to trust us. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the support that he has given me in securing the trust that has enabled us to make a definitive statement of what happened on the night of the accident. I am also grateful that he expressed appreciation and paid tribute to the relatives, and to Lord Justice Clarke for his report.

I agree that much needs to be done if we are to learn the lessons. The recommendations that have been made represent a major step towards doing that and I want them to be implemented as quickly as possible and without delay.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about Captain Henderson, I am referring the whole report to the Director of Public Prosecution, and I have not limited my request for advice to Captain Henderson. I would like advice about any party who has responsibility in this matter.

The hon. Gentleman rightly pointed to the delays that occurred and they relate to other pieces of legislation and the human rights of the people involved in this case. However, as Lord Justice Clarke has pointed out, the delays have meant that we cannot take any further action. In addition, the two or three court cases delayed the proper inquiry, and one court did not come to a decision, which prevented any secondary charges being made. All those events have added to the complications, which is why my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor is reviewing the business of the inquiries and prosecutions that can take place when there are such conflicts. Delays are unacceptable to the relatives and those who are interested in these cases, so we are addressing ourselves directly to that point.

On corporate responsibility, the Home Office has conducted a review, which was finished in September. We have said that our conclusions will appear in a new safety Bill that will be introduced if we are re-elected.

The way in which coroners deal with such cases is actively under review. Indeed, the report makes a number of specific recommendations which we have accepted. A review is being conducted by my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Health to improve the position.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the coastguard. We have introduced for the Thames provisions similar to those for most of our estuaries and rivers, but the coastguard does not operate in every river where there are passenger boats. We are therefore conducting a review of what are called the class 5 vessels that are found in rivers and estuaries throughout the country. We want greater uniformity in the system and I shall report to the House when we have completed the review.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the trauma that the victims have suffered, and that has been a feature of all the accidents that have occurred in the past couple of decades. Our provisions for handling trauma have improved, as we can see from the fact that companies involved in railway tragedies are better informed. Local authorities are also more helpful. However, if a post mortem is necessary, nothing should be done to the bodies of the loved ones without the agreement of the relatives. That recommendation has been made strongly, but Lord Justice Clarke makes it clear that, for obvious reasons, coroners have a right to conduct post mortems; however, we must achieve a better balance and I think that the recommendations achieve that.

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and, more important, for initiating the two inquiries.

Much safety legislation reaches the statute book only when lessons are learned from transport and fire tragedies. That has happened time and again and it appears that we react to tragedies instead of being proactive. Surely any multiple loss of life should automatically lead to a full public inquiry to ensure that the causes are completely examined and to obtain public confidence. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give the House that future Governments will act as he has done in promptly calling for a public inquiry when there is a tragedy? In the case of the Marchioness, families and others encountered difficulties because the then Government blocked the initiation of a public inquiry. Can he assure us that public inquiries will take place if there are disasters and tragedies in future?

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. He makes a powerful point about the circumstances that should lead to a public inquiry. He mentioned one of the criteria; the loss of life. In the

terrible train tragedy at Great Heck, lives were lost, but no one disputed the facts behind that accident: it was not the fault of the railway system, but a combination of circumstances. I use that example without passing judgment on what happened at Great Heck. Sometimes a public inquiry is needed to find what happened and, if necessary, to apportion blame. There is an element of discretion in that difficult area.

The then Government started properly, with a preliminary inquiry into the sinking of the Marchioness. The first decision was taken by the Prime Minister herself on the day. She had a meeting at No. 10 with the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo)—then the Minister of State, Department of Transport—because the Secretary of State was out of the country. They decided, first, to hold a preliminary inquiry, and to leave open the option for a full inquiry. The problem was that people began to find different reasons for not having a full inquiry. That led to suspicion among the relatives and to bad feeling; particularly as the Government had ordered a full inquiry into the loss of the Herald of Free Enterprise without such consideration.

I want to be fair to the previous Administration. It is proper to have a preliminary inquiry, but eventually discretion must be used by Ministers about whether there should be a public inquiry. As a result of the recommendations, we are reviewing the rules governing inquiries with the Lord Chancellor and others. As Lord Justice Clarke said, loss of life is one of the criteria when deciding whether to hold an inquiry, but there are others and we have to make judgments.

I cannot envisage a system in which discretion is not exercised, and, if it is, Ministers should be accountable to this House for their judgment. On balance, that is the better way of dealing with these matters and we can, I hope, come to the best judgments. Sometimes we cannot; if so, we are accountable to this House. If we do not settle the issues, such terrible matters could go on for years with nothing being done. That in turn leads to arguments because, when so much time has passed, it is impossible to pursue a proper prosecution or any further action.

In this case, there was a desire for a maritime accident report. However, when 10 or 11 years pass without a public inquiry, there is a chance of misinterpretation. People then believe that there is bad will and bad feeling, and that those involved are not doing enough. Public inquiries clear the air, with Ministers being answerable to this Chamber.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister very much for coming to the House so promptly and for making such a full statement. Is he satisfied—as far as he reasonably can be—that after learning the lessons from what has happened and from the report, we now have the combination of onshore and on-vessel systems and equipment that are necessary to provide the guarantee of safety that we need, given the welcome increase in traffic on the Thames? That is obviously important not just for Londoners, but for tourists. Is not the main thing that can come out of this process the maximum reassurance that I hope the Deputy Prime Minister feels able to give today, as that would be a fitting testament to those who died in the tragedy?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The question that he poses is the one that every one of us should ask. Looking at the statistics about the increasing traffic on the river, I cannot say that there has been a tremendous drop in the amount of incidents. They may not be the most serious types of incident, but the Thames is a busy river and traffic on it is growing all the time. The report showed not that there was a failure of manning or of competency, but that recommendations were just not observed. There was a certain sloppiness in the system which I believe contributed to the collision of the two vessels, although the main cause was that neither maintained lookouts, as was required under the Government's regulations on safety on the river. It is question of vigilance and accountability.

We have instituted some new checks and controls and, along with the 70-odd recommendations in the report, I believe that these will cause improvements. However, I have been involved in transport safety for a long time and I know that we can never be sure. All we can do is make sure that the checks are done properly and that vigilance is maintained. We must allow people to enjoy the river, but remind them that it can be dangerous. I would like to be able to say that there will never be another incident, but it would be foolish of me to do so. However, we are doing all that we can to prevent another one.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I thank my right hon. Friend for his personal commitment to the issue, without which we would not have learned the lessons from Lord Justice Clarke's inquiry. Clearly, those lessons—if, as he has said, they are implemented in full—will make the Thames a safer place. I also endorse my right hon. Friend's tribute, repeated by other Members, to the families, relatives and survivors of the Marchioness disaster. I have worked closely with them for the past four years, as has the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). My admiration and respect for the families, and for their determination and courage, has increased year by year.

I understand the families' anger that it has taken so long to find the answers to their questions. I note that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) is unable to be in the Chamber this morning, although, as we have heard, he was the duty Minister at the time, and was responsible for the decision that the inquiry should not take place. Would it not be appropriate for the right hon. Gentleman to come to this House to give his own apology for not having an inquiry? That inquiry would have allowed the families and the relatives to put to rest their loved ones and would have allowed us to learn lessons which, if implemented, could have made the river a safer place over the past 11 years.

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks, especially those concerning the families. With regard to his remarks about the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea, I said at the beginning that he met the Prime Minister on the day, as I would have expected; particularly when one considers that the Secretary of State was out of the country. It is a question not of individual responsibility, but of collective responsibility. A number of different Ministers and Secretaries of State have replied to the House on the subject over the past 10 or 11 years. Each came to the conclusion that there should not be a public inquiry. They may have made that decision for different reasons and at different times, but they all arrived at the same conclusion. That conclusion, in my view, was wrong.

[Mr. Prescott]

The maritime accident report said that no fault had occurred that could result in disciplinary action. That was wrong. The body responsible was in constant discussion with Ministers. Lord Justice Clarke's report states that the recommendations from civil servants—arising out of an exchange in the Hayes report, which came after the maritime accident inquiry set up by the Government—were that perhaps Ministers should not have a full inquiry, but that if they did, they, the civil servants, would not be surprised. That is where discretion comes in.

Although my hon. Friend talks about individual responsibility for the matter, each must make his own decision about how he deals with the matter. I am in the unfortunate circumstances of apologising for a previous Administration but, in the circumstances, it is right for me to do so, as I have responsibility now. There was collective responsibility and, frankly, there was collective failure. That is brought out by Lord Justice Clarke's report, and that is where I would address my remarks about the failure to hold a public inquiry.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): None of us should pay too much attention to the cheap remarks of the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) on this serious occasion. As the Deputy Prime Minister said, the benefits to be derived from a public inquiry must be balanced against other considerations; for instance, the need to collect evidence for a criminal prosecution. In that context, could he tell the House whether Lord Justice Clarke has identified any recommendation which, had it been acted upon earlier, might have averted subsequent tragedies on the Thames?

Mr. Prescott: It is a matter of balance; I am faced with striking a balance on the recommendations that I have received from Lord Justice Clarke, and deciding whether I take further action. I am trying to be fair to everyone concerned. I know that the relatives feel strongly that the human rights of those who say that they should be immune from prosecution must be balanced against those of the 55 people who died. That is a difficult balance to strike, and Lord Justice Clarke addressed the point.

On whether we have learned lessons, what contributed to the accident was a failure to observe the law of the land: under the collision regulations, there should be a lookout on a vessel on the Thames. We have not changed that law; it is just that it was not observed. The Clarke report states that individuals, such as Captain Henderson, did not observe the regulations. Some may face charges. Tragically, the captain of the Marchioness died in the accident. Companies also have responsibility. Because our law is not adequate to take action against the companies involved—to be fair, some of the relatives did take action—the courts were not prepared to entertain corporate responsibility or corporate manslaughter charges. Therefore, we are back to changing the law.

Great sloppiness is evident, and it is probably a criticism of the Department at the time that there was not just one accident. A few years previously, the Bowbelle was involved in similar collisions when it did not keep proper lookout. That should have alerted the Department to the need to take more action against such companies and the individuals working for them. It did not. The matter is not one of improving the regulations, although we are making improvements, but of ensuring that they are observed.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): There are obviously many lessons to be learned from the inquiry, particularly for those who are concerned with safety on the river. The lesson about which I am most concerned is the one for us as politicians: how do we deal with matters such as this?

I have read the report of the marine accident investigation branch inquiry, and particularly in view of the latest report, it seems a seriously deficient piece of work. It suggests that there was

"no wilful misconduct in either vessel contributing to the collision",

yet later it finds that there was a failure to provide lookout. Indeed, as the Deputy Prime Minister has pointed out, at least one of the vessels was involved in another incident because of that failure. As the Clarke report suggests, Captain Henderson was in breach of his obligation to call a mayday and to launch rescue vessels.

It seems that there has been a degree of complacency about accepting the MAIB inquiry without seeing in it some very clear signals, in the historical context, that a better piece of work was required. Can I be assured by the Deputy Prime Minister that while we are in government, we will never be guilty of such complacency?

Mr. Prescott: I must tell my hon. Friend that such circumstances often occur and Secretaries of State appear at the Dispatch Box to explain why, but I will do everything that I can to ensure that complacency does not have an effect on our regulations.

My hon. Friend makes a fair point about the MAIB report. Since it keeps coming up, I shall quote from it:

"The inspectors' final finding that there was no wilful misconduct in either vessel contributing to the collision, foundering or the loss of life is fully borne out by the preceding sections of this report and I make no recommendations for any disciplinary action to be taken."

That was not published until two years after the event, and 12 months later it was delivered to the Department.

Anybody reading Lord Justice Clarke's report will see that lookouts were not maintained, and that that was following two or three similar events in preceding years. That raises the question whether that was wilful misconduct on behalf of the captain or the companies. They certainly were not carrying out their responsibility. Their attitude was very complacent; I say no more than that. I shall do all that I can to see that we learn the lessons, and the 70-odd recommendations aim to do that.

I should make one correction. I made a mistake in talking about 55 deaths, when I should have said 51. I apologise for that. All in all, there are many lessons to be learned. At the end of the day, that was what Lord Justice Clarke's inquiry was about—to find out the truth, what went wrong and to see what we could do to prevent such an accident from happening again.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): May I say how much I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement that there will be liaison and discussions with the Lord Chancellor's Department on whether there can be a public inquiry while there may also be criminal prosecutions.

The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned in his statement the question of visibility. Has his Department given any thought to the use and compulsion of use of proximity radar, which would automatically state whether another vessel is nearby? The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned that an assessment is being made of all small passenger vessels in use on the Thames. When will that assessment be completed?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Member for his remarks. He makes an important point. If he looks at Lord Justice Clarke's inquiry, or the Hayes inquiry, which the previous Administration set up, he will see the difficulties with communication—whether vessels are located by radio, as normal, or by radar. Such vessels have those facilities.

As has been pointed out, the disco music on the Marchioness was so loud that the radio could not be heard. That is of serious concern. Visibility from the bridge was another matter of concern. As I said 10 years ago, somebody must have made a mistake. When the vessel was given a second deck on which passengers could dance, lack of visibility was obvious. When the vessel's stability was changed and it was given another deck, somebody must have agreed that it was safe and that there was full visibility. Clearly, it was not safe. That applied not only to this accident—similar incidents were reported concerning restriction of visibility on a number of vessels two or three years previously. So, it is not as if we did not know about such matters.

I am in a way risking my hand in saying that the real problem is that sometimes, recommendations are made but, on receiving them, people sit back. When asked why the owners did not implement them, it was simply said that they just did not do so. There was an argument over whether the lack of visibility required another crew member, which presumably had cost implications.

Either way, too many people looked in different directions and did not deal with the problem. That is at the heart of the matter. We must ensure that inspections systems are reviewed regularly. By the way, such systems were checked on this occasion, but nobody said that there was anything wrong. There was something wrong, and there is evidence to that effect. The case reveals sloppiness in the Department, but we are doing everything to see that that is corrected.

National Lottery (Amendment) Bill

Question again proposed, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

11.47 am

Mr. Forth:—uncontroversial.

Having said that, the question is whether that point applies simply to the Bill or to the context in which the Bill is promoted. Although the Bill focuses on a particular element of the availability of lottery funding, I am always nervous when there is apparent unanimity on a measure. That bothers me greatly. I am also nervous when, obviously with the best possible motives, Members seek to build on one particular worthy cause or case and then claim that that legitimises taking the matter more widely. The Bill's contents raise several much wider questions about which we should at least satisfy ourselves before we allow it to make progress. I suspect that the Bill will be given a Second Reading today, but enough has already been said by my hon. Friends and in my few remarks to suggest that it will need careful scrutiny in Committee and on Report.

The first question is the role of Government and taxpayer funding relative to moneys channelled through the lottery. That is not a new question, but we should keep a close eye on it.

When the lottery was set up, I remember well that the philosophy behind it was that lottery funding should be available for matters that did not or could not attract Government—I prefer to say taxpayer—funding. As the years have passed, however, the distinction has been constantly blurred—especially, it must be said, under the present Government—to such an extent that it is now almost non-existent. The Government are using—I might even say plundering—the substantial lottery funds to do many things that we have thought hitherto should be done with Government, or taxpayers', money.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend has raised the important question of additionality. When the lottery was established, we looked at examples in France, where the state—the taxpayer—traditionally funds grandiose projects of a kind that we in this country do not generally fund, at least not since the Victorian era. When the millennium fund was set up, it was planned that on its closure the money would be distributed among the existing funds. Is he aware that it was this Government, and this Government only, who decided that the money—money normally spent by the taxpayer—should instead be spent on health and education?

Mr. Forth: I think that we should emulate very little of what happens in France, although one exception might be, funnily enough, the French health service. We should perhaps look closely at that, not least because it was recently rated the best health service in the world. It is odd that we do not take a closer look at what the French apparently do better than we do: there may be lessons to be learned.

My hon. Friend's point reinforces my concern. I understand, for example, that the new opportunities fund has already been used to finance a network of healthy living centres, out-of-schools learning, out-of-schools child care, information and communications technology

[Mr. Forth]

training for teachers and librarians, and the improvement of cancer prevention, detection and treatment. No one would claim that those were not the worthiest causes, but we must still ask why we have slid away from the proposition that the Government of the day should accept responsibility for such matters through, say, the national health service or the Department of Social Security. The Government look increasingly to lottery funds for those purposes, which is a radical departure from the philosophy that originally underpinned the lottery.

Let us leave aside the question of whether the lottery itself is a good or a bad thing. I think that we have largely finished with that argument, although there will always be echoes of it. We are now in danger of accepting that lottery funding is to be subsumed in general taxpayer, or Government, funding, and then used for what Ministers, bureaucrats or boards consider worthy purposes.

I say all this because I think that the Bill takes it for granted that the process is complete, and that there can be no further controversy about it. I am not ready to accept that proposition; I put it no higher than that. It appears to blur seriously the relative roles of Government and taxpayer, of the lottery and ticket buyers—what ticket buyers think is happening to their money is an important consideration—and of charities and community-based local activities. That last element was described eloquently by the hon. Member for Norwich, North. The Bill entails a risk of continued blurring of the distinction between those activities.

I have another reservation, which concerns the overall principle of endowment. That has been mentioned by other Conservative Members and, indeed, by the hon. Member for Norwich, North. It is apparently taken as read that endowment is a good thing, and the more we have of it the better. Whether private individuals who have taken out endowment policies, or endowment-linked policies, for their private provision would agree with that is an interesting question. Indeed, many hon. Members—probably more Labour than Conservative—have recently expressed reservations about endowment as a principle, mechanism or approach. I am not sure that it is as incontrovertibly beneficial as the Bill seems to suggest.

As has emerged from our exchanges so far, it is at least possible that from time to time, and in different circumstances, the endowment principle may not be appropriate. It may give rise to difficult choices and decisions. Given the money available to us for good causes now—I shall leave aside the source for the moment; I have already touched on that argument briefly—is it better to put a large proportion into an endowment from which we hope to receive a continuing beneficial income or to distribute those funds more widely among many causes for their immediate benefit? It is not self-evident that the endowment approach is necessarily better in all circumstances.

The hon. Member for Norwich, North said that, through his preferred mechanism, it would be possible to apply for an endowment and the decision involved would be exactly that—a decision. I merely say that, on the face of it, the decision will not necessarily be easy.

Dr. Gibson: Did the right hon. Gentleman understand what I was saying? I said that it was not a case of "either/or"; both mechanisms were available, and the charities board, given its control, would decide whether the relevant endowment scheme, or any other scheme, was the best in the circumstances. We used the case of carers because it was obviously long term, but we are certainly not trying to prevent money from being spent quickly to benefit many people as he describes. Those are both mechanisms that we should use, and the board will control them.

Mr. Forth: I shall deal in a moment with whether the charities board, or indeed any board, is always the best authority to make such decisions.

I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but it is the choice that causes the problem. To make sense, an endowment fund must involve a large sum, especially at times of low yield and low interest rates. All I am saying is that I would not like to have to decide whether to sink a large amount of lottery money into an endowment—however worthy the cause—or to provide it immediately, in much smaller amounts, for the benefit of a much wider range of equally good causes. That is a difficult choice, and I do not envy those who must make it. We are talking about a difficult choice, and not about something that is necessarily obvious.

Dr. Gibson: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that NESTA's endowment is invested by the national debt commissioners in a combination of cash and short-dated, fixed-interest United Kingdom Government issues? The mechanism already exists, regardless of whether it returns 5 or 10 per cent. annually. We therefore already operate a very successful national endowment fund, which is called NESTA. Although we shall see how it operates over time, it currently yields more than £10 million annually, which by any account is good news for investment in the projects that it supports. It supports, for example, young people who may require only £5,000 to conduct a short-term scientific experiment. We have to meet that type of need.

Mr. Forth: If one says it fairly quickly, £10 million sounds like a lot of money. However, let us examine the size of endowment fund necessary to yield that £10 million. I would guess that the sum is not unadjacent to £100 million, and may be even more than that. However, what could we do with the £100 million that is yielding the £10 million for the excellent causes that the hon. Gentleman described? That is the nature of the decisions that we have to take.

Mr. Fabricant: I never like to criticise my right hon. Friend, especially for his arithmetic. However, he will be aware that interest rates currently yield 6 per cent. It is therefore more likely that £180 million would be required to yield that £10 million.

Mr. Forth: I always defer to my hon. Friend in such sophisticated matters. However, he reinforces the point that I am trying to make and illustrates the choice facing us.

Speaking of wisdom, it was my hon. Friend who mentioned the recent great millennium fiasco. That was, in a different guise, another of the lottery-funded good causes in which boards, bureaucrats and well-meaning people decided what to do with large lottery sums. The result was the dome and a wobbly bridge. That does not

gives me much confidence that the great, the good and the well-meaning and well-intentioned will always make the wise choices about how to use the money that those of us who assiduously buy lottery tickets—to say nothing of increasingly put-upon taxpayers—expect of them. Those elements are all combined in the Bill.

I recognise that the Bill is relatively limited in its scope and focused, for which I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Norwich, North. The Bill is, in a sense, uncontroversial in that it is shot through with motherhood and apple pie, which are the type of thing that appeal to the House. However, it also contains important questions that we should resolve before we rush forward.

I should like to flag up some issues to which we may have to give some attention later. Clause 1(2) states:

"the Charities Board may impose such conditions as they see fit"

in making a grant under section 38 of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. Although I have no doubt that that is a proper approach to take, it places an enormous burden on the charities board to make appropriate and sensible decisions when it is granting the money. That could have considerable repercussions.

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: Even with that consideration taken into account, do not all the other lottery boards have the right to grant endowments? Therefore, is it not anomalous that the National Lotteries Charities Board cannot do the same? The Bill is about remedying that anomaly.

Mr. Forth: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. However, would not one approach be to remove that discretion from the other boards? If he is saying that we should make the charities board more like the Millennium Commission, I am not sure that I agree. I do not accept his assertion that, because the others do it, it is a jolly good idea for the charities board also to do it. For all I know, that might be a rotten idea. In fact, I suspect that, in some circumstances, it is a rotten idea.

I do not accept Labour Members' obsession with the one-size-fits-all approach, which they seem to like in the European Union and in all sorts of other things. I am a bit of a flexibility man myself. I like horses for courses. I like discretion and freedom. Such an approach therefore does not appeal to me. The hon. Gentleman, in trying to lead me down that road, asked, "Because the others do it, should not this board be able to do it?" To my mind, that is not a compelling argument.

As I said, the Bill states:

"the Charities Board may impose such conditions as they see fit".

I should like to flag up an issue that may be more for Committee or Report—whether the board can subsequently alter those conditions if it sees fit, and in what circumstances.

Clause 1(2) also states:

"The Charities Board may acquire and dispose of land for the purpose of enabling them to exercise their functions under this section."

I confess that such provisions always make me feel nervous. Although I shall for the moment leave to one side the matter of whether the Millennium Commission acquired the land on which the dome sits, or the dome itself, I am not convinced that it is necessarily a good thing that a body such as the charities board should be able to become a landowner or landlord. That is not self-evidently wise in such cases. Indeed, I can imagine that there may be some circumstances in which such an arrangement could be grotesquely unwise.

Dr. Gibson: Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that such an arrangement is not new, but already exists in the National Lottery etc. Act 1998?

Mr. Forth: Again, that does not make it good. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that just because something has happened, we must repeat it in his Bill, that may be his judgment, but it is not necessarily the right approach. There may have been errors from which we should learn. We should not seek to repeat a mistaken approach simply because it has been done before. I do not find that argument compelling. What worries me about bringing the ability to acquire and dispose of land into the provisions is that it introduces a greater permanence and inflexibility that may not be entirely desirable. Certain elements of the Bill need further consideration.

I am sure that the Bill should receive a Second Reading so that we can consider it in more detail. I hope that it receives proper scrutiny in Committee and on Report as it involves such large sums of money. The fact that it is lottery money does not make that less important. These days we have to be accountable not just for taxpayers' money, but for the disposition and use of lottery money because it is our money, although, as we have given it voluntarily through buying tickets, it is a slightly different category from taxpayers' money. Nevertheless the sums involved are very large indeed, so it is incumbent on us to satisfy ourselves as far as we reasonably can that there are mechanisms to ensure that the funds are properly disposed of and accountable and that the flexibility allowed to those who make the decisions is appropriate. Having said that, I shall watch the progress of the Bill with interest to see that we all discharge our duty to make sure that it is fit for the purpose for which it was intended.

12.7 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) in supporting the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). I begin by apologising to the House for my absence at the start of the debate. I had to host a meeting between the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) and my local authority in seeking to persuade my right hon. Friend of the rightness of Harrow's case for more funding for a CCTV bid.

I support my hon. Friend's Bill and welcome the fact that it seeks to close a loophole and allow the National Lottery Charities Board to make grants to endowments of charities and other organisations. I know that the background to the Bill is the difficulties faced by the "We Care" 2000 appeal in establishing and getting lottery funding for an endowment fund to support carers in Norfolk. I should like to mention another example of an excellent community project which may well benefit from an endowment fund provided by the National Lottery Charities Board and to support the purpose of my hon. Friend's Bill.

I have six or seven district centres in my constituency, all of which have a strong sense of community. The people of Pinner have had to endure the sight of West

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

house, a property that is surrounded by parkland, being in a dilapidated condition for much of the past 20 years. It is close to a residential area and the excellent West Lodge school. The fact that the premises have been dilapidated for so long undoubtedly spoils the amenity of the area. Clearly if West house could be brought back into community use it would be of enormous benefit to the people in the immediate environs of West house, the Pinner Memorial park and the school.

The house was originally owned by the Cutler family and was acquired by public subscription in the late 1940s as a memorial to the war dead of Pinner. The money was collected by subscriptions from local people, and there was a real sense of community ownership of the house.

The upstairs room was used as a shrine to the war dead, with a war memorial book recording on vellum the names of those who had perished in the two world wars. The rest of the house was used for a wide variety of community purposes, not least by the Workers Educational Association. It was also used as a park cafeteria. I have distant recollections of having attended band practices there in my youth.

In 1991, the then Tory-controlled Harrow council took the decision to close West house because of its unwillingness to put in the funds to restore it from its state of dilapidation. The building looks out over the heart of Pinner. From it, one can see the parish church, the station and the shopping centre. Since 1991, the excellent Pinner Association has been campaigning to get it back into use. It has been working in partnership with the council to improve Pinner Memorial park and has established a peace garden.

Various options for West house have been considered. One possibility that was canvassed for some time was to convert it into an exclusive restaurant. Another was to use it as sheltered housing. For a variety of reasons, neither of those ideas came to fruition. In 1995, the council, in partnership with the Pinner Association, established a West house working party, of which I was privileged to be a part in my former role as a Harrow councillor.

The working group drafted in consultants from Prometheus to produce a feasibility study on a proposal to establish a museum and art gallery on the site. With the work under way, the house has been used very occasionally, for instance for VE Day and millennium celebrations. The most significant progress was the approach by the William Heath Robinson Trust, which was seeking a location in Pinner for the artist's 500 to 600 works. Heath Robinson was an international artist, a humorous book illustrator famous for his cartoons and drawings of mad inventions. If he were alive today, he might design, as one of my constituents suggested, an instrument to allow a Member of Parliament to eat smoked salmon sandwiches while twisting the Prime Minister's arm to get more funds for Harrow.

Heath Robinson's ingenuity gave great enjoyment to many people. I am delighted to say that he lived in Pinner from 1912 to 1918, and the trust is keen to bring his collection back to Pinner, primarily for the enjoyment of the people of Pinner and Harrow, and to give the works a permanent home. Sadly, there is nowhere in the borough at present properly to hang an exhibition of either his or any other artist's works. We have the slightly bizarre situation of Harrow council and Harrow Heritage Trust having secured lottery money to create storage space at the nearby Headstone manor for all the works but still not having a permanent place in which to house them.

The consultants have drawn up plans of what a refurbished facility might look like. Stage one is to raise about £350,000 to bring West house back into permanent use, with a gallery for temporary art exhibitions, community rooms and a public cafeteria. Some £2 million is needed to complete an education centre and the permanent location to house more of the Heath Robinson collection.

The Pinner Association and Harrow council have undertaken a considerable amount of work. The Charity Commission has confirmed that a charitable trust to manage the West house estate will be established, and the association has organised a fund-raising campaign. I pay tribute to Martin Verden and Keith Schofield, the chair and vice-chair of that campaign, which in a short time has raised £35,000. If the Bill becomes law and the National Lottery Charities Board makes a grant towards an endowment, that will help those people who want to bring West house back into community usage. It will be good to have the funding to put the collection of the William Heath Robinson trust on public display.

I pay tribute to the Pinner Association, which has campaigned assiduously on the issue during the past 10 years, and, in particular, to its secretary, Cynthia Wells, for whom the project has been especially important. I know that the Bill's purpose is to remedy an anomaly and a problem that is faced by people in Norfolk who want to support carers. However, it holds out the prospect for people in Pinner of seeing West house brought back into use, as a museum for the Heath Robinson collection, helping to educate future generations of people who are born in my constituency. I warmly commend the Bill to the House.

12.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Kate Hoey): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on his success in introducing the Bill and in bringing together so many people from all parties to support it. It is pleasant to spend a Friday morning dealing with a Bill that has such support, which is especially strong among MPs with Norfolk constituencies. I know how much work my hon. Friend has put into the project and recognise that it means a great deal to him and other hon. Members from that region. I am also grateful for his interpretation of the legal difficulties with benevolent and philanthropic law. As I am not a lawyer, I am pleased that my hon. Friend gave a detailed and incisive explanation of the differences. If the Bill goes into Committee, his work will be useful.

The Bill has been inspired by the "We Care" 2000 appeal, launched by the *Eastern Daily Press* in October 1998 with the aim of raising £1 million to establish an endowment fund—the Norfolk millennium trust for carers. I commend the hard work and dedication of everyone involved in the campaign, especially the staff and readers of the *Eastern Daily Press*. There is a huge number of unpaid carers and we would surely all agree that they are unsung heros and heroines who merit our admiration and support. I was struck by the way in which

my hon. Friend read out the article about his constituent, Jemima Hutson. That strongly conveyed the huge amount of work, effort and love that carers put in to what they do, and the attention that their work requires.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright) gave a moving account of his constituents, Christine and Tanya. We all have constituents who fit that bill. Perhaps that is one reason why there is cross-party support for my hon. Friend's Bill.

I want to point out how much national lottery support is going into Norfolk and how much the lottery is doing across the country to help carers and other groups of volunteers. Although it is only six years old, it has had a tremendous impact on our national life and is one of the most successful lotteries in the world. More than £8.8 billion has already been awarded to more than 82,000 projects across the country. The National Lottery Charities Board has made more than 40,000 grants, worth nearly £1.9 billion, to help meet the needs of those at greatest disadvantage in society and to improve the quality of life in our communities.

In Norfolk alone, the board has made nearly 500 grants, worth more than £19 million, to voluntary and community groups. They include a contribution of some £23,000, as has already been mentioned, towards the administrative costs of the "We Care" 2000 appeal. Across the United Kingdom, the board has already made grants worth more than £15 million to projects related to carers.

The current wording of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 allows the National Lottery Charities Board to help fund expenditure by charities or similar organisations but not to contribute towards endowment funds. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who apologised for having to leave before the end of the debate, asked if all the other distributors could do that. They can, which is why the situation is, in some senses, an anomaly.

The Government sympathise in principle with the changes proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), which would help to put the NLCB on the same footing as the other lottery distributors, enabling it to make grants towards endowments when it wished to do so. However, it is important to point out that the NLCB, in common with all the other lottery bodies, makes its own decisions on individual grants, independent of Government. Should the Bill become law, it would therefore still be up to the board to decide how to use this new power. That might answer one of the points made by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), although it is always very difficult to satisfy him completely.

The board would have a number of issues to consider carefully before deciding how to use the new power. An endowment must be of a considerable size to yield a reasonable annual income. Sometimes it is felt that lottery funds can provide greater benefits by directly supporting activities through specific, time-limited grants. In a way, the board would have the discretion to decide about that. Those running the "We Care" 2000 appeal clearly feel strongly that they could satisfy the National Lottery Charities Board if they were given the opportunity to do so. It is not really for us to be pedantic about whether the board would give an endowment grant to a particular charity, because such matters would have to be taken into account by the board. However, it does not seem sensible to me that one distributing body has different rules for a particular function and can do something if it thinks it right when another cannot.

Mr. Forth: Is there any appeal mechanism against decisions? The board could decide to put a very large amount of money indeed into an endowment—it would have to be large to yield any meaningful income—and a lot of other good causes would feel that they had been unreasonably and unfairly deprived of what they could otherwise have had. Do they have any appeal mechanism once the decision has been made and the money committed?

Kate Hoey: There is an appeal mechanism to the lottery distribution boards if a body or group does not get money. In the sports lottery distribution, for example, a number of groups make appeals and elicit the help of Members of Parliament in doing so. Much as it would be nice as a Minister to be able to decide where the money is to go, I am glad that we do not have to make that difficult decision. Through the powers that Parliament gives us, we appoint the members of these bodies, and we expect them to weigh things up and to realise the importance of their task.

Anyone who is against the Bill must say why the National Lottery Charities Board should be treated differently from the other lottery distributors under the current law.

Mr. MacGregor: I entirely agree that that is an anomaly. Does the Minister agree with me that if the £1 million target is achieved, about £50,000 a year—even at today's interest rates—is a significant sum for carers every year?

Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman is right, it is a significant sum. The point about endowments is that they provide long-term benefit, sustainability and certainty. That is why they are an attractive mechanism for charities and other bodies.

The technical points will have to be dealt with in Committee. The Government recognise that the funding of endowments can be an appropriate use of lottery funds. We have already established the National Endowment for Science, Technology and Arts under the National Lottery Act 1998 as a national endowment with £200 million of lottery funds. NESTA was set up as an independent, permanent fund to support and promote talent, innovation and creativity. It has so far provided funding for innovations in a wide range of areas, and for talented individuals in areas as diverse as interactive technology, poetry, film-making and science centres.

In addition, the Millennium Commission is establishing a £100 million endowment fund to ensure a permanent future for its highly successful millennium awards scheme. The scheme helps individuals to undertake projects that fulfil a personal ambition while benefiting the wider community. By 2004, 40,000 people will have benefited from that scheme, and the endowment will ensure that it continues to help individuals, which is what it is envisaged the millennium trust for carers and the "We Care" 2000 appeal will do.

I have no idea whether the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) was making his last speech to the House. He has had a long and distinguished career,

[Kate Hoey]

and he was supportive of my hon. Friend's proposal. Indeed, it is amazing how the Members of Parliament in Norfolk work closely together in charitable giving and get involved in activities such as singing for charity. I am sorry that neither the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) nor my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright) feel that they are physically active enough to participate in sport. I hope that the Government's policies on sport will help them to do so in future.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk said that the NLCB offers grants for one year only. That is not right. Grants can be time-limited, and some are for two or three years. The NLCB will consider a maximum extension of up to six years.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) and I have similar views on this issue. We support the Bill in principle, and the Government sympathise with the concerns expressed given what has happened. The hon. Gentleman will want to take up the technical suggestions that he has made when the Bill goes into Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) expounded on the value of one of the many projects in his constituency, at West house, providing an illustration of the difference that so many hon. Members have seen the lottery make in their communities. I am grateful to him for supporting the Bill.

The Government sympathise in principle with what my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North is trying to achieve. We may wish to offer technical improvements should his Bill make further progress, but we shall not oppose it today.

12.30 pm

Dr. Gibson: With the leave of the House, I thank all those who have spoken so confidently and well about what I am trying to do. The Bill would be valuable to the people whom we represent, and I appreciate the support given to it. I hope that the speech made by the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) was his last. This is the second time that I have had to compliment him, and I should not want to have to do so again.

Mr. MacGregor: In my youth, there were, on the variety boards all around the country, several farewell appearances from someone called G. H. Elliot, the chocolate-coloured coon. I must warn the hon. Gentleman that I may repeat that process.

Dr. Gibson: That might be quite enjoyable.

The principle of the Bill, which appears to have been accepted, is that the National Lottery Charities Board should consider short and long-term money and benefits. I accept that the technicalities need to be hammered out in another arena, but the additional flexibility that the Bill will give to the board will enrich its work and be much appreciated by all the people who pay their pounds every day of the week to support lottery funding. I thank all those who have turned out to support the Bill. I cannot wait to get into Committee, though my haste has nothing to do with the date of the general election. Sooner or later, we shall go into Committee, and I hope to see all those present today on that occasion.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Railways Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

12.32 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Railways Act 2001 would sound very grand, though many hon. Members would like such an Act to be passed in a more radical form than my Bill. Many would support a Bill that would take Railtrack back into the public sector, but, because it is a private Member's Bill, the aim of my Bill is much more restricted than that. That said, it is a good Bill all the same.

My Bill would set up an inquiry that

"shall examine the effects of the existing system of ownership, control and management of the railway infrastructure".

It adds that that inquiry should look into alternatives to the existing structure, and that its results should be placed before both House of Parliament within two years.

We need that because there is great concern throughout the country that Railtrack—any reference I make to the rail infrastructure refers to Railtrack—is failing to deliver in so many ways that we need to seek alternatives.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It is customary for the promoter of a private Member's Bill to hold discussions with the Government on their attitude to the Bill. Will the hon. Gentleman share with the House the result of any such conversation with the Government? Does he believe that he will have their support for his Bill?

Mr. Martlew: The right hon. Gentleman will have to wait to hear the Government's reply for an answer to that question. I am conscious that he was one of those who pushed the privatisation of Railtrack through. I hope that he will have time to apologise to the House before we rise this afternoon.

The reason for the Bill is that the railways are in a mess. There is no doubt about that. We have almost a wartime service throughout the United Kingdom. If we had criticised the planned privatisation of the railways when we were in opposition by predicting that there would be speed restrictions throughout the country and that the railway infrastructure would fall apart, we would have been accused of scaremongering. When the Conservative Government introduced the Bill to privatise the railways no one believed that things would end up so bad.

My Bill asks the Government to prepare a report on the current ownership, control and management of the rail network and the alternatives. In my constituency, the fact that the railways are not working to anything like their former efficiency is a disaster. It is impossible to travel from London to Carlisle, do a day or half a day's work and come back on the same day. Yesterday, I went up to meet the Prime Minister to discuss the serious problem of the foot and mouth outbreak in Cumbria. It took me six hours to get to Carlisle. I had to catch a train two hours before I needed to. During that time, I could not do work that I would otherwise have done. It then took me six hours to get back. That was not so bad because I was on the sleeper. My father used to drive steam trains on the west coast main line, and train journeys took that time in his day.

I wrote to various organisations and interested parties about my Bill. I can put on the record some of the responses. I received one from the chief executive of Great North Eastern Railway. He wrote a thoughtful letter that was critical of Railtrack, but said that all that was needed was that Railtrack should appoint a first-class chairman. I do not accept that that is all that we need, so I was a little disappointed with that response.

I wrote to the managing director of Virgin Trains, Mr. Chris Green, a man whom I admire greatly. If we had more professional railwaymen like him in charge, we would not have the problems that we have today. He did not agree with my Bill and specifically opposed the option of giving the Government a golden share. He went on to list the things that were wrong with the railways and Railtrack in particular and how they should be put right. He said that things had to change and various adjustments had to be made to the system because it was not working.

I wrote to the RMT, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association and ASLEF. They came back with a united voice; their campaign to take back the track is well known. They believe that the creation of Railtrack and the privatisation of all of the old British Rail has been a disaster. They believe that privatisation and the creation of Railtrack has reduced safety and siphoned money out of investment for profits, and that it has not worked.

I also received a letter from Tom Winsor, the Rail Regulator, for whom I have great admiration. He said that it was difficult for him to comment on record because several inquiries were going on into crashes. However, he sent me a copy of a letter in which he argued strongly against the regionalisation of Railtrack. He argued that it was not the right way to go.

I then got what I think was a letter from Sir Alistair Morton, the chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority. It was one paragraph long. I do not want to be over-sensitive, but it was an impertinent letter. I understand that several hon. Members have received impertinent letters from the SRA. I suspect that it will not do it any good in the long term to correspond in that way.

The final response was a two-paragraph letter from Mr. Steve Marshall, the new chief executive of Railtrack. The only defence he offers against changing the system is that further reorganisation of the railways at present would create more disruption. Surely, the chief executive of Railtrack could have made a clearer case as to why we should not have a report into alternative structures for the railway system. However, his sole defence was that it would cause more disruption so we should not consider it.

Most of those responses accepted that something radical needed to be done. Some accepted my Bill, while others opposed it.

What are the options? Transport 2000—a transport charity—commissioned six essays on the railway. The essays were issued last week; anyone who is interested in the railway should read them. I shall not go into them in detail, as I do not want to take up too much time.

The first argued for evolution rather than revolution. The author stated that, yes, there had been problems due to privatisation, but it had resulted in increased investment and more passengers. He argued that evolution rather than major structural change was needed.

[Mr. Martlew]

Jimmy Knapp, the general secretary of the RMT, put the case for public ownership. He argued strongly that Railtrack had failed; there were safety problems and we should divert money from the shareholders either to be invested in the system or as profit for the Government.

A third essay argued for regionalisation of the railways based on the German model. That is a difficult idea to accept because we do not have the same structures in this country—we do not have regional government. Such a system would fail and create even more problems than there are at present.

The chairman of the train operators organisation argued that train operators should be given control of the system. I think the reason for that is that, under the original private railway system, the same companies owned the trains and the tracks. However, that, too, is not an option that should be taken up.

An interesting proposal was that Railtrack should become a non-profit-making trust with several stakeholders. I think it was based on the same principle as the Canadian air traffic control organisation. Safety would be given priority and any profits would be ploughed back into the infrastructure. That is a sensible alternative to bringing Railtrack back into the public sector.

The final essay argued that we needed fewer companies. Fewer players should be involved; we should simplify the system and go for bigger and better. Today, I do not argue for any of those options, but that the existing system needs serious examination. My Bill does that.

If I were the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth), I should argue that the proposals in my Bill on the SRA are premature. The Government have set up the SRA and it is implementing policies that the Government want to see. To some extent, I accept that argument. That is why my Bill specifies a time scale of two years—that is important. The public—especially the travelling public—are angry about the current state of the railways; they want a commitment from the Government to bring the system back into the public sector although they accept that that will not happen. However, if the SRA solution does not work within two years, a radical alternative will be needed.

There are indications that the SRA is having problems. I read in the press today that one of the retiring members of the SRA has decided that he can stay there no longer and that Railtrack is

"holed below the waterline".

That is a very serious statement. I accept that the SRA has not had the time to carry out the work that is needed, but the Minister should consider that if it is no better in two years, a plan B must be ready to be implemented. I suspect that if the Minister accepts the Bill, that alternative will exist.

As the chairman of the west coast main line group, I have great admiration for Tom Winsor, whom I have met on several occasions. He is dynamic, and he wants to make progress, but there is a sense of frustration. He said again, only this week, that Railtrack should meet some deadlines and that he would force it to do so, but when asked whether he would fine it, he realised the pointlessness of the situation. If he fines Railtrack, it will have to ask the Government for more public money.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman mentions the Rail Regulator, but will the Bill affect the regulator's role in any way? I can see no explicit reference to that in the Bill. I should not have thought that the references to the

"ownership, control and management of railway infrastructure"

would necessarily encompass the regulator's role, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman could help me.

Mr. Martlew: I think that the right hon. Gentleman would accept that if the Rail Regulator were included, it would impinge on the final outcome of whatever decision the Government decide to take on the Bill. Obviously, if we decide to move forward, beyond the Bill, we will have to take a serious look at whether we need the Rail Regulator. I am sure that the provisions are correct in that context.

I do not know whether the Government will argue against the Bill, but they will argue against taking the railways back into the public sector, and I accept many of their arguments. For example, they say that it would cost £4 billion to take back Railtrack. The figure was £5 billion, but that was before the price of the stocks reduced considerably.

I met the previous chief executive of Railtrack before he resigned, probably last summer, and he suggested that he would be willing to accept a Government share in Railtrack. There is an argument that, without the Government, Railtrack is a bankrupt company; it depends totally on Government subsidy to keep going.

Mr. Harold Best (Leeds, North-West): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is a feeling among the public that such a Government share in the present arrangements might improve not only the efficiency and management of the railways, but the social responsibility to those for whom the service is supposed to be provided?

Mr. Martlew: My hon. Friend puts that argument well. The Government's argument is that if they had, for example, a 25 per cent. share, they would be involved in Railtrack, but not in control. A while ago, when deciding who should become the chairman of Railtrack was an issue, the Government were told to keep out and that the company would decide. The suggestion is that if the Government owned 25 per cent. of the share, they would still not have the necessary influence, but I think that we might be better able to control Railtrack in those circumstances.

The major disaster that took place after the Hatfield crash was Railtrack's response to it, because a very junior official in Railtrack closed the west coast main line, which runs through my constituency and into Scotland, without telling anyone. That created chaos for more than 24 hours. If the Government had been involved, I suspect that the decision on speed restrictions would also have taken account of the consequence of people using cars instead of trains. Car use is likely to lead to many more deaths than people travelling by train.

Railtrack took no consideration of that point; it took a very narrow view. It was shell-shocked at the time. The Transport Committee has recommended that someone on

the board of Railtrack should know something about railways. That case made it apparent that no one did. There is a case for Government involvement, but my Bill is not about that; it is about considering that possibility.

I know that other Members wish to speak about the other Bills on the Order Paper and I am sure that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) realises that it is very frustrating not to be able to speak on the Bill that one has introduced. Many years ago, I introduced a Bill dealing with the export of veal calves to the continent and some hon. Members read out the telephone directory in an attempt to stop me speaking on that Bill. I do not intend to do that.

A Minister has been prepared to come to the Dispatch Box to argue about this Bill. That is fine. We shall debate its provisions and come to a decision. However, the public demand that, once again, a Minister should come to the Dispatch Box and take responsibility for what is happening on the railways. Although we would not consider privatising the roads—the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst might—that is exactly what we did to the railways. That was a disaster and it must be very frustrating for my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister that he is not able to get to grips with Railtrack and instruct it on what to do. That problem might be overcome by the Strategic Rail Authority, but the public and, I think, the House would like the Government to be involved. My Bill would not do that in itself, but it is a paving measure.

I know that other hon. Members with to speak about other Bills and I suspect that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst wants to say something about this one. However, I make it clear that it is not my intention to divide the House, because I am sure that there are not enough Members in Parliament to get my Bill through. I think that this is a good Bill, but I do not want to waste time. Other Members should be able to speak about their Bills.

12.52 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): That was an interesting conclusion to the speech of the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew). Part of me hesitates to intrude on private grief among Labour Members, because, in a sense, this is an internal argument for them. However, it raises much wider issues and I take seriously the role that private Members' Bills play in our proceedings. Fridays such as this are parliamentary sitting days, the House is sitting and we are potentially making law. In fact, a short time ago, the House gave an unopposed Second Reading to a Bill on a completely different matter. The hon. Gentleman has brought his Bill to the House and it deserves the same attention as any other Bill.

Mr. Martlew: If my Bill is likely to receive an unopposed Second Reading, I shall not withdraw it.

Mr. Forth: Of course, it is for any hon. Member to promote a Bill and decide whether to seek to divide the House on it. The promoter of the Bill has certain privileges, but he does not have a monopoly of them. Therefore, the House is entitled to take its view as to whether a Bill should proceed. I want to consider the Bill to see what I make of it.

The hon. Gentleman's Bill makes some interesting assumptions about the railways. Like a lot of Labour Members, he seems to look back to what he regards as the golden era of British Rail. That has always intrigued and fascinated me.

I am old enough to remember travelling on steam trains, which I used to do in my youth in Glasgow. It was an exciting experience for a young person. However, I have little memory of British Rail in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s being a paragon of efficiency and a model to which we would all aspire. Yet this has become the atmosphere in which Labour Members would like these debates to take place. They want us to have a fond memory of British Rail, as opposed to what they would say are the evils of privatisation.

Figures that I have suggest that in the 40 years from 1952, the share of passenger journeys made by rail fell from 17 per cent. to just 5 per cent., while the percentage of goods moved by rail dropped dramatically from 42 per cent. to 7 per cent. Even if one measures the success of the publicly-owned, state-run British Rail against the sort of criteria that Labour Members mention, British Rail failed dismally in almost every respect. It is common ground between us that there was a lack of investment in the railway system throughout those decades, when government oscillated between the Labour and Conservative parties. If there is shame or something to be admitted, we must all share in it. That, I suspect, is common ground. We must look at what the Bill proposes against that background.

As recently as 1995, the Labour party opposed rail privatisation, which is the Bill's target. In 1995, no less a figure than the present Prime Minister said that privatisation

"would replace a comprehensive, co-ordinated national railway network with a hotch-potch of privatised companies, linked together by a giant bureaucratic paper-chase of contracts, overseen, of course, by a clutch of new quangos".

There were some good Blairite soundbites there.

However, by the 1997 Labour election manifesto, the line had changed completely to say:

"The process of privatisation is now largely complete. Our task will be to improve the situation as we find it."

I do not sense that the spirit of the Bill is to improve the situation as the hon. Member for Carlisle finds it. I doubt whether that would be satisfactory to him. The whole thrust of the Bill suggests that he wants something more radical.

Mr. Martlew: During what will probably be a lengthy speech, will the right hon. Gentleman outline whether he is happy with the fact that he voted for privatisation and whether he thinks it is a success? If it is not a success, why not? What are the alternatives?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me prompts, which are always useful. I am an avid supporter of private ownership and control as opposed to state ownership and control in all respects. I believe that private ownership is morally and operationally superior. I strongly supported the privatisation of the railways, as I supported the privatisation of so many other things undertaken by the Conservative Governments of Lady Thatcher and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). However, I will concede, with

[Mr. Forth]

hindsight, that the way in which rail privatisation was carried out was not ideal and could have been better. In that respect, there is scope for revisiting the issue to see whether a better regime could be devised. Funnily enough, if I thought that that was the object of the Bill, I might be prepared to give it some positive consideration. However, since I suspect that that is not its motivation, I cannot support it.

I can see that it is a difficulty for the hon. Gentleman and his Front Benchers, rather than for me, that the Labour party felt obliged—apparently—to change its hostility to rail privatisation in 1995, as articulated by no less a person than the Prime Minister, to an acceptance of reality in 1997. I welcome that. It provides the background to the Bill.

I would claim that, in many respects, the railway network has improved considerably since privatisation. For example, the number of passenger journeys has increased, which, ironically, is one cause of the present problems on the railways. The system is almost a victim of its own success.

Mr. Martlew: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that those data are now out of date?

Mr. Forth: Because of the Government's recent cock-ups, the trend has been momentarily interrupted, but until their grotesque overreaction to some tragic accidents on the railway, which I submit is the cause of most of our current problems, there had been a steady and welcome increase in the number of passengers and rail mileage after privatisation. The trend was there for all to see. In addition, domestic rail freight has increased, more trains are being run, rolling stock is being dramatically modernised and there are new stations and freight terminals. I will not go all the way through the catalogue, but it is an early indication of the justification for private, as opposed to public, ownership.

The whole reason the Conservative Government considered private ownership, control and management of the railway system was systematic under-investment over several decades. Indeed, the Bill, to which I will come shortly, makes mention of

"levels of investment in railway services".

To that extent, the outcome of the investigation and analysis proposed would be interesting. My submission would be that it is already evident, even without the proposed inquiry, that investment in the railways has improved significantly since privatisation, and continues to do so. The difficulty for those who argue for a return to public ownership and Government control is that history shows that rarely do a Government consistently over a period of time set aside sufficient funds for investment.

The background to the Bill is muddled. I am clear about my position and that of my party. We believed in the 1990s—and believe now—in the merits of private ownership, management and control. The governing party's position is not at all clear, although the Minister will no doubt shortly help us. The hon. Member for Carlisle and I await with bated breath his comment on the Government's attitude to the Bill. I am disappointed for the hon. Member for Carlisle that either he could not extract the Government's view from the Minister, or the Minister is too coy to tell the House. One way or another, all will be revealed when the Minister gets to his feet. Knowing him as I do, I expect that we shall hear a blunt and forthright expression of the Government's views. But, he should not rise just yet, because I shall now analyse the Bill.

My first problem with the Bill is that I am not sure that it is a proper role for statute to do what the very first line of clause 1 seeks to do and use the law to require the Secretary of State to hold an inquiry. Interestingly, that is an echo of the statement made not two hours ago by the Deputy Prime Minister on a different matter altogether, in which the very subject of inquiries and their status and relationship to Government came up. The Deputy Prime Minister, no less, said in his excellent statement—and in the course of his excellent replies to the questions that followed it—that he believed that the relevance and appropriateness of inquiries must always be a matter for proper discretion and judgment on the part of the Government and Ministers of the day. I agree with his view.

If that is indeed the case, I suspect that the Government will have a problem with the very first line of the Bill, which is at odds with what the Deputy Prime Minister told the House. I can see immediately that there is a potential conflict between the thrust of the Bill and the view of the Government, as expressed by no less a figure than the Deputy Prime Minister.

The Bill proposes that the Secretary of State "shall hold an inquiry". That, I feel, is the wrong way in which to use statute. It goes on to say that the inquiry would be

"into the ownership, control and management of railway infrastructure"

in the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman explained why he considered that necessary, but I do not consider it necessary.

I have said that I support privatisation as a concept and a policy, and I certainly do; but I am not necessarily prepared to defend the way in which railway privatisation was carried out. We knew at the time that there was a spectrum of possible methods. One method was selected, and, with hindsight, we may not consider it to have been the best.

Mr. Martlew: The right hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the last Government. Did he make private representations about his reservations at that time? Will he give us more information about where the privatisation went wrong? Could it be that the Government pushed it through too fast because they wanted to get it through before the general election?

Mr. Forth: All those things are possible.

My role was not particularly glorious. At the time—around 1994-95—I was a relatively junior Minister working in the foothills of the Department for Education, which became the Department for Education and Employment, and doing my best for the country's schools, colleges and universities. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that a junior education Minister has a relatively minor input in matters such as privatisation of the railways. I am sure that if he consults the Minister later, he will learn that that is the case even now.

If we were to quiz the Minister about the niceties and intricacies of, say, the hospitals system or overseas aid, we would probably be given a dusty answer. The Minister would tell us, quite rightly, that he spends all his time looking after such things as the railways. I have no difficulty with that, or even any embarrassment. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am unembarrassable anyway. However, the second part of his question is important and relevant.

I mentioned hindsight. We should probably look at the arrangements again, but not by means of an inquiry of the kind suggested by the hon. Gentleman. We should examine them in the normal way in which Government should examine how arrangements are working—perhaps even with the advice of the regulator. We should always be prepared to look again at the way in which matters as important as the railway network are structured, organised, managed and so on, but we should do so more through the regulatory regime than through—as the Bill suggests—a radical investigation of the

"ownership, control and management of railway infrastructure".

I have real difficulty with clause 1(1), which I believe is significantly misdirected.

The Bill goes on to set out in detail what would be, in effect, the terms of reference of the inquiry that the hon. Gentleman seeks by law to establish and impose on the Secretary of State of the day. He proposes that the inquiry

"shall examine the effects of the existing system of ownership, control and management of railway infrastructure"—

in other words, privatisation and Railtrack, very largely—on, first, public finances.

That is the crux of the matter. What the Government will have to grapple with, and what the hon. Gentleman rather slid over, are the implications of a radical change to, in particular, the ownership—let us leave aside control and management for a moment—of the railway infrastructure in terms of public finances.

The hon. Gentleman should come clean, and I shall give him the opportunity to do so if he wishes to take it. Is he suggesting in any way that the railway infrastructure should be taken back into public ownership? If so, there would be a very considerable implication for public finances. Does he want his inquiry to examine that issue? Some people would think that that is the hidden agenda behind the Bill.

Some of the people whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech are enthusiastic about that idea. I do not have much to do with trade unions in the usual course of events, although I suspect that he has much to do with them, and good luck to him if he does. However, I wonder whether they are urging him, through the Bill, to press the Government to bring back into public ownership the railway infrastructure.

Mr. Martlew: I thought that I made it clear at the beginning of my speech that I wanted to introduce a Bill to achieve what the right hon. Gentleman has described. However, my constituents, and not the trade union movement, are behind the Bill. I represent a city with a tremendous railway history, and the railway people in my city realise that we now have a mess that makes BR look very good in comparison. I suspect that his constituents also are behind the Bill. I imagine that his constituents who are delayed on commuter lines on their way to work are fed up with current arrangements, and that they are among those who want the railways taken back.

Mr. Forth: I would be astonished and profoundly shocked if the people of Bromley and Chislehurst wanted BR back. I also doubt that socialism has lingered sufficiently in Carlisle for the good burghers of that city to want BR back.

I am surprised at this, because I respect the hon. Gentleman's knowledge in these matters, but I think that he is confusing the effects of privatisation as such with recent events in which Government mismanagement—probably coupled with a combination of some mismanagement by Railtrack, pressure by Government and Railtrack, and the intervention of the regulator—has led to lamentable railway performance. That is not the result of privatisation as such. He and I will have simply to disagree on that.

Mr. Best: Can the right hon. Gentleman give a reason other than privatisation for the lamentable performance? Privatisation has created the difficulties and utter chaos that I have to face when travelling from Leeds. Privatisation is the reality that we have to manage. Railtrack would have difficulty organising—I do not know how best to say this—a short period of intoxication in a brewery, and it is certainly having difficulties in organising its railway services.

Mr. Forth: That may be true. I do not want to digress unduly, and the matter may be for another occasion, but I suspect that that has everything to do with the Government's tendency to micro-manage, overreact and panic, and the relationships that they have developed and imposed on the regulator, Railtrack and the operating companies. Those are complex relationships, and I believe that the Government have got them completely wrong. I suspect that the blame—if we are going to get into this ghastly blame culture, in which we all wallow almost constantly these days—has to be shared among all those participants. That is why I am resisting the suggestion which Labour Members seem to want to make that privatisation per se is responsible for the current poor performance of the railways. On that, the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best) and I will have simply to disagree.

I was talking about clause 1(2)(a), which explicitly mentions the public finances. I hope that the Minister, in his reply, will tell us whether the Government believe that the public finances could be used to bring back the railway infrastructure into public ownership. That is obviously what some Labour Members—perhaps many Labour Members, for all I know—want. We have to know right at the start whether the inquiry that the Bill would impose on the Government would have any chance of succeeding in relation to clause 1(2)(a) on the public finances. There is no point in our proceeding much further than that until we have some indication from the Government about whether that is case.

Clause 1(2)(b) refers to the levels of investment in railway services. Unless the hon. Member for Carlisle corrects me, I assume that the provision widens the scope of the Bill to include railway services. It could apply to rolling stock and so on, and rightly so because in making an assessment of management, ownership and control we

[Mr. Forth]

cannot divorce the infrastructure from the services. However, the provision broadens the scope of the Bill considerably and must inevitably bring in considerations affecting the operating companies as well as those affecting Railtrack.

The levels of investment are a crucial consideration. Apart from the moral case for private ownership that I mentioned earlier, the primary purpose of privatisation was to attract investment. Without doubt, privatisation—whether it involves telecommunications, railway services or anything else—has demonstrated over the decades that if an industry is turned over to private ownership and control and properly managed, it can attract a higher level of investment and therefore provide a much better service. So, an interesting question to pose in respect of clause 1(2)(b) is what are or have been the levels of investment in railway services. The Minister's response will be helpful in assessing whether the Bill is necessary.

When we talk about public finances or levels of investment, we are on relatively firm ground, but clause 1(2)(c) refers to the efficiency and effectiveness of railway services and that is much more difficult territory. A common fault in government—and even here in the legislature—is to use such terms as efficiency and effectiveness as if we all knew exactly what they meant. However, I am not sure that that is entirely clear in the context of railway services. Recent events have illustrated that all too well—some may say all too tragically. For example, how does one balance considerations of frequency of service, timeliness, promptness of arrival and passenger security with passenger safety? Let me make a distinction. When I talk about passenger safety, I refer to the traditional approach to the number of deaths and injuries that are caused per passenger mile.

We do not often talk about passenger security, but I believe that one factor that deters many people from using the railway services on short-haul commuter journeys and long-haul intercity journeys is the risk that they perceive, rightly or wrongly, that they may be subject to abuse or attack. That particularly affects women and those travelling late at night. How does one factor all that into efficiency and effectiveness? They are very real considerations for passengers.

As a railway passenger, I am interested in a variety of different factors affecting the efficiency and effectiveness of the railway services. I certainly take into account the frequency of the services. The hon. Gentleman complained about the infrequency and unreliability of the service from Carlisle, but he did not complain about feeling threatened. It may be that the service runs so rarely and so few people use it that he is almost on his own and there is nobody to threaten him. I am much more familiar with the commuter services, on which such matters are a real consideration, particularly late at night.

Am I looking at the issues as a taxpayer or as a passenger? Inevitably, we are all both and we want the facility to take into account as taxpayers and as rail users what we would like in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, frequency, timeliness, security and safety and fares. They are all important considerations. Therefore, I am at a loss as to just how efficiency and effectiveness will be defined in the Bill without knowing a lot more about what is in the minds of the hon. Gentleman and, perhaps, the Minister.

The Bill then moves on to the cost and safety of railway passenger services and services for the carriage of goods.

Cost is a simple word, but it encompasses some complex notions and variables. The cost to whom—the taxpayer, the community at large, the environment, the passenger or all of those? Logically, it must be all of them. The scale of the inquiry is starting to burgeon, so one wonders how long it will take—we will have to consider further the time limit suggested in clause 2.

What I had intended to call the hidden agenda is in fact contained explicitly in clause 1(3):

> "The inquiry shall consider whether alternative systems of ownership, control and management of railway infrastructure would provide greater benefits."

Let us examine what that might mean. "Alternative systems of ownership" is a dead giveaway. The idea is to take the railway infrastructure back into public ownership. Does the hon. Gentleman have any idea of the likely cost and of where the money would be found? The Chancellor keeps boasting about how much extra money he has. We all know that, because he has taken it from us in tax, and we feel every penny of it. Then he says that much of it has gone into national debt repayment. Lady Thatcher must be delighted. Having spent all that money, is he going to re-borrow it to fund railway infrastructure renationalisation?

"Alternative systems of ownership" conjures up intriguing possibilities. Are we talking about variations on the theme of private ownership or about full-blown public ownership? The clause also refers to "control and management". Does that allow the inquiry to extend to the role of the regulator? Whether the regulator controls or manages is open to question. If the inquiry does not cover the regulator, we cannot have a comprehensive look at the system. There is an unfortunate element of doubt about what was intended.

All that pales into insignificance when one comes to the phrase "would provide greater benefits". That may seem easy enough to assess, but such a simple phrase usually conceals more than it reveals. Benefits to whom: the passenger; the taxpayer; people who do not use the railways; or someone else? How on earth does one provide a framework in which greater benefits can be assessed? Given the role that the railway network and infrastructure play in our daily lives, all or any of us can be affected in many different ways. We have to consider the cost of moving freight; the cost to passengers; our safety and well-being; and the claimed environmental advantages of rail. How much do we take such matters into account and what weight do we give them? People do not often rate them equally. For example, if I rarely used the railway system, as a taxpayer, I might want less of my taxes going to subsidise it, and passengers to pay more. However, a regular passenger would be entitled to take the opposite view. Someone who is concerned about the environment and pollution would have a different view of the railways from a person for whom those are not important. I might be indifferent to the railways.

I accept that it is the Government's role to make a judgment about such matters. I hope that the Minister will help us when he responds. We need to know how the Government interpret the simple phrase "would provide greater benefits". Where will their emphasis lie when they approach that difficult problem? We have our own preferences. I suspect that mine are different from those

held by the hon. Gentleman and the Government, but we should know where we stand. We do not even know whether the hon. Gentleman's view of benefits is the same as the Government's. He did not spell that out because he was so anxious to sit down and let other debates take place, in his typically generous way. We are no further on with regard to that matter.

Clause 1(4) is a seductive subsection. The stipulation that

"The inquiry shall take into account the views of . . . users of railway passenger services . . . users of services for the carriage of goods . . . operators of railway assets"

and other such persons is an attractive notion. It has become fashionable in government to take account of the views of surveys, focus groups—referendums even. They could all be covered by the broad phrase,

"shall take into account the views of".

However, it would be difficult to take account of the views of users of railway passenger services because I imagine that they vary enormously. Suppose that I travelled on the train to Carlisle with the hon. Gentleman and we went up and down the carriages asking people about their priorities, and that the hon. Gentleman then travelled with me on the swift and efficient service between central London and Bromley and we asked fewer questions—because we would have much less time. I suspect that we would get different responses.

It is taken as read that everyone would like a service that is fast, cheap, safe and arrives on time. However, to get underneath that, we would have to ask people how much they were prepared to pay, how crowded they were prepared to be and how they rated safety and security over price. There could be an armed guard in every carriage to make people feel really safe, but that would be expensive. Each lady passenger could be personally escorted by a railway employee, if that made her feel better, but that would also be expensive. Simply to say that we will take account of the views of users of railway passenger services does not take us as far down the track as the hon. Gentleman imagines.

That is even less true when one considers the

"users of services for the carriage of goods by railway"—

freight, in other words. There must be interesting different views about priorities with regard to the scale of the network. As a layman, I have always suspected that more freight is not moved by rail because the rail network is limited and inflexible in comparison with the road network. One way to deal with that would be to reverse Beeching. There are probably not many other hon. Members present who can remember the good Dr. Beeching. I studied his report when I was at university, which was between 1962 and 1966. Dr. Beeching had become famous not long before for wielding his axe and reducing dramatically the scope of the rail network. One of the results of that process was that the level of service that could be offered to freight users was severely limited and the amount of freight carried was therefore reduced.

Against that background, a lot of the

"users of services for the carriage of goods by railway"

as clause 1(4)(b) so quaintly puts it, might have a very different view. Some might want their goods to be taken on a much more comprehensive rail network to all conceivable parts of the British Isles. Some might want a very fast service, while others might want it to be as cheap as possible. One can imagine a wide variety of views. Where would that leave us in trying to take those views into account?

The operators of railway assets will have different views altogether. No doubt they would see the matter, quite properly, in terms of their shareholders, their profitability, their ability to reinvest in the service and their ability to attract greater numbers of passengers and a greater volume of freight. Those would all be relevant considerations for the rail operators who would rightly and legitimately have a different perspective from that of the passengers and the freight users.

Clause 14)(d) refers to the old favourite:

"such other persons or organisations as the Secretary of State thinks appropriate."

The mind boggles, but the Minister may be prepared to lift the curtain and allow us to peep through into the Secretary of State's mind as to what other persons or organisations the right hon. Gentleman might see fit to consult. The number of organisations could, on the one hand, be fairly limited, such as the rail users' organisations or simply people closely related to the rail system. On the other hand, almost any organisation could be included, such as environmental organisations, local authorities—goodness knows who. It would be useful if the Minister could give us an idea of how far he believes the scope of clause 1(4)(d) might take us in finding out views on these matters.

Once we had taken into account the views of all these different people, how would we put those views together and make sense of them, particularly if they were—as inevitably I think they would be—in conflict with one another? I know that it is trendy, modern and inclusive to use phrases such as

"take into account the views of"

but I have always had my doubts as to whether doing so would be of real value.

It has just occurred to me that the one group with probably more influence than any others would be the focus group. We know that focus groups largely determine what the Government do and think. We know that they decide, very substantially, the thinking in No. 10. Would focus groups be included in the list, I wonder? There must be somewhere to fit them in. Yes, it would be under clause 1(4)(d):

"such other persons or organisations".

Is the Minister going to tell us when he sets about interpreting clause 1(4)(d) that he believes that focus groups would have a proper and legitimate role in deciding what should be done?

Then we come to clause 2. The good news is that when all this excellent work has been done, the Secretary of State will lay copies of the report before each House of Parliament. We should be grateful for that. He will also

"make the report of the inquiry publicly available by such other means as he sees fit".

I still believe in the good old printed page. I hope that by the time this happens, if it ever does, there will be no nonsense about websites and the like. I have never consulted a website in my life—I do not know how to and I hope I never have to. I hope that instead we will have a nice chunky report, printed on paper and available in the Vote Office. At least Members of Parliament will then be

[Mr. Forth]

able to have a good look at it on the written page. I hope that it will be properly available to the public on the same basis.

It worries me that clause 2 says that the report should be laid before Parliament and made publicly available

"within two years of the date of commencement of this Act."

The hon. Gentleman wants the result of his excellent Bill to be available as soon as possible, but I am worried about the placing of such an artificial time constraint on this important work. Is two years enough to do justice to the work that I have described? I have skipped through the Bill only in the most skimpy detail. I could have spent much more time on each of the provisions in clause 1, but I did not want to delay the House unduly. In the brief and sketchy summary that I have given, there was more than enough scope for an inquiry to last a considerable time. If it is to be done properly, an artificial time limit of two years from the outset is a misjudgment.

The hon. Gentleman desperately wants the inquiry to be carried out as quickly as possible—presumably he wants to put the Government on the spot—magically to improve the service between Carlisle and London. He would argue that if we changed the ownership of the railway infrastructure he would have a better time travelling from Carlisle to London. The hon. Gentleman may not have to travel from Carlisle to London for much longer. I saw him on television last night, and an insensitive person from the television station referred to his majority and an upcoming election. I would not dream of doing that.

Mr. Martlew: I am sure that I shall be re-elected. I have no intention of joining the chicken run.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that that is a relief to every other constituency in the country. We shall leave that judgment to the people of Carlisle in the election, which is or is not about to happen. No one seems to know because the Prime Minister cannot make up his mind.

I was querying whether two years is a sufficient time in which to conduct such an important and comprehensive inquiry. I have serious reservations about that. I do not think that it is.

Clause 3—"Inquiry procedure: supplementary"—bothers me somewhat, because it says:

"The Secretary of State may by direction make provision supplemental to that contained in sections 1 and 2 in relation to the procedure to be followed by the inquiry."

I am not sure whether the clause is necessary. I do not believe that Bills that could become law should contain otiose provisions. If the Secretary of State is required to hold an inquiry, as set out in detail, I doubt whether we need to say that he may make provision supplemental to that contained in clauses 1 and 2. Those clauses contain catch-all provisions such as subsection (2)(e), which refers to

"such other matters as the Secretary of State may prescribe"

and subsection (4)(d), which refers to

"such other persons or organisations as the Secretary of State thinks appropriate".

Given the scope of those provisions, I doubt whether clause 3 is required.

The Bill may seem innocuous at first glance, but it provides for a wide-ranging and costly inquiry that I do not think would be very fruitful. We already have mechanisms, such as rail users consultative and representative bodies, the Rail Regulator, company law, which provides a framework within which the railway operators work, and the Health and Safety Executive. Whether such an inquiry would bring any improvement at all remains to be seen.

Although the hon. Member for Carlisle was a little too coy to say so, I am sure that he is really after the return of British Rail. If that is so, it is incumbent on the Minister to be open about how the Government see that idea and about where it might lead us. I have already quoted the Labour party manifesto from the last election, which said:

"The process of privatisation is now largely complete . . . Our task will be to improve the situation as we find it".

Those words are not at one with the aims of the Bill before us.

I have, I hope, raised a few pertinent questions and given the Minister some material to get his teeth into. I look forward to hearing what he will say so that the House of Commons may judge whether the Bill deserves our support.

1.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): This has been an interesting debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) spoke with obvious conviction, and I thank him and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for their contributions. I recognise the concerns so clearly articulated in the debate, but the Government cannot support the Bill. I will clarify why that is so. Some, though not all, of the reasons for our response became apparent during the debate.

Since Hatfield, several options for restructuring the management and operation of the national rail network have been put forward, particularly in relation to the future ownership of Railtrack. I shall deal with each of them in turn. The Government have made it clear that we have no plans to bring Railtrack back into public ownership. To do so would probably take a couple of years and involve complex and controversial primary legislation. During that time, the industry would effectively be paralysed.

Bringing Railtrack back into public ownership would cost the taxpayer around £4 billion at the current stock market valuation—I appreciate that the stock market is a movable feast at present, but that is the approximate price. None of that would be spent on rail investment, since it would all go towards compensating shareholders.

After years of instability caused by the break up of the railway system into more than 100 separate companies, the Government do not wish the industry to undergo further years of upheaval. That would be in no one's interest. It would divert valuable public resources that would be better spent on direct investment in improvements and expansion. We believe that over-hasty privatisation left the system with real problems, but our task remains to deal with the railways as we found them and to make sure that they operate in the public interest.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst seemed anxious that we should all share in the blame for what happened, but invited us to accept that he himself

was guarding the foothills of the Department for Education and Employment at the time. He was not, he implied, responsible—his way of saying with a bit of extra flair, "Not me, Guv". The right hon. Gentleman was, however, a member of the then Government, and I believe that collective responsibility was supposed to apply. He should at least be prepared to accept that he was part of the process. If he wants to share the blame with anyone, he should share it with the people with whom he was in power.

Mr. Forth: Oh, all right then.

Mr. Ainsworth: Thank you.

The Government's present stance reflects the decision taken at the last Labour party conference. Acquisition by the Government of a minority shareholding in Railtrack would not give us control over the company's policy. Under company law, stakeholders have a fiduciary duty to put the interests of the company first, not their own.

The Government would not be able, for example, to use a 25 per cent. stake in Railtrack to force decisions in line with Government policy. As a minority shareholder, we would not have control of the company or its policy. We would therefore have responsibility without power. Rather than increasing control over Railtrack, an equity stake in the company could result in the Government seeming to be complicit in all Railtrack decisions—including those taken in the interests of the majority of shareholders, which may be at odds with public policy. It is better management and planning which will deliver improved performance for the company.

Support has been articulated today for converting Railtrack into a public non-profit stakeholder trust. Under this option, the company would be run by a Government-appointed stakeholder board of train operators, the Strategic Rail Authority, customers, employees and so on, with no single party exercising majority control.

However, a public trust would almost certainly be subject to public expenditure controls. It would not guarantee the necessary investment without having to find it from public resources, which we believe would be better invested in education and health, for which no alternative sources are available.

The requirement on the Government to underwrite the bond issue to purchase Railtrack from the current shareholders would impose a further potential burden on public expenditure. Buying out shareholders would divert funds earmarked for investment. The costs of non-commercial projects, cost overruns and poor performance would fall to the taxpayer, rather than to operators and customers. The inability to offer a return to investors would reduce Railtrack's current access to private investment capital.

It is far from clear that the proposed composition of the stakeholder board, in which none of the partners has a majority, would facilitate policy agreement or decision making, or that the engineering and asset management skills fundamental to improving safety and raising train performance would predominate.

There is a role for stakeholder input, but this is at the strategic level when plans are being drawn up by the Government and the Strategic Rail Authority. The role of the Railtrack board is to deliver the infrastructure element of these plans, not to decide what they are.

Splitting Railtrack geographically would produce further fragmentation at a time when it is generally accepted by the industry that the overriding need is to achieve coherence. It would further reduce the company's ability to raise capital for investment.

The concept of vertical integration—to enable franchises to include operational responsibility for track—has also found recent support. However, this would reduce the autonomy of franchisees and undermine the current and proposed franchises. It would complicate the role of the Rail Regulator and might result in the promotion of regional interests ahead of the delivery of a national strategy for a renaissance of our railways. It is not clear how vertical integration of passenger franchises would help cross-franchise operators such as freight.

I share the conviction of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle that mistakes were made in the privatisation process. Indeed, since Hatfield the architects of that process have admitted that they got it wrong. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst came pretty close to admitting it today. But after years of fragmentation and instability, the answer is not yet more upheaval. What we now need is evolution rather than revolution.

The Government believe that the major changes proposed today to Railtrack's ownership, operation and accountability are not necessary to ensure that the company meets its public service obligations. We have appointed a tough Rail Regulator to ensure that Railtrack delivers on its licence requirements and does not abuse its monopoly position.

We are not keen to implement options that entail reorganisation, upheaval and the loss of management focus and strategic direction, or increase the Government's costs as a result of compliance with market rules governing share acquisitions—knowledge of our intention to acquire Railtrack stock would drive up the company's share price. Instead, the Government have decided that the time is better spent putting in place the new coherent industry arrangements contained in the Transport Act 2000 and that the money is better spent as part of the £60 billion provided for in our 10-year plan for transport, published last July.

The Prime Minister made it clear last month that the only way to cure the problems on the railway is through proper strategic control and urgently needed investment. We have created the Strategic Rail Authority to tackle fragmentation and to provide strategic leadership. We are working hard to correct decades of underinvestment through our 10-year plan.

The Government's interest is to ensure that Railtrack implements the national track recovery plan as it has promised, following the disruption from gauge corner cracking, and that it invests in a safer, punctual and efficient railway, backed by the massive investment programme in the 10-year plan.

The issues proposed for review by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle have already been covered by a recently undertaken parliamentary inquiry—that of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs into rail investment—to which my noble Friend the Minister for Transport gave oral evidence on

[Mr. Ainsworth]

12 December. The Transport Sub-Committee's report is expected shortly. Because of that and for the reasons that I outlined, the Government will oppose the Bill.

Mr. Martlew: In view of the Minister's response, but, more important, for reasons of time, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and Bill, by leave, withdrawn.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Deceased Fathers) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

1.51 pm

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is simple in intent—even though it has a long title. Although the Opposition Benches are sparsely attended, I hope that no Members on either side of the House will oppose the measure. In essence, it corrects an injustice that should never have arisen.

The purpose of the Bill is to permit a man's name to be entered as a child's father on the birth register and on the long birth certificate when a child has been born following infertility treatment or in vitro fertilisation after the man has died. For example, that may be because the man's sperm or an embryo created using his sperm was stored before his treatment for cancer or other medical conditions and he died subsequently. Another reason may be that infertility treatment had already begun, the man died suddenly but the treatment continued.

I can give the House no clearer example of such circumstances than those of Stephen and Diane Blood. In 1995, Stephen lost his fight for life after contracting meningitis; he was 30 years old. He had given consent for his wife, Diane, to undergo fertility treatment, using his sperm, after his death. Diane fought for the right to receive that treatment. It was almost four years—after numerous legal battles and much anguish—that her son, Liam Stephen, was born on 11 December, just before Christmas 1998.

Diane's fight for the right to have Liam Stephen drew widespread media attention and public support. Indeed, in opinion polls—we are all keen on them in this place—on whether Diane should be allowed to continue her treatment, she received 90 per cent. support for that right. *Hansard* records the involvement of the House on several occasions.

That fight was not limited only to the right for treatment. Even after Liam's birth, his father's name could not rightly be recorded on the birth certificate. The effect of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 is that it does not allow a man to be treated as the father of a child where his sperm, or an embryo created with his sperm, is used after his death.

Currently, the birth certificates of children born in such circumstances show a blank entry or a line alongside the mother's name. A letter from Joanne Tarbuck—a mother thus affected—to the Department of Health in April 1999 points out:

> "Despite undergoing two years of counselling before I was allowed to try for mine and Martin's baby, I was unaware that my husband's name would not be permitted on the birth certificate. I was therefore extremely upset to learn of this for the first time when I went to register Jonathan's birth. This does not seem fair on him or on other children born in similar circumstances."

That is the injustice which we seek to address under the Bill.

Although the Bill would amend the 1990 Act, it is not in essence deeply involved in the ethics or the moral debate that surrounds such procedures. It is a simple and

straightforward measure, in which the rights of children to have their fathers properly recorded in the birth register are recognised as foremost.

We may ask why the anomaly was not discovered during the consideration of the 1990 Act. Under that Act, sperm can be stored for 39 years. It was thus recognised at the time that if legal rights—for example, those involved in succession or inheritance—were to accrue and a child was born perhaps many years after the death of the father, it would become almost impossible to wind up that man's estate. Under the Bill, therefore, the needs of those children and their families would be addressed without affecting the current law on succession and inheritance.

There are 30 such children today, but that number is expected to grow at a rate of at least 10 a year—it could be much higher—and the Bill is of considerable importance to their mothers. Two of the mothers affected—Diane Blood and Joanne Tarbuck—are with us in the House today, together with their children and families. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to their resilience over the years.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), who has championed the case of her constituent, Marion Jordan, and her son, Daniel, in the House on numerous occasions. I thank her for the work that she has done in allowing us to get this far.

Following the case of Diane Blood, the previous Government instigated a review of the 1990 Act. The review was undertaken by Sheila McLean, who is professor of law and ethics in medicine at Glasgow university. Professor McLean made several recommendations in her report, among which was the proposal that the father's name should be allowed to appear on a child's birth certificate. In recommending that course of action, Professor McLean considered that the current restriction may not be compatible with the 1979 United Nations convention on the rights of the child.

Article 2.1 of the UN convention states that the rights accorded to each child, as set out in the convention, should be respected without discrimination of any kind, including that involving the child's birth or any other status. I share that view.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments about myself in relation to my constituent Marion Jordan and her son Daniel. Does he agree that the rights of the child should be paramount and that the Labour Government have put child-friendly policies—and, indeed, money—where their mouth is? However, there has been no movement on this issue to date, so my hon. Friend's Back-Bench initiative is to be welcomed. Does he also agree that the proposal is the morally correct, the legally correct and, frankly, the humane thing to do?

Mr. Clarke: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's sentiments. This is more than simply a moral question; legal questions also need to be answered. The Bill, if passed, would easily answer the challenges that may accrue from those parents if the Bill is not successful.

In addition to my reference to the UN convention on human rights, I shall comment on the issues that may arise under articles 8 and 14 of the European convention on human rights. Those articles deal, respectively, with the rights to choose or discover who one is and the enjoyment of rights without discrimination at birth. Those concerns would be dealt with under the Bill.

The suffering caused to those families is unnecessary and avoidable. We must remember that those women suffer not only from the bereavement of their husband or father of their child, but because they feel that the absence of the father's name on the child's birth certificate robs those men of legitimate recognition.

To assist the House, I shall outline the circumstances in which the Bill can be applied. It mirrors the current provisions in the 1990 Act that provide for a man to be treated as the father of the child when he is still alive. The four circumstances outlined in the Bill are as follows. The first relates to when the couple were married before the man's death and the woman uses his sperm or an embryo created with his sperm to conceive a child after the man's death. Diane Blood would have fallen into that category, and that is covered by the proposed subsection (5A).

Secondly, the circumstance in which a couple were not married but were being treated together before the man's death and the woman uses his sperm or an embryo created using his sperm to conceive a child after the man's death is listed as the proposed subsection (5B). Alternatively, the circumstance in which a couple were married and the embryo was created before the man's death using donor sperm and the woman uses the embryo after the man's death to conceive a child is covered by proposed subsection (5C). Finally, the circumstance in which the couple were not were married but were being treated together in the United Kingdom at a licensed clinic where an embryo was created using donor sperm and it is used after the man's death to conceive a child is covered by the proposed subsection (5D).

Under the Bill's provisions, the mother may elect, within 42 days of the child's birth, for the man to be recorded on the birth register. The registrar will require proof of the treatment undertaken and that can be provided by any medical practitioner. The provisions are also retrospective and can be satisfied in any case, where relevant, on or after 1 August 1991, which is when the 1990 Act came into force.

The Bill would also amend section 10 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, adding to the categories covered by that Act. That simply means that on a certificate of birth, after the father's name, the words "pursuant to section 10" would be added. Anyone looking at the register in future would be able to discover from the wordings of the proposed subsections (5A), (5B), (5C) and (5D) the reason why the birth was registered under that section.

The Bill would extend to Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as to England and Wales. I am glad to say that it has been welcomed by the devolved Parliament and Assemblies.

Under the Human Rights Act 1998, Ministers are required to make a statement expressing whether the Bill is compliant with the convention. I believe that the provisions are not only compliant but support the Act's intentions.

I have sought to highlight the unusual case of families, who under the current provision, are not permitted to write and record the name of the husband or father alongside the name of the child's mother on a certificate of birth.

[Mr. Clarke]

It would be of great comfort to the child's wider family and to future generations of the families that the truth should now be recorded.

I leave the penultimate words on the matter to Diane Blood. In a letter sent to me, she said:

"Those who have lost someone dear to us know how precious time is. You only get to live once. Why grow up being officially recorded as illegitimate, when the alternative has been agreed? When Liam is asked, say maybe at school, for a passport or for hospital records, 'who is your father?' I'd rather he wasn't left confused by what answer he is allowed to give."

I firmly believe that it is right and fitting that we should support the Bill. I commend it to the House.

2.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The Government strongly support and welcome the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke) and I commend his clear and well-argued speech in favour of it.

The Bill would bring into effect some of the recommendations in the McLean review that the Government accepted last year. We set out then our intention to introduce legislation, but we have a tight parliamentary timetable this Session. That is why I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend has taken up the issue and introduced the Bill.

The Bill provides for the father's name to be entered on the child's birth certificate when his sperm or an embryo created with it is used after his death. These are not common circumstances; we should be thankful that they are not, for they are inevitably tragic and difficult for the few families concerned. For those few families, this is an extremely important issue about which they feel passionate. The obstacles placed in the way of getting legal recognition for the father of the children are unfair and insensitive.

To be faced with that insensitivity, as well as the frustration of what is in effect an outdated law, can only compound the distress that those families face at a time when they are trying to look forward and celebrate the new life of a child. That is why it is right to change the law. That is why the Bill is right and why we wish it a speedy passage through the House.

Ms Shipley: Is my hon. Friend aware that visiting the House today are two little boys to whom, as the law stands, we are legally saying, "You do not have a father"?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I pay tribute to her for her work on the issue and the representations that she has made on behalf of constituents who have been affected by the existing law. That is why it is right to make the Bill retrospective, and not simply so that it affects future families facing those circumstances.

The Bill applies where couples have decided to have children through IVF but when the man, sadly, has died before the treatment is completed; perhaps when he has stored sperm or where the embryos have been created but not yet implanted. Their intention to start a family is clear but, sadly, the man has died through illness or accident before the embryos can be implanted.

In the circumstances, the widow faces a double loss; the loss of her partner and of the shared plans for their lives together and their future family. The law allows women in that situation to use the stored sperm or embryo to have a child, provided the father has consented to that. Despite having a child that they both wanted, he cannot be recorded as the child's father on the birth certificate. If the embryo had been implanted before his death, his name could have been on the birth certificate. If they had conceived the child in the normal way before he died, his name could go on the birth certificate. In the specific circumstances that I have described—and despite that man being intentionally the father of the child—he is not recognised on the birth certificate because, effectively, of the date on which he died.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I thought I heard the hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke) refer to whether the treatment had been carried out in the UK or not, or at a licensed facility or not. Does the Bill seek to make any distinction as to where the treatment may have been carried out? Are there circumstances in which that would invalidate the provisions of the Bill?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As I understand it, the Bill would apply to treatment in a UK licensed clinic only for those families who have used donor sperm, rather than the sperm of the father. If that is incorrect, I will happily write to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Tony Clarke: The reference to clinics in the UK would be of relevance only to the final category where, as my hon. Friend rightly said, donor sperm is used and the couple are not married. It is only in that last category that we sought, rightly, for treatment to be carried out in the UK.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification.

We should be clear that the Bill will not allow the child succession or inheritance rights. The reason for that is that the child could be born many years after the father's death. If those rights were granted, it would be impossible to wind up the father's estate until all the sperm or embryos had been used or destroyed. Clearly, that is impractical.

The Government set out our intention to go further than the McLean report and the Bill does that. The problem with the recommendation in the McLean report is that it is not retrospective. It would have applied only to new families facing such difficult circumstances, not to those who have already experienced them and who are now bringing up children whose fathers have died.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South has described the case of Diane Blood. My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) has raised in the House the case of her constituent, Marion Jordan, and has campaigned on the issue. The Government felt that it would be wrong not to extend provisions, under the Bill or in similar legislation, to include families who have already experienced so much and who have campaigned so hard for changes to be made. It is unusual to make laws retrospective in this way, and the Government have given

the issue great consideration, but we think that it is the right thing to do in the circumstances. That is why the Government are supporting the Bill.

It is true that many of the measures made possible under the Bill will have a symbolic value, but it is an extremely important symbolic value, particularly to the families involved. I join my hon. Friends in paying tribute to the mothers who have campaigned for this Bill for so long on behalf of their children.

Ms Shipley: The Bill is about more than the circumstances of one or two families who are affected. The law might be out of kilter with international conventions which we have signed. The UK might be in breach of United Nations conventions on human rights and on the rights of the child, so it is incumbent on the House to tighten up legislation on this important issue.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that concerns have been raised about the compatibility of the law in this area with European conventions. However, it is also simply the right thing to do to support the Bill, and that is why the Government are doing so. I wish the Bill a speedy passage through the House. As it is in the interests of families and of children being brought up today, I hope that it receives cross-party support.

2.12 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It is obvious that the Bill deals with a difficult area, not least because it reflects all too well the extent to which it is incumbent on us to try to ensure that developments in the law keep pace, where appropriate, with developments in technology. It is entirely owing to the fact that medical technology has advanced as it has over the past few years that we are faced with this problem.

Fortunately for us, the Bill does not deal with the ethical and other considerations that surround the techniques involved. They are entirely separate. However, it is worth remembering that the techniques that allow the process to take place and so put people in this position are not without an ethical dimension.

I am not sure that I fully understand why this need be so, but great care is taken to distinguish between those who are married and those who are not. The modernisers among us—I am not one for this or, indeed, most other purposes—constantly try to establish that marriage is becoming less and less important and that partnerships and long-term relationships matter more and more. Intriguingly, in operating in a difficult and sensitive area, the Bill goes to extraordinary lengths to make such a distinction, which I find reassuring even though I am not entirely clear about the reason why. That is even more true of the distinction that apparently must be made about whether the treatment took place in UK-licensed premises. The question of whether there are any UK-licensed clinics outside the UK might be relevant.

Mr. Tony Clarke: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's interest, and the matters that he raises are important, but the Bill simply mirrors provisions in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. We are dealing with a minor issue: the right of children to have their deceased fathers recognised on their birth certificates, as fathers who are still living can be under the 1990 Act. I see the point of his technical questions, but does he accept that they are not relevant to the Bill?

Mr. Forth: I do not. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for trying to be helpful, but we have already had this discussion once today, in the context of an earlier Bill. It is not good enough to say that because a provision already exists, and has existed for a long time, a similar measure can be nodded through, especially when we are operating in an environment of rapidly changing technology and circumstances. He suggests that because a provision has been in statute law since 1990, we need not pay close attention to it; the reason for the Bill, however, is the rapid march of technology. Are not those two facts slightly at odds?

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his explanation, but I do not accept the basis on which he offered it. He seems to be saying, "Don't worry, folks. It's been around for a while, so it's almost certainly OK".

Surely the whole point of the opportunity that the Bill gives us to revise the law is that it allows us to consider whether any other matters need to be dealt with. That is verified by the lengths to which it goes in amending earlier legislation. The schedule, entitled "Consequential amendments", requires consideration to be given to the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Scotland) Act 1965 and the Adoption Act 1976, among others.

The issue may be relatively narrow, and the Bill's intent may, as the hon. Gentleman claimed, be simple. By the standard of many private Members' Bills, however, it is lengthy and detailed. That, and the fact that the schedule seeks to amend consequentially a number of other statutes, suggest that there are ramifications that we nod through at our peril.

I concede that in many cases of this kind the principle, or the specifics, that gave rise to the Bill concerned make it, in one sense, relatively uncontroversial; but the consequences may not be uncontroversial. This Bill has ethical and other dimensions that, in my view, require close consideration—not least the element of retrospection that is explicitly included.

We are talking about unusual circumstances, including the circumstances of those whose lives the Bill seeks to improve. Perhaps, in that context, the element of retrospection is inevitable and desirable, but I am always nervous when Bills contain a retrospective element. When I studied politics at university nearly 40 years ago, I was told that changes in the law should never be retrospective: that was the doctrine on which I was brought up. When I arrived in this place, as recently as 1983, that was still the prevailing philosophy in matters of legislation. I now find that—rather surreptitiously, if I may say so—more and more elements are being introduced into legislation in a way that I, for one, consider undesirable.

Ms Shipley: Surely retrospection is the right course in this instance, because written consent will definitely have been given. My constituent Marion Jordan and her husband wanted children, and had planned to have them. Her husband died of cancer before they could have them, but he had consented. The child is his, but he cannot be registered on the birth certificate. Retrospection must be right when consent has been given.

Mr. Forth: Consent may well legitimise retrospectivity in that case, but it does not necessarily legitimise it in the

[Mr. Forth]

absolute sense that the hon. Lady suggests. I do not agree with the proposition that I think she is making that it is acceptable in every case.

Given the Bill's unusual and relatively narrow confines and the circumstances with which it and the case that the hon. Lady described deal, I may be able to accept that retrospection is justified. However, I am trying to lay down my own ground rule that states that retrospection has to be justified fully in every case and not introduced as a much more general proposition. Her response has helped greatly in that. The elements of the Bill that would usually cause me unease might be much more justified in this case than in many others.

I notice that there is a retrospectivity cut-off date of 1 August 1991. Limiting retrospection is an interesting idea, but I have no doubt that there is a very good reason for it.

Mr. Tony Clarke: The date was chosen simply because that was the date on which the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 came into force.

Mr. Forth: Again, that does not necessarily make it the right thing to do. It may well be that, in some cases, a specific retrospection date should be determined in relation to, for example, a technology or the nature of a consent. However, in this case, I accept the hon. Gentleman's comments.

I hope that the Bill is as simple and limited in scope as the promoter has suggested. In this case, I shall overlook the fact that it has the Government's fingerprints all over it—although I usually take a dim view of the Government trying to sneak Bills through in the guise of private Members' Bills. However, perhaps there should be exceptions to every rule, and it may well be that this is one of them. All I am saying is, do not think that it has not been noticed.

Consideration of the Bill in Committee will allow hon. Members to scrutinise it much more closely. It will also require further scrutiny on Report. At this stage, however, accepting what the promoter and the Minister have said about the Bill, and in view of the circumstances of the families it seeks to help, I see no reason why it should not be read a Second time.

2.22 pm

Mr. Tony Clarke: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for his brevity and kind wishes for the Bill's passage. I am sure that the issues that he raised will be addressed in Committee.

I am grateful also to the Minister—as I know that the families, who are in the Gallery, will be—for saying that the Bill has the Government's full support. I ask her to join me and do everything in her power to ensure that the Bill is passed in this Parliament. The families have had an extraordinarily long wait for justice. Their children are in the Gallery today, although they will probably have no reason to remember today other than as a day out in London and a visit to a strange old building that my daughter describes as an old church.

Perhaps one day in the future, those children and others like them will look back on a day when legislation was debated that made it possible for their rightful father to be recognised on their birth certificate. It is for those children, both born and unborn, that I promote this Bill. I thank the Minister for her comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Register of Drug Trafficking Offenders Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

2.24 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am grateful for the opportunity at least to talk briefly about the Bill. Drug dealing is a pernicious evil that destroys the health and hopes of thousands of our young people. Daily, I read of tragic tales of what drug dealing has done to families and communities across the United Kingdom. That tragedy is exacerbated by the fact that those who deal in that deadly trade flaunt their wealth and power in the very communities that they are destroying. Many millions of pounds of drug money is successfully laundered into respectable businesses, property and investments. It is also used to buy high-value goods. In all those transactions, those who work in financial services and related professions or in commerce are unwittingly handling the proceeds of crime.

For about 12 years, we have had legislation designed to help confiscate the assets of crime, particularly drug trafficking, but it is ineffective. It was designed to provide a punishment, to deny criminals access to the funds that they need to continue their criminal activities, to deter others by showing that crime does not pay and to take criminal money out of circulation. Its effectiveness has been assessed recently, both in the report of the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit published in June 2000 and in Scotland by the report of Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, entitled, "Making Crime Pay: Confiscation of Criminal Assets in Scotland" published last year in response to a request by the Scottish Deputy Minister for Justice.

The former report, which was commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in late 1999, concluded that criminals and their associates can often retain the gains that they make from their criminal activity even when they have been convicted and imprisoned.

The latter report contains statistical evidence for Scotland that shows just how unsuccessful the current legislation and its implementation is in taking criminal money out of circulation.

I know that I am not telling the Minister anything that he does not know already or that is not already documented in the PIU report. I am aware of the proposal in the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill, which is a major initiative to deal with some of the problems that arise from the status quo.

I do not propose to go into all the reasons why the present legislation is considered deficient, but the proposal in this Bill for the establishment of a register of drug trafficking offenders is a practical addition to that set of tools. It would amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 by inserting a new section that deals with the establishment of the register and its maintenance and sets out the circumstances in which the register may be consulted and by whom.

The Bill is designed to target money laundering and to assist existing legislation in seizing the proceeds of drug dealing. Its principal purpose is to help the Government and the devolved Administrations, the police and the business sector to share important information to help them work together in a concerted way to tackle and disrupt the supply of illegal drugs.

Since the Bill was presented to the House on 26 February, it has attracted support from surprising corners, but I shall not go into that now.

The proposed new section of the 1971 Act is divided into four subsections. Subsection (1) sets out the offences for which the punishment of recording the fact of conviction on a register may be imposed. The offences set out are those that are generally described as drug trafficking offences. They are all very serious offences and can attract significant periods of imprisonment on conviction, up to life imprisonment. Subsection (1) also allows the court to order the recording of the conviction on a register to be established and maintained by the Secretary of State.

Subsection (2) describes the persons who may consult that register and the circumstances in which they may do so. It draws heavily on the provisions of the money laundering legislation and it is designed to provide to people in commerce or in financial services an opportunity for convenient and quick access to information about those who present them with substantial amounts of money where there is no clear legitimate source of such wealth.

Subsection (3) requires the Secretary of State to lay regulations of an incidental nature and relating to any fee for access before Parliament within three months of the Bill being enacted.

Subsection (4) limits the type of offenders to which the Bill's provisions relate. As I have explained previously, it is only a register of serious drug dealers. By limiting it to them, those who deal for commercial gain and who have a track record that suggests that they will continue to do so in the future, the proposals in the Bill are a proportionate response to the threat to human rights posed by crime and criminality and are no more draconian than is necessary.

By preventing criminals from profiting from crime, we create a powerful deterrent to criminality. I am grateful for the support that this modest proposal has generated. I await with interest any further comments and I commend the Bill to the House.

2.29 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am delighted that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) has invited further comments, which are appropriate when we have only six minutes to do justice to a Bill with such ramifications.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 30 March.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

SITING OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS MASTS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 6 April.

EDUCATION (STUDENT LOANS) (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 30 March.

COPYRIGHT, ETC. AND TRADE MARKS (OFFENCES AND ENFORCEMENT) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [9 March].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 30 March.

DIVORCE (RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [2 February].

Hon. Members: Object.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Debate to be resumed what day?

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Friday 6 April.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 6 April.

PRIVATE DENTAL PRACTITIONERS BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [16 March].

Hon. Members: Object.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Debate to be resumed what day?

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Friday 30 March.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Did the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) have the permission of the Member in charge of the Bill to move that debate on it be resumed on Friday next?

Mr. Forth: Yes, but I do not believe that it is necessary.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that I must remind the right hon. Gentleman that it is indeed a requirement.

Mr. Forth: Well, I do have permission.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is fine.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 30 March.

RAIL PASSENGER SERVICES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 30 March.

PENSION ANNUITIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 30 March.

CLIMATE CHANGE BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 30 March.

HIGH HEDGES BILL

Order read for consideration (not amended in the Standing Committee).

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered upon Friday 27 April.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—[*Mr. Tipping.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I make it clear that I had the permission of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) to move that debate on the Divorce (Religious Marriages) Bill be resumed on 6 April?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Those comments will be noted.

Criminal Records (Access)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

2.34 pm

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the important matter of access to criminal records for universities seeking to recruit lecturing staff. I have been pursuing the issue with Ministers as a result of a disturbing chain of events that took place at the Lincoln campus of the university of Lincolnshire and Humberside. My constituents and I take great pride in the many achievements of the staff and students and in all that the university contributes to our city as an integral part of the community.

The university in Lincoln regrettably came into the national spotlight last year in connection with the case of Russell Griffiths, a former lecturer who, following acquittal on a charge of raping a student, pleaded guilty to, and went to prison for, obtaining pecuniary advantage by deception. He had lied about his previous criminal convictions to get a lecturer's post and it transpired that he had unspent convictions, all relating to ex-girlfriends on whom he had inflicted threats to kill, criminal damage and obscene material.

I am sure that the House would agree, knowing what we now know, that Griffiths would not have been a suitable person to appoint to the trusted post of lecturer, a job that is performed with much professionalism and skill in universities and colleges across the country. It is important that we record our trust in the overwhelming majority of lecturers who do a first-rate job on our behalf. However, such a case must not be allowed to happen again. I am anxious that confidence among staff, employers and students is re-established and maintained.

I speak with the backing not only of my constituents, but of Universities UK, the national body that represents vice-chancellors, and the National Union of Students, which has joined forces with university staff to form CAMPUS—the Campaign for the Protection of University Students. To speak with one voice is a powerful and representative position from which to present the case to Parliament. I hope that the Minister will take account of the unanimous views on the matter.

I pay tribute to the leadership and clarity shown by key players at the university of Lincolnshire and Humberside, including Professor David Chiddick, the vice-chancellor, Verity Coyle, president of the students union, and Debbie Wilson, a senior lecturer. They have my appreciation and admiration for the way in which they have worked to look positively and constructively to the future and have brought their important colleagues on board.

I am pleased that the university in Lincoln has taken some important steps by strengthening its short-listing and interviewing procedures, including checks on references by telephone rather than relying on letters. However, the authorities are limited by legislative provision that prevents them from obtaining the level of checks on criminal records that they want. They eagerly await the establishment and operation of the Criminal Records Bureau, which will assist them greatly to vet prospective employees.

The establishment of the Criminal Records Bureau by the Home Office will improve access to criminal records and record checks for employment-related and voluntary

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appointment purposes. In particular, it will provide protection for children and others against those who may wish to harm them. I welcome the fact that the Government accept that the arrangements for access to criminal record checks are unsatisfactory. By setting up a single national contact point, they are helping us to bridge the gap.

I wonder, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether you, like me, remember being 18 and being convinced that you knew everything and the world was out there waiting for you. Perhaps you did, and perhaps it was. I would not want to remove that quality, but at 18, only a few months—or, indeed, a few weeks—mark the divide between being legally regarded as a child and living at home and being a legal adult who is in a new environment with full responsibility for one's daily life, decisions and actions. We should support students in their new world of university by making it a place where they can learn and grow, both academically and personally, without fear of those whom they should be able to trust to guide and support them.

Professor David Chiddick wrote to me saying:

"I believe we have a duty of care to our students, even though they are legally adults, given the special circumstances and the unique relationship that exists between a lecturer and a student."

I agree wholeheartedly. A lecturer is in a position of trust, responsibility and, indeed, power, and should not be permitted to take advantage of that.

Moreover, as the Government press ahead to widen access and participation in university education—something I very much endorse—the increasing number and range of background, age and experience mean that, as with any section of the population, the range of ability to deal with life's challenges will also widen and vary. Whether a student is more or less vulnerable is simply not the issue, as many students are more than capable of looking after themselves. It is the nature of the relationship between the student and the lecturer that we need to consider.

Of course, perfectly sound, morally acceptable and defensible relationships do exist between lecturers and students, as consenting adults. That is not the area of concern to which I refer. However, we need to bear it in mind that lecturers do not work only with young adults. At Lincoln, for example, a children's university for 12 to 16-year-olds regularly takes place, as do visits of school groups, which is very much to be encouraged. It also provides a venue for the Co-operative Kids Club. Such events enable lecturers to work, unsupervised, with those under 18.

I urge the Minister to work closely with the Department for Education and Employment to ensure that guidance and instruction is issued to universities on requiring a basic disclosure document, from the criminal records bureau, as a condition of employment. That would enable a full check to be made on unspent convictions. I should like to go one step further by asking the Minister to review the exceptions order in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 and include university lecturers. They, like teachers, traffic wardens and probation officers would then be required to declare spent convictions according to the Criminal Records Bureau standard level of disclosure.

I quite understand and endorse the purpose of the 1974 Act—to allow ex-offenders to wipe the slate clean and start afresh. Equally, there are some occupations for which I believe that that is not appropriate, which is recognised by the exemptions that have been made. I also appreciate that there is a delicate balance to be struck between giving ex-offenders the chance to contribute fully to society once again—and having a job is one of the best ways to include rather than exclude people—and ensuring the protection of those they work with, where appropriate.

The nature of the job of lecturer with its attendant responsibilities and requirements, needs careful consideration. I am in no doubt that if the case of Russell Griffiths is to have a positive outcome and scars are to be healed at the university in Lincoln, we must ensure, as far as possible, that such a case cannot happen again. We need to move that bit further to restore full confidence between students and staff and among each other.

I hope that this case, which sent shock waves throughout the Lincoln campus, will not have happened in vain. I thank the Government, particularly the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who has been most helpful with this case, for the progress that has been made so far in establishing the Criminal Records Bureau. That is a responsive measure, and will prove highly effective. However, I ask that the Minister seriously consider the request that I have made, on behalf of my constituents, for the benefit of the university community and their friends and families across the country.

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) for raising these issues. Clearly, the case of Russell Griffiths is very disturbing. It gives rise to an important issue of principle—I shall come to that in a moment—but it is essential that the issue is seen in its wider context. I should therefore like to begin by setting out the background in relation to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974—a key consideration in this matter—the current arrangements for police checks, and the new arrangements that we are putting in place through the Criminal Records Bureau. They are due to come into effect during the latter part of this year and the start of next year.

It has long been accepted that it is important for those who offend to be able to reform, to pick up their lives again after paying the penalty, and to have a fresh start. The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 has been the key legislation in that respect for more than a quarter of a century, and it will continue to be so under the new arrangements that the Criminal Records Bureau will operate, to which I shall come shortly.

The principle underlying the 1974 Act is that once a conviction has become spent it is stale, and a person applying for a job should not need to declare it to an employer. However, the need for rehabilitation must be balanced against the risk to society, particularly its most vulnerable members, from the ex-offender. That is why, for as long as the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act has been in place, there has also been a list of positions for which someone can be asked about spent convictions. People asked about spent convictions have to tell a potential employer what those convictions were for before obtaining the job.

It is crucial to get that list of positions right. We must protect the vulnerable, but we must not make the list such that an offender who has put his past behind him is disadvantaged if that is not necessary for the demands of the job.

Employers do not currently have access to police checks. If they ask a job applicant whether he has a criminal record, they have no way of verifying what they are told. That situation is partly a reflection of the sensitivity with which we treat information about a person's criminal record. However, there are also police resource constraints.

Prioritisation has been essential. The largest demand is for checks to be carried out in cases to which we would all give the highest priority—the protection of children from those who are in the strongest position to do them harm, such as those in positions affording substantial unsupervised access to children.

Most people working with children in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors are not routinely subject to police checks, and nor are people working with vulnerable adults. Frankly, the situation regarding checks on people working with children and vulnerable adults and the resourcing constraints of the police is not satisfactory.

The establishment of the Criminal Records Bureau is a major part of a much larger package of measures designed to provide additional protection for the vulnerable. Moreover, the CRB will be specifically resourced to undertake the task, and to do so to high service standards. Although protection of the vulnerable will be the primary purpose of the CRB, its service will be broader. The bureau will provide three different levels of certificates—or disclosures, as they will be known: the basic level of check will apply to the broad generality of jobs, and the other two types will relate to posts, positions and professions that attract greater sensitivity. The key gateway will be the exceptions order under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. The higher level checks will include people working with children and with vulnerable adults. The highest level will relate principally to those working most closely with children and vulnerable adults.

I now come to the particular case that my hon. Friend has raised. Let me say at the outset how disturbing I found this case, just as she did. As I said, we must take great care to ensure that we strike the correct balance between protection of the individual—the potential victim—and the rights of a potential employee to be able to live down the misdemeanours of his or her past.

We must be conscious of the danger that our reactions to a particular case could lead us to a position that would upset a careful balance. In the case to which my hon. Friend referred, it was possible for information about previous convictions to be concealed. Under the present arrangements, the university authorities did not have access to police information that would have revealed those convictions. The position will be wholly different once the CRB becomes fully operational. Under the arrangements for criminal records checks that the CRB will operate, the authorities could request that a check be carried out at the basic level. That would have revealed the unspent convictions of Russell Griffiths.

I understand that officials from the Department for Education and Employment have met representatives of Universities UK—formerly the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals—to discuss arrangements for criminal record checks. Universities UK is considering issuing guidance on strengthening existing recruitment for university staff. It is likely to emphasise the need to verify qualifications and obtain independent references, and to advise universities to obtain a basic disclosure from the CRB, when available, as part of their recruitment process.

It would be a very large step to contemplate bringing university staff within the scope of the higher level checks that will be available from the CRB. The main practical effect would be to open up to scrutiny any stale conviction that might lie in a person's past, but which, under the tests set in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, should not be revealed unless there are exceptional circumstances. It would also bring to light a caution, reprimand or warning to a young offender. At the very highest level of check conducted by the bureau, it would mean a search of local police records.

Such information is clearly more sensitive, and making it available remains an exceptional measure under the scheme that the CRB will operate. To warrant such disclosure, the circumstances must be such that the interests of protecting the victim would require that the scales be tilted further in that direction. That has clearly been considered justified in order to protect the most vulnerable members of our society—children, and the most vulnerable adults.

In an area where striking the right balance is so important, I do not have a closed mind, but would have to be convinced that we need to tilt the scales by making university staff subject to higher levels of checks from the CRB. We take the view that the basic checks that would be provided by the CRB would be likely to be adequate, but we are willing to listen to any argument made by my hon. Friend or others to suggest that we need to go to a higher level. We shall listen to such arguments, but we remain to be convinced by them.

I have listened with great care to my hon. Friend. She has raised important issues, and the Government will reflect carefully on the strong points that she made. She asked me to review exemptions to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. That will take some time to arrange, but I hope to be able to do it in the summer, and we shall consider her arguments when we do so. I cannot prejudge the outcome of that review, and it would require an affirmative resolution of the House if we were to change any of the exemptions. If that becomes necessary, the House will require a further debate at which my hon. Friend could comment further.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising an important issue. I hope that we can respond in a way that ensures that the sort of problems that arose in the case of Russell Griffiths will be prevented from causing distress to universities and students in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 26 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Channel 4

1. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): If he will make a statement on the contribution of Channel 4 to public service television. [153861]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): Channel 4 provides distinctive and innovative programming, and both provides competition for and complements the other public service broadcasters. We will maintain its current status and ensure that it remains a key element of public service broadcasting in the multichannel future.

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Is she aware that last year alone, Channel 4 invested £30 million in British film and that that investment levered in an additional £73 million from overseas and other sources? How important is it to that level of investment in that important industry that Channel 4 remains a public service broadcaster? What would be the consequences if the ill-advised privatisation policy espoused by the Opposition became Government policy?

Janet Anderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising such an important issue. Privatisation would damage the British film industry, for which Channel 4 has been a front-line source of finance for two decades. It would jeopardise the channel's remit to serve minority interests and it would lose its creative edge. Dividends to shareholders would take money directly out of programme budgets. We made it clear in the White Paper that

"We will also maintain Channel 4 as a public service broadcaster . . . we entirely reject proposals to privatise Channel 4 and will maintain Channel 4's present structure of a non-profit making statutory corporation".

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does the hon. Lady realise that Carlton UK Television and Sky television might be upset by that response, given that they are private organisations and also fund the film industry? Does she not realise that it is possible for Channel 4—which is, after all, funded by advertising—to be privatised provided that there are safeguards to ensure continued investment in the film industry and public service broadcasting? Indeed, Carlton, Granada Television and other private media organisations can rightly be proud of their public service broadcasting.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman seems to argue for more regulation, which I thought that the Conservatives were against. Do they not recognise that public service broadcasting will be more important than ever in the digital age as a benchmark of quality and diversity? I remind him that a Conservative Home Secretary, Willie Whitelaw, set up Channel 4 and a Conservative Secretary of State for National Heritage, the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), rejected a proposal to privatise it. The latest Opposition policy is a significant U-turn which would do nothing to preserve the quality of public service broadcasting.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): The Minister should be more cautious. She knows that we propose to privatise Channel 4 and reinvest the proceeds in the cultural sector. She should also know that our proposals have been well received. No one doubts that Channel 4 at its best makes a significant contribution to public service broadcasting, but can she provide a shred of evidence from outside Channel 4 that the introduction of shareholders would automatically cause it to commit commercial suicide by abandoning its audiences and deserting such a successful formula, which raised £650 million last year? Before she treats the House to another dewy-eyed lecture about the purity of Channel 4 and dumbing down, can she explain the public service contribution of "Ibiza Uncovered", "Get Your Kit Off" and "Eurotrash"?

Janet Anderson: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not understand that dividends to shareholders would take precedence and take money directly out of programme budgets, after all that is not rocket science, but common sense. I remind him that in 1999, Channel 4 broadcast the work of more than 400 independent production companies, at least eight times as much as any other broadcaster. What opportunities would those producers have under the Conservatives policies? What is more, the hon. Gentleman's figures do not add up. If the Conservatives ever got a chance to implement their policies, they would need a fund of £9.2 billion to generate the £275 million Treasury grant for arts bodies that we have announced. I suggest that he goes back to the drawing board.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): This talk about public ownership just before a general election is wonderful news. Keep taking the tablets.

Janet Anderson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I thank him very much for his visit to my constituency on Saturday night, when he reminded people of what the Government have done since their election—in stark contrast to what that lot on the Opposition Benches did in 18 years.

Museum Charges

2. **Valerie Davey** (Bristol, West): What estimate he has made of the impact on attendance of the lifting of museum charges on attendance at national museums and galleries. [153862]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Our policy is to encourage all museums to offer the widest possible access to their collections. Two years ago, we introduced free admission to national museums and galleries for all children. In the first year, attendances rose by 20 per cent. Last year, we introduced free admission for all those over 60, and those attendances have since risen by over 40 per cent. As a result of the VAT change announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Budget we will be able to provide free admission for everyone to all the national museums and galleries from 1 December.

Valerie Davey: May I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend for his reply? I am sure that everyone in the Chamber will celebrate that news. More than 436,000 people visited the Bristol city museum and art gallery last year, which was a 50 per cent. increase since charges were lifted. Will my right hon. Friend also celebrate with me the fact that Bristol City council scrapped admission charges in 1998? Will he also endorse the city museum's good practice of having fun days for children and staging family events alongside major exhibitions?

Mr. Smith: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Bristol City council on its progress. I understand that there has been an increase in attendances of about 50 per cent. at the Bristol city museum and art gallery since charges were lifted. Of course, Bristol City council was two years ahead of the national museums and galleries because local authorities have always been able to reclaim their VAT. Bristol city museum and art gallery is a designated museum of national importance and it is wonderful that so many more people can now enjoy it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Before congratulating himself in such sickly fashion, can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what assessment he has made of the impact of the current inability of free museums to reclaim VAT on the provision of services?

Mr. Smith: That point was central to the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Budget. As a result of the decision on VAT that we have now announced, free national museums will be able to reclaim VAT, with substantial benefit for their budgets.

Tourism (Foot and Mouth)

3. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What assessment he has made of the effect on the tourist industry of the foot and mouth outbreak. [153863]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The loss of tourism business in England is in the order of £100 million a week and could reach £250 million a week if the consequential implications of the foot and mouth outbreak continue well into the main summer season.

Mr. Dalyell: Farmers apart, what is being done to help the total rural economic community? Many small hotel keepers are simply reeling.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the severe impact of the foot and mouth outbreak on the entire rural economy. Tourism has been particularly badly affected, but many other rural businesses have been affected too. When I visited Cumbria last weekend to see for myself the impact on local tourism and businesses, I was told a grim story. Hoteliers, guest house keepers and people dependent on the tourism industry were extremely anxious that two things should happen.

First, they wanted the Government to recognise the difficulties that they faced with cash flow; the initial package of measures announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment last week will go some way to providing initial relief. In addition, they were extremely anxious that we should emphasise that visitors to the countryside are very welcome and that there are many things that those visitors can do with great enjoyment and benefit all around the country, without any threat or danger of the spread of the disease.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Does the Secretary of State endorse the British Tourist Authority's recovery programme for tourism, and are the Government prepared to make money available now to enable the BTA to combat the sharp decline in visitor numbers and inquiries, not just to the areas most severely affected by the disease, but even to our resorts around the coasts? Will the right hon. Gentleman give an assurance that the increased money made available for our tourist operations abroad will not rule out money being made available to tourist boards in the affected areas such as Cumbria and Devon, where work is needed now?

Mr. Smith: There are two crucial tasks. The first is to ensure that overseas visitors do not get an erroneous message about Britain being closed for tourism business. Over the past few weeks the British Tourist Authority has been working actively to combat that impression. We strongly support those efforts and we are in discussion with the BTA about a package of proposals, with new resources, to provide the right sort of information and advertising abroad.

The second task is to ensure that, particularly with the Easter break coming up, domestic visitors are encouraged to enjoy holidays in Britain, especially in the British countryside. It is crucial to ensure that accurate information is available about what is and what is not available to them to do. The regional tourist boards and local tourist information centres are working closely and carefully on that. The helplines are available and the information is getting out as rapidly as possible.

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): Although I know that my right hon. Friend recognises that in Cumbria the tourism industry contributes almost £1 billion per annum to the county's economy, does he recognise that in the remoter parts of west and south Cumbria, and particularly in my

constituency, Copeland, the tourism industry is made up of very many small businesses, which depend overwhelmingly on walkers and climbers for their income? Given that the necessary restrictions are being extended, regrettably and sadly, into my constituency because of an outbreak there, may I urge my right hon. Friend and the Government to look closely at how those very small businesses in the remote valleys and dales can be sustained for the future? They are the most vulnerable of all, because they are such tiny businesses. In particular, will my right hon. Friend consider how the Government might offer some direct assistance to those people? I applaud what is being done through the tourist authorities and the Cumbria tourist board, but those businesses will not survive unless they get direct assistance in this dire emergency.

Mr. Smith: I understand the issue that my right hon. Friend raises. For small businesses that are heavily dependent on walkers and climbers for their income, the position is nowhere near as revocable as it is for more broadly based businesses that can attract car-borne visitors. Those small businesses will immediately qualify for the package of measures announced last week by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, and we will consider further what more might be done to assist them.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I endorse entirely the remarks of the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). The House will be dismayed at the news that an outbreak has been discovered in the heart of the Lake district. The impact on farming communities and on tourism is becoming catastrophic. Although the effect is more acute in rural areas, there is clear evidence that towns and cities across the United Kingdom are suffering from cancelled bookings, and the cost is running into billions of pounds.

Does the Secretary of State agree that extra funds for marketing will help, but that realistically, they will be of limited value while the pyres continue to burn and the footpaths are closed? Will he ensure that when help does come, it is targeted at the areas where the problem has been most acute? Does he understand the growing anger and frustration in the tourism industry at the lack of immediate and effective action to tackle the cash flow problems faced by many businesses today?

When will the Secretary of State—or the Minister for the Environment or whoever now claims to be in charge of the crisis—offer, not promise, rate relief and emergency loans for companies whose businesses have collapsed? Will he now consider scrapping his unpopular and unwise decision to abolish an England-wide marketing remit in tourism, which has hampered the efforts of the English Tourism Council during the crisis and fuelled uncertainty and confusion over the Government's handling of the whole affair?

Mr. Smith: Coming from the party which, when in office, cut the old English tourist board by 70 per cent., the hon. Gentleman's last remark is perhaps a bit unwise. We must obviously try to approach this issue in as bipartisan a manner as possible, because there is a real and serious difficulty facing the tourism industry across the country, including the cities, owing to the fall in overseas visitor bookings. It is particularly acute in the countryside and especially in Cumbria, Devon and mid-Wales, which have been especially affected by the foot and mouth outbreak.

We have already put on the table a package of measures, as announced last week, which include enhanced rate relief for businesses in the affected rural areas. We shall of course be looking at what more needs to be done as the picture become clearer, but the most useful thing that we can all do to try to help those businesses in the rural economy is to encourage people to continue taking their holidays in the countryside.

I fear that, in the first few days of the outbreak, many people cancelled bookings in the countryside, perhaps in the mistaken belief that they were somehow helping. I would argue that they can help the rural economy and rural businesses best by continuing their visits, by going to see the countryside, and by engaging in activities that pose no threat to livestock or of progress of the disease.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will my right hon. Friend join me in appealing to members of the national media, particularly the broadcast media, to stop the practice of frightening tourists away from the Lake district by what they say? If they carry on, they will create hundreds of bankruptcies in west Cumbria and in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and in mine. We cannot go on like this. They are making things worse. Furthermore, they are exaggerating the impact on the Lake district, in which until last weekend there were almost no cases of foot and mouth.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify the impact of some of those impressions on tourism and holiday making, particularly in the Lake district. It is of course very sad news that one new case was identified yesterday in the Duddon valley on the edge of the Lake district national park. We must hope sincerely that the outbreak will not spread further into the park, which is still very much open for business. There are 100 visitor attractions in the Lake district that people can go to see. I very much hope that they will still want to do so.

Dome Sale

4. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What his estimate is of the final sum raised by the sale of the contents of the Millennium Dome. [153864]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): On 3 March, the New Millennium Experience Company announced that the total value of the hammer price for items auctioned was approximately £3.5 million. That figure is subject to final reconciliation after completion of payments and collection of items by the purchasers.

Mr. Wilkinson: Why was the second lot of items withdrawn from the sale? Were they of such intrinsically wonderful value, were they of such cultural interest, or

were they retained so that the dome could be maintained at the cost of £3 million a month, with that residue inside, and form part, as the Prime Minister said, of

"the first paragraph of this manifesto for re-election"?

Janet Anderson: Those assets identified by Legacy plc as essential to its bid—along with other assets of potentially significant value to a future leisure attraction—were held back from the auction and remain in the ownership of the New Millennium Experience Company. A decision on how the value of those items will be realised will be taken in conjunction with any decision on the dome's future use.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): The Government seem to think that if they say nothing about the dome, the problem will go away and people will forget about it. However, people will not forget. They will not forget the waste of hundreds of millions of pounds of lottery money; the refusal of Lord Falconer, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, to resign; or the role played by the Secretary of State—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must ask a question. I cannot hear one at present.

Mr. Ainsworth: I am coming to my question, Mr. Speaker.

Will the Minister confirm that the sale of the dome's contents was as big a fiasco as everything else to do with the dome? As it costs almost £80 a minute merely to stay shut and there is a deafening official silence about any future sale of the site, will she also confirm that the dome is likely to run out of money again? When will that happen, and when it does, who will pick up the bill?

Janet Anderson: May I just remind the hon. Gentleman of one or two things? The decision to build the dome was taken under the previous Government, as was the decision to build it at Greenwich. They also appointed the original chairman and chief executive of the dome company, determined the corporate structure, decided on the use of lottery money to support the project and created the role of the shareholder. I rest my case.

Sport (Foot and Mouth)

5. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): What representations he has received regarding the cancellation of sporting fixtures to take account of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [153865]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): I have received representations from the British Equestrian Federation, and there have been a small number of inquiries from individuals regarding ice hockey, water sports and netball.

Mr. Robathan: There has been great debate in the press about whether sporting events should be cancelled. It has also been suggested that Buckingham palace has become involved, although that is mere speculation. Does the Minister agree, in the light of her background, that the overriding priority in this terrible crisis must be eradication of the disease, and that caution should therefore be applied when any danger is associated with a sporting event? Will the Government produce guidelines to assist the organisers of sporting events, whatever form they take, to ensure that they do not threaten to spread the disease?

Kate Hoey: I agree that the first priority must be to eradicate the disease, but I think that it is important to get the balance right on sporting fixtures. Guidelines are widely available. The governing bodies of sport are ultimately responsible for their own sport, and have dealt responsibly with the outbreak and taken their own decisions. The British Equestrian Federation, which deals with a range of horse sports—its responsibilities include pony trekking and other aspects of equestrian sport—has been especially affected by the outbreak and has taken very responsible decisions. We must leave those involved to make the best judgments for themselves. I do not believe that any event that has so far gone ahead should have been cancelled.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): Although some Labour Members—especially me—might wish that the recent game between England and Scotland at Twickenham had been cancelled, the fact is that the cancellation of major rugby internationals is a damaging blow not only to the sporting industry, but to the tourism industry, as such events are major money-spinners. Will my hon. Friend have urgent talks with the various rugby unions to ensure that the games now proceed as planned?

Kate Hoey: As my hon. Friend knows, only games involving the Irish team have been postponed and new dates have been suggested for them. The England-Scotland game took place as it would usually have done. It was a good result and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was present to see England win. I commiserate with my hon. Friend on that result, but I believe that all governing bodies are dealing with the problem in a very responsible manner.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): If the countryside is open for business as the Secretary of State insists, why were the Badmington horse trials cancelled, why is the Windsor horse show about to be cancelled, and why was the countryside march, which the Minister supports, cancelled?

Kate Hoey: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman well knows that the organisers believed that it was appropriate to cancel those events. That does not mean that events cannot take place in other parts of the countryside, where there are no cases of foot and mouth and which are far from infected areas. We must strike a balance. Does the hon. Gentleman want the Government to cancel all sporting events? That is clearly nonsense, and he knows it.

Amateur Sports Clubs

7. **Mr. Derek Twigg** (Halton): What assessment he has made of the effect on prospects for amateur sports clubs of the Chancellor's Budget. [153867]

11. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on reform of tax on non-profit sports clubs. [153871]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): In the course of this year and last year, I have held several meetings with ministerial colleagues and representatives across the sports sector to discuss the taxation burden on community amateur sports clubs. The announcement from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the Budget of plans to consult on a new tax relief for those clubs will be of great benefit to them.

Mr. Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, which will be warmly welcomed in my constituency where there are many community sports clubs. My constituency is a disadvantaged area, and my hon. Friend's reply is therefore especially important.

Discussions were taking place with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about rate relief for non-profit-making sports clubs. What stage have they reached?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is right that the many small community amateur clubs, which are the bedrock of sport, will benefit from the tax exemption. It will give them a great morale boost. They should be treated in the same way as small community amateur dramatic societies. I hope that the discussions will lead to the small community sports clubs receiving the same treatment for rate relief as amateur arts clubs.

Mr. Heath: There are 110,000 amateur sports clubs, which have more than 5 million members, who will greatly welcome the Minister's words. However, as the hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) said, consultation on mandatory rate relief has already been announced, yet we have not moved further. Does the Minister agree that we do not need more Green Papers, White Papers, consultation exercises, taskforces or focus groups, but some action to support our small amateur sports clubs and the many volunteers throughout the country who help to make them work? Will she impress on her colleagues the urgency of supporting those clubs?

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman should have paid tribute to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats on sport, because we are considering an all-party effort, and one throughout sport, to gain the recognition that I described. I do not want more Green Papers and consultation, but the definition of a small community amateur sports club must be clarified specifically if the necessary provisions are to be included in the pre-Budget report in October. We do not want professional clubs, which earn huge amounts of money, to benefit. The provision is for the small club; that is why it is important to get it right. We have waited a long time for it.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed), who presented a ten-minute Bill on the subject, and to all hon. Members who have worked for the provision, as well as to the Central Council of Physical Recreation and all sorts of organisations in sport. Having waited so long, another six months to get the detail right is neither here nor there.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I welcome my hon. Friend's words. Some clubs are considering development plans at the moment, so will she consider publishing advice and guidance for clubs on the tactics and the strategy that they should now adopt for those plans, which they will later present and for which they will want to raise money?

Kate Hoey: As I said earlier, the Central Council of Physical Recreation has led a terrific campaign for many years. It has clear guidelines, and it will be willing to give advice to any individual club. However, that advice will not apply to professional clubs and relief will be limited to clubs that have truly open membership, not those where access is restricted to a small section of the community. We want to open up our clubs and support the voluntary effort at grass roots. We will also adopt guidelines, and any club is welcome to get in touch with us.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I am sure that the Minister intended to reassure voluntary sports clubs, and I agree with her sentiment that everyone has considered this matter. Is it not the case, however, that nothing has been decided, and that there is nothing new in what the Chancellor said? He only agreed to consider how to give help to sports clubs.

I confirm to the Minister that we have considered this matter in some depth, and I can announce today that the next Conservative Government will work with the Charity Commission—and change the law if necessary—to offer charitable status to voluntary, not-for-profit sports clubs. Is she aware that that would not only give them help with rates, but encourage new money through tax relief for corporate and personal donations; and most importantly, that it would help to secure facilities and playing fields for future generations? Grass-roots sports clubs feel let down by the Government, and we intend to put that right.

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman and his party had 18 years in which to do that and they never got very far, despite having a Prime Minister who was committed to the idea at one stage. The Chancellor has now committed the Government to seeing this provision as a necessary one. We are looking at the details and their implications. If we were to go down the charitable status route, which is not a route that sport itself wants, we should still be discussing this issue in another 20 years' time.

Space for Sports and the Arts Programme

8. **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): How the space for sports and the arts programme will benefit schools in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency. [153868]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): Under the space for sport and the arts programme, Tower Hamlets local education authority has been allocated £1.25 million,

which will fund four projects enabling seven primary schools to benefit, including six in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Ms King: I thank my hon. Friend for that extremely welcome reply. In 1997, not only was there no level playing field in British children's access to sports provision, but in my constituency, there was not a single playing field. I therefore found the outburst by the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) quite strange.

Given the deprivation in Tower Hamlets, will my hon. Friend ensure that schools in my area will still be allowed to bid for new funding from, for example, the new opportunities fund, so that children in Tower Hamlets can have the same access to and space for sports and the arts as children in the rest of the country?

Kate Hoey: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. This money will make a great difference to many primary schools across the country, and Members of Parliament in whose constituencies the primary schools will be affected will receive a letter later today. I assure my hon. Friend that, in relation to the new opportunities fund money for school sports, all local education authorities will have something. Clearly, areas such as hers, with its great deprivation, will be looked at again, and I hope that she will equally pleased by the next announcement.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Should there not be more space for sports and the arts inside the national curriculum?

Kate Hoey: Of course, there is space for sport and the arts within the national curriculum. There is now an entitlement for every young person at school to have two hours of good quality physical education in school sport, either within or outside the curriculum.

As I have pointed out before, the school day is very different in different schools, in terms of what happens inside and outside the curriculum. We need what happens in the curriculum to provide for certain things to happen outside the curriculum as a spin-off. For example, a proper cricket or rugby match cannot be played within curriculum time. We have to ensure that all our youngsters have a proper introduction to physical education in school sport in the curriculum, which can then be used, magnified and enjoyed outside it. We are also keen to see the return of increased competition, which went out of our schools during the 18 years of the previous, Conservative Government.

Culture and Recreation Bill

10. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What plans he has to bring forward amendments to the Culture and Recreation Bill on the recording of archaeological sites and historic monuments by local authorities. [153870]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): Amendments on that matter have already been tabled. The Government have no present intention of tabling others.

Mr. Loughton: The Minister will be aware that many local authorities already keep records of archaeological monuments and historical sites, but there is great disparity between the detail and the extent of those records, which causes problems for researchers of archaeology and history and for those hoping to develop brownfield and greenfield sites. Will he give me an undertaking that he will support the amendment long since tabled by my noble Friend Lord Renfrew, which would deal with the matter and which has enormous support among everybody involved and interested in archaeology and heritage? Will the Minister stop prevaricating and give that widely supported measure his backing in the Lords so that we can get on with it?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is right in what he says about sites and monuments records, but rather than legislate on such records, we are attracted to going further, along the lines proposed in the heritage review, to provide for more wide-ranging historical environment record centres. May I suggest that he ask his hon. Friends on the Front Bench why they have sought to block all progress on the Culture and Recreation Bill? He should ask them also to explain how the costs of additional archaeological recording would be met in view of their intention to cut £16 billion of public expenditure.

Wembley Stadium

12. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): If he will make a statement on the future of Wembley stadium. [153872]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The Government fully support the efforts of Sir Rodney Walker and his team to develop a world-class stadium for football and rugby league. I understand that the Football Association and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. are currently holding discussions with their financial advisers on the process of loan syndication. The timing of that is entirely a matter for the FA and Wembley National Stadium Ltd.

Mr. Flight: Will the Secretary of State admit that there seems to be a little bit of a difference between his policy and that of the Minister for Sport with regard to Wembley? Those of us in the outside world consider that things are slightly chaotic. Is it intended that Pickett's Lock stadium should have the capability to host football and the Olympics or will it be used only for athletics? How do the Government plan to fund it? Those are important matters, but there is a perception that two policies are emanating from the Government.

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman's question seems rather confused to me. There is no difference of opinion or of fact whatever between me and my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport. The issue is perfectly clear: Wembley will be a stadium primarily for football and rugby league. It is a Football Association project and we wish it all the very best in putting the funding together.

Pickett's Lock at the Lee Valley stadium in Enfield will be the stadium for the 2005 world athletics championships. The designs for it were announced a few days ago and they have been broadly welcomed. Sport England has already earmarked £60 million of its budget to assist in the construction, and a further £12 million is

already earmarked for the project. I have every confidence that it will now proceed on time to deliver a wonderful setting for the world championships.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Is it not time to admit that Wembley is a complete shambles? Is it not time we threw the existing committee out? It is the fault of those who are on the committee that we have ended up with this absolute disaster. Is it not time the Government got hold of the project themselves and ensured that we have an opening date for the people's stadium?

Mr. Smith: I have to say to my hon. Friend that this is not a Government project; it is a Football Association project and it is up to the FA to take it forward. I was very pleased last December when the FA decided to take much closer control over the project and to put Sir Rodney Walker in as chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd. I have confidence that Sir Rodney and his team will deliver the goods.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does not the Secretary of State realise that the chairman of Sport England, Trevor Brooking, has had to write to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), the Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, to make it clear that the Secretary of State's evidence, given only a week or so ago, was inaccurate? He told the Select Committee that £60 million had been pledged—when it cannot have been, as Mr. Brooking has made clear, because no application has yet been made. Is not that yet another example of our being unable to believe the Secretary of State on any issue whatever?

Mr. Smith: No. The evidence that I gave the Select Committee was crystal clear: it was that £60 million has been earmarked in Sport England's budget. That decision was taken by the Sport England lottery panel, and was confirmed in the minutes of the organisation's council meeting. That is what I told the Select Committee, and it remains the case.

School Sport

13. **Mr. Keith Darvill** (Upminster): If he will make a statement on his Department's support for sport in schools. [153873]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): My Department is working closely with the Department for Education and Employment on school sport initiatives, which will improve the quality of physical education and school sport. For example, £581 million of new opportunities fund money will be put into school sports facilities with an element of community use, and by 2004 we will invest £120 million in a network of 1,000 school sports co-ordinators.

Mr. Darvill: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I welcome the funding from the Government and the national lottery for the sports co-ordinator programme, which is useful in linking local schools and sports clubs. Other associations are also helping to fund the programme. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the programme will be extended as quickly as possible to benefit local areas such as Havering? I am sure that the scheme will prove popular.

Kate Hoey: We want to roll out this programme as quickly as possible. We want to get it right and working properly. The first 140 co-ordinators were appointed last September, and the second round was announced in February. Furthermore, £3.9 million has been allocated for 55 co-ordinators, 12 partnership managers and 249 primary link teachers. By 2004, 250 partnerships will be established with 1,000 secondary schools and up to 6,000 primary schools. The initiative will not involve just one sports co-ordinator for one school, but will establish partnerships, especially with sports clubs in the area, with local authority sports development officers and with the governing bodies of sport.

It has been terrifically useful that many of the governing bodies have got involved and have worked with us closely. They include the Lawn Tennis Association—a sport that my hon. Friend is interested in. We can make this happen if people work together and do not go off and do their own thing, as in the past. That is the beauty and importance of this new arrangement for school sports co-ordinators.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): The Minister may remember that a few months ago I handed a petition to the Secretary of State on behalf of Fakenham high school and the community of Fakenham in support of a new sports complex. Will she give that project her full support?

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to give my full support now, as I do not have the details to hand. I promise him that I shall look into the matter and write to him about that project.

Creative Partnerships

14. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): When he expects the planned creative partnerships to commence. [153874]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): Last month, we were delighted to announce the 16 areas in which we hope creative partnerships pilots will be developed. The Arts Council of England, which is delivering the initiative, will be consulting schools and creative organisations in each location over the next few months to establish which bodies will be involved. Details on how schools and cultural organisations can take part in creative partnerships will be available from the Arts Council from early May. Funding for the initiative will come on stream in April 2002.

Mr. Chapman: I am delighted that one of those partnerships will be in the Wirral. Does the Minister agree with me that creative partnerships have a role in trying to restore instrumental music teaching in our schools, which was pretty well decimated when the Conservative party was in power?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is right. Instrumental music teaching was rapidly disappearing, as local education authorities found it more and more difficult to

support peripatetic music services. School budgets also came under increasing pressure. My right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment and for Culture, Media and Sport mounted an emergency rescue operation. They introduced the music standards fund, which is worth £180 million, and the National Foundation for Youth Music, worth £30 million; and now, with creative partnerships and a budget of £40 million—which will be available to support instrumental music teaching if that is what creative partnerships want—the prospects are transformed.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Minister accept that if the creative arts are to be encouraged, it is essential that they be encouraged in schools, which his partnership initiative will do? That brings to mind—as did an earlier question relating to sports—the role of the arts in the national curriculum. Many people feel that, because the curriculum is so rigorous, the arts are not being given the prominence that they deserve: they tend to be excluded. Will the Minister look into the matter carefully, along with the schools themselves?

Mr. Howarth: I agree. Over the years, the curriculum and teaching methods may not have given enough emphasis to encouraging children's imaginative and creative abilities. Notwithstanding the proper emphasis that my right hon. Friends have insisted should be placed on the teaching of numeracy and literacy, it is important for those additional elements of a balanced curriculum to be introduced.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Repairs (VAT)

29. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): What estimate he has made of the annual savings to the Church of England of a reduction of VAT on repairs to churches to 5 per cent. [153853]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): It is too early to give precise figures for the Church of England's savings on VAT which will arise following the significant announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in his Budget statement earlier this month.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of a written answer in which the Paymaster General said:

"the VAT paid by all churches, including listed churches, for repairs and maintenance is £38 million per year."—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 706W.]

VAT is levied at 17.5 per cent. I calculate that if it were reduced to 5 per cent., the reduction would result in a saving of £10.85 million a year for the combined churches.

On Budget day, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said that he would consult urgently in order to produce a grant scheme to replace the lost VAT early in the new financial year. The new financial year is nearly upon us, but the earliest the Europeans are likely to consider a reduction in VAT is 2003. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the Government have a strong moral obligation to replace the £10.85 million that will be lost in VAT over each of the next two years, until the European Union can introduce its reduction scheme?

Mr. Bell: I am somewhat surprised by the hon. Gentleman's question, as he is well informed on these matters. He surely noted that, in his Budget statement, the Chancellor indicated that a grant amounting to the equivalent of a reduction from 17.5 per cent. to 5 per cent. would be provided. That would cover all repairs for listed churches from 1 April this year. We therefore need not wait for the European Commission: from 1 April this year, the VAT will effectively be reduced from 17.5 per cent. to 5 per cent. As for the Commission, we will continue to work towards achieving what the hon. Gentleman desires.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): When my hon. Friend proffers the estimate for which the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) has asked, will he also tell us how much 18 years of Conservative government cost the churches, when the Conservatives could have enacted a policy about which they have been bleating for the past four years?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding the House that VAT was doubled in 1979 to 7.5 per cent., which imposed an onerous burden on the churches. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is the only Chancellor in 20 years who, as well as taking steps to reduce VAT on church repairs, has introduced a grant scheme, which will operate from 1 April.

Archbishoprics (Administration)

30. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): What advice is given by the commissioners regarding the administrative work for the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. [153854]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Church Commissioners finance the working costs of both archbishops, including staff and office requirements, as they do for other bishops. They aim to provide resources in a consistent and cost-effective way, and will offer advice as needed.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that both archbishops are currently sinking under a weight of administrative work? Does he agree with many people in the Church of England who are calling for the establishment of a third archbishopric? Does he not agree that, if that were to be established, the obvious place for a third archbishop would be in the diocese that is one of the oldest in the country and which has the precedent of a third archbishop—there was an archbishop of Lichfield

in 787? Lichfield is also midway between Canterbury and York. Will he use all his tremendous talents and efforts to press for a third archbishop: an archbishop of Lichfield?

Mr. Bell: The hon. Gentleman's eloquence is well known to the House. He is also, as Napoleon once said, a lucky man. Generals should be lucky and he is lucky—he won his seat at the last election with a majority of 230. With such good fortune and such eloquence, I am sure that Lord Hurd, who is conducting a review of the see of Canterbury, will listen carefully to what he says and take his remarks fully into account.

Church Land

31. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on the purposes for which Church land can be used. [153855]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): With your permission, Mr. Speaker, in relation to Church land use, I would like to make a short statement on the foot and mouth crisis.

The Church Commissioners have sent individual letters via their managing agents to all their farm tenants. At the moment, the commissioners believe that they have four confirmed cases in Cumbria, where much of the commissioners' land is subject to exclusion orders and the risk of infection is very high. They think that it is inevitable that more of their farms will be infected.

The commissioners encourage their tenants to raise any instance of hardship or financial difficulty with their managing agents, who will either deal with it, or refer it on to them for a decision in line with the commissioners' longstanding policy.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whose answer was characteristically informative and prudent.

Given that church halls are vested in parochial church councils and can therefore be used for a wide variety of purposes, and given that the Church of England is said to be placing increased emphasis not only on the spiritual, but on the educational and social development of young people aged between 11 and 25, will the hon. Gentleman join me in encouraging not only the Church of England but other Churches to consider making their land available for productive use not only by Christians or by other people of religious persuasion, but by all young people who can benefit from it?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. We hope that foot and mouth disease and the crisis will be over as soon as possible. That will liberate all Church land. When that happy day comes, I am sure that the Church will wish to take into account his helpful suggestion.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. I wonder whether he could go back to the Church Commissioners to ensure that farms that may not be directly affected through infection but which are in the 3 or 16 km exclusion areas will also get a rent-free period to help them through their current strife.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The Church Commissioners have had a longstanding policy of assisting farms in difficulty, wherever they happen to be—that predates the present crisis. We treat all cases sympathetically, whether farms are afflicted with foot and mouth, or are in the exclusion zones, or are simply nearby.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I welcome the hon. Gentleman's statement, but I urge upon him the notion that the Church Commissioners should adopt the most generous possible attitude to farmers who work the estates in their ownership. As the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) has said, they should take that attitude not just to those in directly affected areas. There is a possibility of conducting a full-scale review of agricultural rents throughout the country and making it retrospective to Lady day. Will he please consider that?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As he knows, the Church Commissioners are the largest landowners in the United Kingdom and have about 300 tenants. The Archbishop of Canterbury has asked that the commissioners look sympathetically at farmers facing problems. The point that the hon. Gentleman has made will be taken fully into account.

Redundant Churches

32. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on the use of redundant churches. [153856]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The procedure for settling the future of redundant Church of England churches gives priority to any diocese seeking and achieving suitable alternative uses. Use by another Christian body or for wider community purposes is generally regarded as the most suitable use for former churches.

Mr. Paterson: What powers does a bishop have to overrule a parochial church council that has closed a church and done nothing with it even though the congregation wants to reopen it?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for referring to the relationship between a parish council and a bishop as regards church closures. If he has a particular church in mind and will write to me, I will be very glad to answer his questions.

European Council (Stockholm)

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the Special European Council held in Stockholm from 22 to 24 March.

At Stockholm, there was from all our partners sympathy over the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Britain and support for the measures that we are taking to contain and eradicate the disease. With your permission, Mr. Speaker, tomorrow, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will make a statement to the House on the latest developments.

The purpose of the Council was to take forward the process of economic reform that was launched last year at Lisbon. That involved setting performance targets for the first time; benchmarking both between the nations of the European Union and in relation to our main competitors outside Europe; and a massive programme of liberalisation in opening up our markets.

As American growth slows, that policy is even more vital for growth and jobs in the future. Since March 2000, 2.5 million new jobs have been created in the European Union. In the United Kingdom we have created more than 1 million new jobs since 1997. Those figures will be welcomed in the House, in the country and across the European Union.

European Union spending on information and communications technology as a proportion of gross domestic product has, for the first time, outstripped that of the United States. In Europe, the proportion of homes with access to the internet has doubled to 28 per cent. For the United Kingdom, however, the figure is now 41 per cent. We must, however, go further.

Prior to the summit, we had already agreed rules for electronic commerce, so that a company registered in its home state can operate on the basis of those rules anywhere in the European Union; rules allowing businesses to operate as a European company; a programme for liberalisation of rail freight; and the final steps in telecommunications liberalisation, in a manner which will bring cheaper bills and cheaper internet access. That is good news for consumers across Europe.

At Stockholm, we agreed, first, to liberalise financial services, in a comprehensive plan that includes a single European company prospectus, common accounting standards, a far quicker procedure for changing financial services rules, and completing the single market in wholesale and retail financial services. The City and the Confederation of British Industry have rightly welcomed that breakthrough as good for jobs in the UK and the rest of the EU.

Secondly, we have made a commitment to open up the electricity and gas markets across the European Union. Most member states support the Commission's proposed timetable of full energy liberalisation by 2005, with intermediate targets for commercial liberalisation of 2003 for electricity and 2004 for gas. That proposal goes forward. There is widespread support for it in the Council and, crucially, it can be agreed by qualified majority vote. While I regret that we could not go further at Stockholm, the prospects for agreement at European level remain good. Our aim is for the Council of Ministers to reach agreement before the end of the year.

Thirdly, we agreed to reform competition policy and eliminate unfair state aids. We expect that, in 18 months, British consumers will benefit from, for example, changes to the so-called car block exemption in which our aim will be to secure a decrease in UK car prices.

Fourthly, we agreed to finalise plans this year to deliver a Europe-wide patent. Currently, it can take almost four years for a patent to be agreed right across the European Union. That is twice the time that it takes in the United States, and at five times the cost.

We also hope to agree, in June, the single European sky policy, which will improve air traffic management in Europe, enhancing safety and reducing delays. A 25 per cent. reduction in delays, for example, would save Europe's air transport industry and the public 2 billion euros a year.

Additionally, the Council took further steps on employment, especially for women and over-50s; on vocational skills; and on new technologies, including third-generation mobile communications and biotechnology.

On trade, we renewed our commitment to work towards a new WTO round later this year—an issue that we shall pursue when President Bush meets EU Heads of Government in Sweden in June. Taken together, these changes are further steps along the way to an efficient and competitive European economy.

President Putin met members of the European Council in Stockholm, and I had a good separate bilateral meeting with him. Discussion focused on economic issues. We expressed our support for continued Russian economic reform and for Russia's bid to join the World Trade Organisation. We also underlined the importance of further steps by Russia to improve the investment climate.

There were other conversations on the margins of the summit: some private, some public, some supposed to be private that ended up public—our own special contribution to the transparency of the Council process.

President Trajkovski of Macedonia joined us in Stockholm at a critical moment for his country. We offered him our support and condemned the activity of the armed Albanian extremists. Macedonia has started to build a multi-ethnic society and it is in all our interests that the country succeeds and does not polarise into separate Slav and Albanian communities. The United Kingdom has acted quickly to help shore up democracy and peace in Macedonia.

In Kosovo, NATO has diverted an extra 500 KFOR personnel to the Kosovo-Macedonia border, and I can announce today two further new steps. First, we are creating a new UK-Scandinavian battle group of some 400 troops from within our existing contingents for deployment by the KFOR commander to help secure part of the Kosovo-Macedonian border. Secondly, to reinforce KFOR's capacity to control Kosovo's borders, we are sending out a unit of Phoenix unmanned aerial vehicles with a 120-strong support team to provide extra aerial reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering assets to KFOR. The unit will be operational next month.

The European Union also reaffirmed strongly at Stockholm our joint commitment to the Nice treaty and its ratification. Failure to ratify would put at risk the entire enlargement process. While we must, of course, go further in pursuing the policies of economic reform, the fact that this is now the clear economic focus of the EU is in itself

a huge advance. The agenda for it is being led by the UK, and once again it shows the advantages of constructive engagement and the folly of a policy of isolation.

That is the approach that we took at Stockholm. It is a policy that is delivering economic reform in Europe and jobs for this country. It is the policy that I propose to pursue with the support of this House and of the country.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): First and foremost, I join the Prime Minister in acknowledging the concern expressed by EU leaders about the severity of the situation facing the countryside in Britain and tens of thousands of businesses—a subject to which I shall return shortly.

There are several conclusions of the Council that I would like to welcome. We welcome the clear statement of support for Macedonia and the integrity of its borders. With Lord Robertson and Mr. Solana now visiting the area, does the Prime Minister recognise the need not only to express support for Macedonia and to take the measures that he has outlined, but for a co-ordinated approach to the Balkans region as a whole?

I also welcome those aspects of the summit conclusions that further open up the single market, including the progress made on financial services liberalisation, but will the Prime Minister acknowledge that the high hopes of many in the Government following Lisbon a year ago have largely been dashed, and that the Government made several mistakes in the run-up to Stockholm? The first was to spin things that could not be delivered—not an unfamiliar problem with this Government. Does he recall promising the House a year ago

"a sea change in European economic thinking . . . away from heavy-handed intervention and regulation, towards a new approach based on enterprise, innovation and competition"?—[*Official Report*, 27 March 2000; Vol. 347, c. 21.]

Does not such rhetoric make the reality since then all the more disappointing? Why has there been so little progress on the liberalisation of energy markets—an issue vital to British businesses—with all mention of clear deadlines blocked and removed from the communiqué? Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he told Mr. Jospin at the weekend that he would find the outcome very difficult to sell to his constituents back in Britain?

The Prime Minister's second mistake was to agree to yet more red tape, including the so-called tax package. It is intended to lead to tax harmonisation, as confirmed by the Belgian Finance Minister this morning. On the works council directive, to which the Government say that they are opposed, and on which the Prime Minister signed away our veto, did he place it on the agenda and make the position of the United Kingdom clear? Last week, the Minister for the Cabinet Office assured the House that the Prime Minister intended to secure agreement on introducing a rigorous business impact assessment system and the setting of an 18-month deadline, but that has not appeared in the conclusions of the summit. Did the right hon. Gentleman put that on the agenda and did he make the United Kingdom's position clear?

Was not the Prime Minister's third mistake the decision to take with him the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz)? The Minister for Europe travelled with the Prime Minister but then kept a low profile and, according to officials, had nothing in his diary. The one thing he did, we learn, was to host a lunch for European Ministers. As a senior Government official said:

"We really hope he did not try to charge them for attending."

We also know that the Prime Minister confided to Commissioner Prodi that he had 10 days in which to decide about something. We know that he could not possibly have been talking about a general election. We know that because his press secretary was at the same time telling journalists that the Prime Minister was not remotely focused on a general election, and that the only people who were talking about general elections were those in the media.

Let us take the Prime Minister's word for it that Mr. Prodi's query was about the timing of the county council elections—a big issue of concern in the European Commission, as we know. That being so, the Prime Minister has set himself a deadline of next Monday by which to make a decision about the local elections. Can we presume that this week he will bring forward the legislation that we called for last week to enable any decision about county council elections in areas affected by foot and mouth to be taken this week?

The severity of the foot and mouth crisis was widely acknowledged at Stockholm. I know that both sides of the House welcome the assistance of vets from other European countries. Given that there is still a massive shortage of vets, what further discussions did the Prime Minister have with his European counterparts over the weekend so that we can bring more desperately needed vets into Britain from the rest of the European Union?

The foot and mouth crisis is clearly not yet under control. What contingency plans have been drawn up for a vaccination and slaughter programme, such as the one floated on Friday by the Minister of Agriculture for use as a last resort? As such a programme may, one day, have to be used as a last resort, did the Prime Minister discuss with other countries the availability of the right kind of vaccine in the rest of Europe, given the limited supply in Europe as a whole? What did he do in Stockholm to obtain those supplies from other European countries as a precaution?

European countries know that the most important thing is to deal with this crisis domestically. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Government will be in a stronger position to give them that assurance if they implement vigorously the measures that they have announced and others have been calling for in recent weeks? I know that we will have the statement of the Minister of Agriculture tomorrow. However, in persuading other European countries of our determination in this respect, will the Prime Minister comment on the fact that we are seeing today in Cumbria what a valuable contribution the Army can make? Now that they are at last deployed, will he assure us that he will allow the Army commanders to draw on whatever resources they need to do the job, and to do so in other parts of the United Kingdom as well?

Will the right hon. Gentleman also assure other European countries that, although delays in slaughter are still a major problem—since last Thursday, the backlog has risen by more than 40 per cent. to 227,000—he agrees with the Government's chief scientist that slaughtering should take place within 24 hours of the disease being identified?

[Mr. William Hague]

Eleven days ago, the Government announced a precautionary cull in Cumbria. When will that cull start, and will it be extended to other areas of the outbreak, as the chief scientist recommended? *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members may not want me to ask the Prime Minister about the crisis, but it is affecting the whole country and was discussed at Stockholm. We are entitled to ask about it.

As the Government's effort requires urgency and co-ordination, will the Prime Minister form a crisis Cabinet? Would that not be the best way to resolve the interdepartmental turf wars that have obviously arisen? The Government say that they will do all those things, but their efforts have lacked urgency and co-ordination. The message to the Government from across the country about the use of the Army, the speed of slaughter and carrying out the cull is, "Stop dithering, and get on with it." In doing all that, would the Government not signal, at last, that their absolute and overriding priority is to get on top of the situation and get a grip on eradicating the disease?

The Prime Minister: First, let me deal with the serious points made about the European Council; that will require a fairly limited amount of time.

On Macedonia, we do, of course, want a co-ordinated approach to the Balkans. That is precisely what we have through NATO and KFOR, and in the stability pact in that part of the Balkans.

On reform, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said that nothing had happened at the Council. That simply is not correct. Extremely substantial reform has been agreed in the financial services sector. A Europe-wide patent is obviously important. The position of Britain and Spain over Gibraltar remains subject to negotiation over how the policy will affect Gibraltar. There should therefore be agreement on the single sky policy in Europe, which is immensely important.

The right hon. Gentleman said that regulation was no part of the Council's deliberations. In fact, paragraph 23 of the conclusions makes it clear that it was. He said that we had conceded on tax harmonisation, but we have made no such concession.

On gas and electricity, I think that the right hon. Gentleman did not listen to the point that I made. Because the Council requires unanimity, it is correct that the position on timetables for gas and electricity liberalisation was blocked at Stockholm. The point is, however, that the Commission proposal cannot be blocked in the same way. There is an interesting reason for that, and the right hon. Gentleman may wish to reflect on that reason: the Commission proposal will be decided by qualified majority voting. If it were not to be decided by QMV, there would be no guarantee of our ever achieving gas and electricity liberalisation. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman should reflect on that point.

I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman did not repeat his policy to refuse to ratify the treaty of Nice and call for a referendum on it. There was unanimous support for ratifying the treaty of Nice, and I discerned no support whatever for his policy of renegotiating the terms of our treaty of Rome engagement with the European Union. With the greatest of respect, I think that in handling those negotiations, the right hon. Gentleman would find it difficult to secure agreement on any item in front of the European Council.

Let me turn to the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised on foot and mouth. First, it is important to state exactly what has happened so far. In respect of the number of vets, there are now well over 1,200. We are bringing in vets all the time from different parts of the country. In addition, we are removing some burdens of administration from the vets themselves.

The right hon. Gentleman said that we had belatedly employed the Army. In fact, we have employed Army logistics teams throughout the country. I cannot give an exact number, but around 1,000 people are employed in the various Army logistics schemes. I have been to Cumbria and Devon over the past few days, and I can tell the right hon. Gentleman clearly that the Army are not concerned about, for example, the number of slaughtermen available. They are concerned about co-ordination and the logistical, practical effort of administering the cull that needs to be carried out.

On the policy of slaughter within 24 hours, the right hon. Gentleman will know that that is already our policy. The latest figures from Devon—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps hon. Members would wait for a moment. The latest figures from Devon show that all cases slaughtered in the county over the past three days were slaughtered within 24 hours of confirmation. I am pleased to say that the number of animals awaiting disposal has fallen, too.

I stress to the right hon. Gentleman, however—he seems to imply that it is easy to carry out these tasks—that it is a huge, practical, logistical effort. It is like tracking the common cold in the human population; it is very difficult to do, which is why the whole energy and resources of Government have been put at the disposal of those who have to do it. With the greatest respect to the right hon. Gentleman, the idea that what that requires is another committee is beside the point. What it actually requires is to make sure that the work that is supposed to happen on the ground is happening; we are doing everything that we possibly can in order to expedite that. It does not help when he seizes the opportunity of any particular problem that occurs in the country to get out his bandwagon and travel around the country—*[Interruption.]*

On vaccination, I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman now proposes that we do that, but of course, as the Minister of Agriculture has made clear, we have to keep all options under review. I emphasise again that one of the things that we have tried to do throughout is to keep farming opinion with us as to the right course to take in respect of this epidemic. Farming opinion—at least up until now—has been hugely hostile to the idea of vaccination, but the right hon. Gentleman is right in saying that we must make sure that all contingencies are planned for. However, vaccination is not an easy solution to the problem either.

Most people recognise that the policy of containment by culling is the right one—at any rate at present, as we track the development of the disease. The absolute essence now is to make sure that we take down the time from confirmation to slaughter. That is being done in every part of the country. The other priority is to make sure that all the resources of Government are put at the disposal of the people carrying out that policy. That has

been done. Of course it is difficult, but we shall carry on working with those people within their communities, with the veterinary service, with the armed forces and with every part of Government to do our best to get this disease under control and eradicate it. That is what the entire country wishes us to do and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and Opposition Members will give us their support in carrying out that policy.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): In what proved to be—for all concerned—a rather modest European Union summit, will the Prime Minister confirm that, for Macedonia in particular and the Balkans in general, the right stance has to be condemnation of the rebel forces, support of the Government of the day and, especially, a continuing emphasis, on the part of his Administration as well as the EU as a whole, on human rights and the respect of human rights in that troubled area?

I have two specific questions arising from the summit. First, did the Prime Minister have an opportunity to discuss with any of his opposite numbers the suspicion of many of our farmers and an increasing number of our consumers that importations of food produce to our country are not subject to the stringent standards that we impose on ourselves? That is a legitimate concern.

My second question relates to a broader legitimate concern. Are the Prime Minister and the EU concerned that President Bush now says that he does not support the Kyoto protocol on climate change? For wider environmental reasons, should not the EU and the Government be pressurising Washington as a matter of considerable priority?

The Prime Minister: First, in respect of the Balkans, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for support of the policy that we have declared on the position in Macedonia.

In respect of importations of food produce, that is a common concern raised by farmers and people in farming communities. We have stringent standards and we must ensure that they are applied properly. I hope that in the statement that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture will make tomorrow, he will be able to say a little more about the origins of the epidemic and the likely prognosis on how it was spread.

On climate change, we made it clear in the European Union declaration that we stand fully behind the Kyoto targets. This country will probably meet those targets ahead of time. I am proud of our role in negotiating the Kyoto treaty. It is an issue on which our views differ from those of the United States, but it is important that we maintain our position.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Having listened to the sub-Churchillian pseudo rhetoric of the leader of the Conservative party—although Churchill never promised to fight them in the Committee Rooms—does my right hon. Friend agree that the only thing more ridiculous than a cynical opportunist is an incompetent cynical opportunist? Does he further agree that the Tory leader's synthetic compassion for farmers, who are undoubtedly suffering from severe difficulties, comes ill from a member of a former Government who deliberately created hundreds of thousands of unemployed in the coal mining, steel and shipbuilding industries without providing any compensation for families, businesses or communities? Does he also agree that the only cull that the Tories are afraid of is the cull of Tory Members when the election is held?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes his point extremely well. It would be otiose for me to add to it.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): In considering the presidency conclusions, will the Prime Minister note that pensions is the first issue raised? He did not mention that in his statement. How will public service pensions throughout Europe be funded? Will it not be by a mass policy of taxation?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that is no.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will the Prime Minister put into the Library the rules of engagement under which KFOR and British troops can open fire on Albanian extremists, many of whom are, doubtless, bandits?

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether it is practice to put copies of the rules of engagement in the Library. We are attempting to ensure that we target the extremists who are carrying out violent actions against parts of the Macedonian population. We went to war in Kosovo to protect the principle of racial tolerance and because we were against genocide. We must ensure that that applies equally, whether it is Serbs attacking Albanians or Albanians attacking Serbs.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): In the conversation to which the Prime Minister referred—of which we had a tantalising glimpse on television—did he explain to Mr. Prodi that he has 14 months of his mandate to run? Did he give Mr. Prodi an assurance that he had no intention of fighting the great national crisis that faces this country by dispensing with Parliament and governing without it for four weeks?

The Prime Minister: I gave no such assurances. Indeed, we did not discuss the issue.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): After Stockholm, does the Prime Minister still hope that it will be possible for Britain to join the euro in the next Parliament?

The Prime Minister: We have a very clear position on that. In principle, we are in favour of it; in practice, the economic conditions have to be met. That position has not changed.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): As a result of the discussions at Stockholm about the increasingly grave situation in Macedonia, has the folly of driving the Serbs out of control of Kosovo finally been brought home to the Prime Minister? That has led inevitably to the destabilisation of Macedonia, which poses a far greater threat to the whole of the Balkans than Kosovo ever did. Will he grasp that the key to stability in the Balkans is to control Albania and the Albanians?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that I disagree totally. Had we failed to take action in Kosovo, quite apart from the fact that there would have been about 1 million additional refugees going around Europe looking for a place of refuge, we would have allowed a brutal piece of racial genocide to succeed. The future for the Balkans is to eliminate that type of ethnic conflict. The situation in Serbia today is that Milosevic has gone. I should have thought that even the hon. Gentleman would have welcomed that as a step forward in the Balkans.

On the situation in Macedonia, surely our position has got to be consistent with the principles that we set out during the Kosovo conflict. We support the territorial integrity of Macedonia and we do not believe that boundaries should be changed by force. Whether it is Albanian extremists or other extremists, we should use whatever power we have to prevent them from gaining the upper hand and pushing their views on the vast majority of people who want to live in peace, if only they were allowed to do so.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): At my right hon. Friend's bilateral meetings, did any of his counterparts discuss the hazards of feeding swill to pigs? Will he confirm that, as the international marketplace expands, the dangers of foot and mouth disease and swine fever getting in to pigswill are increasing? No matter how hard we try to ensure that licence holders treat their swill effectively, no enforcement regime is watertight. Does he agree that the hazards of feeding swill to pigs are increasing and that we should consider bringing the practice to an end?

The Prime Minister: I think that the points made by my right hon. Friend are valid. Indeed, there is an increasing understanding across Europe and in this country that we must look at some of those practices and analyse them against the background of a changing market. For example, there is no doubt that one of the most difficult aspects of tracking and eliminating the disease concerns the two weeks prior to it being reported. In the modern world there is such a large number of movements, particularly of sheep, around the country, that it becomes very difficult to track the disease afterwards.

On my right hon. Friend's point about pig swill, I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture will have more to say about that in due course. However, I know that that point is felt strongly by many farmers in this country and others.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): In my constituency, which has just had its first outbreak of foot and mouth confirmed, the situation facing farmers and tourism-related businesses ranges from desperate to catastrophic. Does the Prime Minister accept that, whatever he may have said at Stockholm, the time has come to set aside, for the time being, all thoughts of a general election?

The Prime Minister: I have said that I will listen to representations, including that of the hon. Gentleman, and I will.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): When my right hon. Friend went across to Stockholm, did he mention in formal or informal talks the fact that setting aside paying back £34 billion would not only help our economy in the event of an American recession, but be very good in the event of us deciding to stay outside the euro? If he did not, he has my permission to use that line—it is a good one.

The Prime Minister: In that case, it is like all my hon. Friend's lines.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Did the Prime Minister discuss in Stockholm why effective measures against foot and mouth are being introduced two weeks late?

The Prime Minister: That is simply wrong. As soon as cases were reported, we took action. May I tell Opposition Members who are now criticising us that, only a few days ago, the Leader of the Opposition was saying that he broadly agreed with the policy that we were pursuing?

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, when he came to Exeter on Saturday, he was told that the problems were not, as suggested by the Leader of the Opposition, problems of resources and personnel? Instead, the two main problems were the lack of places in which to dispose of carcases and the need for vets on the ground always to refer decisions to slaughter to MAFF. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that those problems are now being sorted out?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and in respect of vets, we have eliminated the normal requirement that they check centrally with the Ministry of Agriculture before ordering the slaughter of animals. As I said, in most parts of the country, we should get from report to slaughter within 24 hours very quickly indeed. I understand that has already been the case in Devon for the last three days.

In respect of disposal, burial sites have been a big problem. Perhaps I should explain again to the House that normally, outside the foot and mouth epidemic, we kill about 600,000 animals a week for the food chain. That is about 30 million animals a year, normally. In the present situation, we are still killing animals for the food chain. In respect of beef and the pig market, about 70 per cent. of normal sales continue. For lamb, it is far less—just under 40 per cent. We need a certain amount of abattoir capacity to carry on normal business, so far as we are able to do so.

There is a limit to the available rendering capacity, which is one method of disposal of the animals being slaughtered as a result of foot and mouth disease. We therefore have an additional requirement for disposal by burial, and we need sites large enough for us to dispose of large numbers of animals quickly. We now have the site in Cumbria, and I know that officials are looking urgently for the right sites in Devon. However, those are difficult decisions. There are local people living near some of the sites, and there are also issues related to the Environment Agency, water tables and so on.

All these things must be done quickly. Meetings are convened and take place round the clock between the Environment Agency, those in the Ministry of Agriculture who are putting together the various aspects of the policy, and those from the Ministry of Defence who are carrying out the logistics on the ground. We are sorting out each of the problems. My hon. Friend is right to say that the two biggest inhibitions that we have faced are the shortage

of vets and an inability to find the right burial sites. Those issues are being dealt with. Thanks to the intervention of the Army, the logistics exercise is well under way.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Did the Prime Minister take the opportunity to raise with President Chirac the refusal of SNCF, the French nationalised railway, to allow cross-channel freight trains to be searched at Frethun before they enter the channel tunnel, thus exposing EWS—English, Welsh and Scottish Railways—which is a British company, to huge fines imposed by the British Government for circumstances over which it has no control, and putting in peril the future of rail freight traffic through the channel tunnel?

The Prime Minister: At the Anglo-French summit at Cahors, we raised precisely those points. As a result, the French Government have agreed to legislate to change the position. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman and his colleagues will change their position of opposing fines on carriers bringing people illegally into the country. That is an irresponsible position for the Opposition to take, and I hope that he will use his influence and his experience as a former Home Secretary to get his colleagues to change it.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress that he made in the liberalisation of the energy market. We now have a timetable, and under the qualified majority voting procedures, the French will no longer have anywhere to hide. They will have to come out and account for their obstructive policies.

Secondly, on financial services, is my right hon. Friend aware that outside Frankfurt and London, the corridor between Edinburgh and Glasgow in central Scotland has the greatest concentration of financial services employment in Europe? It would be helpful if we could ensure that the imaginative training and investment arrangements available elsewhere in Europe were made available to that area, in preparation for the great advance that is to take place in financial services.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right on both points. As a result of the Commission proposal, it will be possible to make significant progress in energy liberalisation. Virtually every other member state whose representative spoke at the Council was in favour of such liberalisation. In respect of financial services, my hon. Friend is right about the Edinburgh-Glasgow corridor. That part of Scotland is one of the fastest growing areas in Europe for financial services. I shall certainly take on board the point that he made.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): If everything to do with the foot and mouth crisis was done when it was necessary, according to the Prime Minister, why was it necessary to remove the senior official in charge of Cumbria?

The Prime Minister: We have not removed that official. All the way through, we have been trying to make sure—in part as a result of representations made by people such as the hon. Gentleman—that for such a huge operation, senior people were involved, together with Army logistics teams, so that we can organise in each control centre everything that is needed. It is not the case that we are removing local officials. Surely it is important that in such a situation, we bring in the very best people from every part of government, to upgrade the ability to tackle the disease. With the greatest respect, the Opposition cannot have it both ways—on one hand telling us that we are not doing enough, and on the other complaining when we bring people in to get the job done.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I was pleased to see at Stockholm the determination to hold a further round of world trade discussions by the end of this year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is an example of this Labour Government using one of their most positive policies in conjunction with their European allies for the good of the world? Will he urge the United States to follow Europe's example and offer free tariff access to the poorest countries in the world?

The Prime Minister: I have no doubt that some of these issues will be part of the EU-US summit. Obviously, the free tariff opportunities that we have afforded the poorer countries are very important. We have done an immense amount as a Government, led as brilliantly as ever by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, on debt, aid and development. Those are very important moves, but the single most important thing alongside that that we can do to help the poorest countries in the world is to open up our markets to their goods. It is hypocritical and wrong for those in the developed world to say that the developing world must put its house in order when we are not prepared to make the moves to open up our markets to their goods and let them trade with us properly.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On 19 March, the Minister of Agriculture said that the foot and mouth crisis was under control. On what date did the Prime Minister order the reconvening of Cobra?

The Prime Minister: As I said to one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues a moment or two ago, it is of course important that we do everything possible to ensure, as the disease is seen to spread, that we have in place the right resources to deal with that. It is—I repeat—absurd for Opposition Members on one hand to try to make points about why there is not greater co-ordination in government, and on the other to complain when we take the very measures for which they have been calling.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Stockholm shows once again that a constructive attitude in Europe pays dividends for the United Kingdom? However, will he take it from me that our leadership opportunities may be restricted unless we join the single currency in the next Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I have nothing to add to the policy that I have already outlined on the single currency, but my right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the dangers of the policy of renegotiating our membership of the European Union. I notice that just a few days ago, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary once again talked about the flexibility clause that they would negotiate in the EU. I have still not discovered a single member state anywhere in the EU that is in favour of that, and I am still waiting—they have

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been very good at shouting things out this afternoon—for Opposition Members to name any member state that is in favour of the policy. Let us remember, they would have to have the agreement of all member states in order to renegotiate. So perhaps there will be a period of silence, and then we can hear them shout out.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): The Council's declaration on Macedonia states:

"We support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of FYROM and the inviolability of borders".

Does the Prime Minister agree that the break-up of Macedonia would have serious consequences not only for Kosovo but possibly for Bosnia? In view of NATO's role in Kosovo, does he think that we have an obligation to use military force to ensure that Macedonia does not break up and that its borders are not violated?

The Prime Minister: We are stepping up the involvement of not just the UK but KFOR itself precisely to ensure that that does not happen. Yes, I agree that it is absolutely essential that we preserve the territorial integrity of Macedonia. The single greatest danger is that what we prevented in Kosovo happens elsewhere: an attempt to change the territorial boundaries of countries in the region by force.

The role played by NATO and KFOR over the past couple of years has been immensely positive. No one can now seriously argue that we would ever have seen the back of Milosevic—certainly not on any reasonable time scale—if we had not taken the action that we did. That in itself has unlocked the possibility of reconstruction of the Balkans. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in respect of Macedonia, which is why we took the opportunity to say publicly at the European Council that we supported the territorial integrity of Macedonia and will back that up.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): First, did my right hon. Friend have the opportunity to talk to President Putin about the deteriorating situation in Chechnya? It is a dire situation and Mr. Putin should be urged to bring about a peaceful solution. Secondly, will he resist all offers from the Leader of the Opposition to join any sort of Cabinet, even temporarily, as there is no point in bringing in a boy to do a man's job?

The Prime Minister: I think I shall just deal with the first bit, if I may. Concern was expressed by the European Council as a whole over Chechnya, and we reaffirmed once again our desire to ensure that there was a political solution to the problem of Chechnya. We understand the problems and issues that are confronted by the Russian Government, but we have made it clear that the matter should be resolved on the basis of a political framework and respect for human rights on all sides.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): In the Prime Minister's talks at Stockholm on foot and mouth, did he have any discussions with his counterparts about changing the EU policy of a blanket prohibition on vaccination? Is he aware that following the tragic outbreak of foot and mouth in the heart of the Lake district, many farmers in Cumbria believe that the badly botched policy of mass culling has now definitively failed and that it could eliminate foot and mouth in the county only at the cost of every animal, farm and tourist business, as well as that of just about every job? Many believe that it would result also in the elimination for ever of specialist breed sheep, which contribute so much to the appearance of the Lake district. May I beg the Prime Minister—and I mean beg—to look urgently at the case for vaccination, before my county is wiped out?

The Prime Minister: Let me put this point to the hon. Gentleman. We have pursued the policy of containing the disease by slaughter because that was the advice given to us by the chief veterinary officer and also by the Government's chief scientific adviser. It was also the policy agreed to by the National Farmers Union. Indeed, it was the policy agreed to by the hon. Gentleman's own political party. When he says that it has been a botched policy, I simply point out that 10 days ago, people were opposed to intensifying that slaughter policy in Cumbria. Today, they wish it to be carried out even more urgently. I understand that, because it is a fast-moving situation and is extremely difficult to track, for all the reasons that we have given.

As for vaccination, I repeat what I said to the Leader of the Opposition a moment or two ago. We do keep that under review and we are urgently looking at every single option we can have. Until now, vaccination has been strongly opposed by those in the farming community, but again, I understand that as the situation moves, what looked as if it was completely unpalatable a short time ago has to be put on the agenda. We are doing that, but I really think that it would be helpful if there was understanding on all sides about the need to move forward with the consent of the farming community, which is why we chose the slaughter policy. We could have gone immediately for a policy of vaccination, but we did not do so precisely because of the opposition to it and, frankly, the worries about how effective it would be. The very point that I would make to the hon. Gentleman is that as the disease develops, these policy decisions must be taken, and that it is easier to take them if there is some understanding that we are tracking a very fast-moving situation in which policy decisions that are taken on one basis may have to change as a result of that situation changing. That is precisely what we are doing, and I can assure him that every single sinew and thought of Government is bent to that task.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): May I thank my right hon. Friend for the very positive note that was struck at Stockholm about the need to put new life into the World Trade Organisation and the round of trade talks? Will he confirm that as part of that desire to get the talks back on the agenda, the European Union will put on the table a much stronger set of proposals than was available at Seattle? Will he also confirm that, on top of that, there will be strong negotiations with the United States to bring it on board so that we get much better trade terms?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that we must secure that objective. We urgently need the WTO round to start; we support that strongly. The points that he makes about its nature and the help that it can give to other countries are right; I endorse them completely.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): When the Prime Minister was discussing foot and mouth with his European counterparts, had he been briefed by the Minister of Agriculture about the impact of borax 30, a simple homeopathic medicine that 7,000 farmers in Britain are using? In the 1967 outbreak, it provided considerable relief. Will he undertake to ask the Minister to answer the question that I have tabled and try to get proper trials carried out to ascertain how much more can be done to use that simple remedy to protect our herds?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly pass on the hon. Gentleman's remarks to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture. We must consider all the possible solutions, but his question emphasises that there are no easy answers.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): Is the Prime Minister aware of the documentary evidence that Sky television provided to MAFF today? It detailed the illegal trade in contaminated pigswill and the misselling of products to supermarkets. Will he clamp down immediately on such illegal activities while simultaneously pushing for reform of the common agricultural policy?

Does my right hon. Friend take encouragement from Stockholm since France and Germany are considering ways in which to move from industrial agriculture to organic products?

The Prime Minister: I have no doubt that it is right to address long-term agricultural strategies; we will tackle them with the community here and throughout Europe.

The anxiety about contaminated pigswill has been expressed on many occasions. We believe that only a small minority of people are engaged in that illegal trade. It is deeply irresponsible and greatly resented by the vast bulk of the farming community. It is one of the reasons why we have to consider the legality of pigswill; it is also a reason for taking every possible measure to make sure not only that the disease is brought under control but that we consider the causes of it.

As I said a moment ago, during the last outbreak in 1967, there were fewer trading movements, especially of sheep, than today. Gaps between the disease originating and its discovery mean that huge numbers of movements take place before the disease is discovered.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): How far and how fast does foot and mouth have to spread before the Prime Minister believes that his policy of kill and cull does not work? Will he assure hon. Members that, when the Minister of Agriculture comes to the House tomorrow—if he can—he will clear up the uncertainty about vaccination, which many believe to be a better option? The Prime Minister is understandably hesitant about it today, but if uncertainty continues for too long, it will be even more damaging for agriculture.

The Prime Minister: I gather from the mood of Conservative Members that they are now casting doubt on the policy of containment. They fully supported it until today, when they raised the question of vaccination. They know perfectly well, because the Minister of Agriculture has already said so, that we are examining all the options. Vaccination is not an easy option. I repeat that I know from my discussions in the past few days that a lot of hostility to it remains in parts of the farming community.

However, it is remiss of Opposition Members to pretend suddenly that vaccination is a policy that they have been developing for weeks, that they have been urging it upon us and we have blindly refused to examine it. We were advised to adopt the policy of containment by slaughter; it was supported by the Opposition, at least until today. It is important to carry it out while ensuring that we are analysing every possible alternative.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does the Prime Minister agree that the progress on energy market liberalisation demonstrates more effectively than ever that extended qualified majority voting can be in the British national interest? Did he read the comments of the deputy director general of the Confederation of British Industry in the run-up to Stockholm? He said that it was not in our commercial interests to have a Eurosceptic Government. Does my right hon. Friend ever recall such a senior figure in the CBI so effectively repudiating Conservative party policy in the run-up to a general election?

The Prime Minister: What my hon. Friend says about qualified majority voting is true. That is precisely the reason why it would be foolish for this country to take the position that it was against qualified majority voting in any circumstances. That is also precisely why the previous Conservative Government agreed to massive extensions of qualified majority voting—for example, in the Single European Act and the Maastricht treaty, which was strongly supported by some of them at the time. Qualified majority voting can, in certain circumstances, be in the country's interests, and that is why Conservative Members supported it.

I shall not comment on what the gentleman from the CBI said, but I want to point out the dangers of Conservative policy on the treaty of Nice. I hope that the Conservatives will reconsider their position on the treaty. They say that they would refuse to ratify it, and then have a referendum—were they to be elected—presumably to ask people to vote against it, as there would not be much point in having a referendum to ask people to vote in favour of it. I have already said that not a single Government elsewhere in the European Union support renegotiating the treaty of Rome. No European Government support renegotiating the treaty of Nice either, not only because of what we went through to achieve it but because it would be patently foolish to re-open all those issues.

Again I ask Opposition Members to name one country that would agree to renegotiate the treaty of Nice. If there were no such country, that would mean that the UK Government would be standing against the enlargement of the European Union—which we have championed elsewhere in Europe—and the damage to Britain and British business would be incalculable.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): What did the European Commission's communication on Kaliningrad—which the European Council welcomed—say?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, that is a long-standing issue. We agreed to carry

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on the process of discussion about it, of course. However, the issue of Kaliningrad is surely one that is best resolved in the most quiet and diplomatic way possible. It is a hugely difficult issue for the surrounding countries and for Russia. For those reasons, what the European Council said on the matter represents the wise course.

Points of Order

4.27 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On Friday 16 March, the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) had an Adjournment debate in which he highlighted, among other things, an important issue affecting schools in my constituency. I and my office have no record of any prior warning that he intended to travel beyond his constituency boundaries.

I would not normally raise this issue, as I have worked with the hon. Gentleman on issues of mutual interest to our constituents. However, members of his party in Harrow have suggested that it is normal for all MPs automatically to attend Adjournment debates. Given what I have read of the debate, I certainly would have wanted to attend and participate. Will you make it clear, Mr. Speaker, whether I should have been given prior notice of it and of his intention to touch on issues affecting my constituency? As I was not given any such notice, it is not surprising that I was attending to other matters of equal importance at the time.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) for informing me of his intention to raise this point of order. The subject that I dealt with in that debate was secondary education in west London. Hillingdon and Harrow are in west London, as are many other boroughs. As I mentioned in my speech, I was bound to range over issues that transcend borough boundaries.

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) for giving me notice of his point of order. He is quite right: it is an established parliamentary courtesy that a Member who intends to raise in debate—or, indeed, in a parliamentary question—a matter affecting another Member's constituency should give prior notification. End-of-day Adjournment debates are essentially between the Member concerned and the Minister. There is no obligation on any other Member to be present. Indeed, another Member may take part only with the agreement of the Member originating the debate, the Minister and, of course, the Chair.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Agriculture said a number of times last week that briefings for MPs were available in the Government and Opposition Whips Offices, but, despite having made extensive inquiries on several matters of concern to constituents who need urgent answers, we have not received them. I would be grateful if you could urge the Minister to make those briefings available to Members.

Mr. Speaker: I will look into the matter for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I have raised on several occasions the need for a parliamentary hotline. We must have someone in the Ministry of Agriculture whom we can contact with urgent constituency cases to make sure

that they are looked into. I raised the matter three weeks ago, but there is still no contact in the Ministry. That simply is not good enough.

Mr. Speaker: Once again, I will look into the matter and get back to both hon. Members.

Orders of the Day

Adoption and Children Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.30 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has written to you, Mr. Speaker, and to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) to express his apologies for being unable to be present due to a long-standing constituency engagement.

The Bill represents probably the most radical overhaul of adoption law for 25 years. It is long overdue. By common consent, the current legislation is considered to be outmoded, out of date and unsuitable for the kind of adoption service that we need today. As a result, it is failing to meet the needs of children and families and, therefore, the needs of society as a whole. The need to recast both the law and the practice of adoption so that they better serve the interests of children is clear and obvious. The Adoption Act 1976 is based on legislation dating back to 1958 and it is not consistent with the Children Act 1989. There is an overwhelming case for bringing the framework of legislation up to date. That is precisely what the Bill seeks to achieve.

Adoption legislation is vital to our society because children get only one chance to grow up. As every Member of the House knows, the opportunity to grow up in a stable and loving family environment has often been denied to children in care who, for one reason or another, cannot live with their birth families. The children are not the only ones to have lost out as a result—society as a whole has paid a heavy price for that failure.

At any one time, local councils look after almost 58,000 young people, seven in 10 of whom leave care at 16 without an educational qualification of any sort. Almost four in 10 male prisoners under the age of 21 have been looked after at some stage in their lives and 25 per cent. of the people sleeping rough on the streets of London have also been in care. That is a failure not of the children in care, but of the system of care. We in the House must put such failures right.

Those children, perhaps above all others, need the safety, stability and security of a permanent new family. They need that stability as quickly as is humanly possible, but that is not what happens at present. Children remain in the care system far longer than they should. More than 28,000 children have been in care continuously for more than two years. Too often, despite the best intentions of all involved, they are passed from pillar to post.

Nearly one looked-after child in five has three or more placements in a year. Some have six or more. For those children, the care system frequently fails to provide the stability that they need to build a successful future. They need a better chance in life. They deserve a better deal. Today, with this Bill, we are laying the foundations for a better future for thousands of young people in care.

The Government firmly believe that adoption can often be the best solution for children in care who are unable to return to their birth families. Too often, it has been

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considered to be a last resort when it should have been considered as a first resort. In some council areas, 10 per cent. or more of looked-after children are adopted every year. In others, the figure is less than 1 per cent. Those wide discrepancies in performance are unacceptable and unjust.

Overall, we know that the existing law and practice, including the practice in the courts, can be slow, cumbersome and unfair as a result. Of course, the safety of every child should be of paramount concern, but, on average, children wait nearly a year and a half before it is even decided that adoption is best for them. Even after a decision is taken that they should be adopted, they wait longer still. Overall, the average time taken to adopt a looked-after child is more than three years, which is an eternity in a child's eyes.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Minister has just given some disturbing figures about the variation between local authorities dealing with adoption. Does the Bill give the power of adoption to local authorities? One of my constituents has said that, because of the great differences between local authorities, it may be better for a national agency to deal with adoption.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we seriously considered that proposition in the report produced last July by the performance and innovation unit. The idea has been knocking around for some time. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his constituent will understand that the adoption and fostering services, which are closely linked, are also umbilically connected to the wider child protection agenda, for which local authorities rightly have the principal legal responsibility in England and Wales. If we were to erect a barrier between local authorities' child protection functions and their adoption and fostering functions, that would not be a terribly sensible way to proceed. We have certainly considered the proposition, but we have discounted it as a way forward.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman realises from my remarks that I find the discrepancy and wide variation in performance completely unacceptable. However, I do not think that the problem can be solved by creating a new agency. We have tools at our disposal to improve the performance of local authorities. I shall later refer to the new default powers in the Bill to address the problem of local authorities that fail to provide an effective and proper adoption service. We do not currently have such powers.

People who want to adopt children from the care system need a better deal as well. There is a shortage of adoptive parents, but the system sometimes deters people from applying to adopt. It is slow, intrusive and sometimes inappropriate. I am aware of cases in which potential adopters have been told that they cannot adopt because they are too old or, in one case, because they were too middle class. Such blanket bans fail to put the needs of children first. Families who adopt children overwhelmingly do a brilliant job for them. It is not an easy job, because many of the children are not easy. They and their adoptive parents deserve more support.

Our adoption White Paper, published last December, set out an ambitious programme to tackle these related problems, to encourage greater use of adoption, to deliver at least a 40 per cent. increase in the number of looked-after children who are adopted, to transform adoption services and to put the interests of children at the centre of the adoption process. The Bill will play an essential part in underpinning the programme that we set out in the White Paper.

First, it will put the needs of the child at the centre of the adoption process by aligning adoption law with the Children Act 1989 to make the child's welfare the paramount consideration in all decisions to do with adoption.

Secondly, it will help to encourage more people successfully to adopt looked-after children by ensuring that the support they need is available. There will be a clearer duty on local authorities to make arrangements to provide an adoption support service, and a new right to an assessment for new adoptive families, as promised in the White Paper.

Thirdly, the Bill will also support our efforts to build confidence in the adoption process, and encourage more people to come forward to adopt, by enabling the Secretary of State to establish an independent review mechanism for applicants who consider that they are being turned down unfairly. Many of those who commented on the performance and innovation unit report identified that as a key and pressing issue. Clause 9 will address those concerns.

Fourthly, the Bill will support our efforts to cut harmful delays in the adoption process. We have already set out challenging time targets for decision making for children and for the adoption application process in our draft national adoption standards, which were published alongside the White Paper. The Bill makes provision for the Secretary of State to establish a new national adoption register to reduce delay for adopters and children waiting to be adopted. It also includes measures requiring courts to draw up timetables for adoption cases, to help to cut delays in the legal process.

Finally, as we promised in the White Paper, the Bill introduces a new special guardianship order—

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I welcome the measures to speed up adoption procedures, but may I draw the Minister's attention to a danger? The magic six-months point at which everything is triggered may be seen as a threat by local authorities. Indeed, it should be seen as a threat. It is most important for authorities not to have an incentive to "churn" children when about five and a half months have passed, and then begin the process all over again when the children return to care.

Mr. Hutton: I entirely agree, but we do not see the six-months time scale as a threat. We think that it will support good decision making by local authorities. If there was any sign that authorities were behaving in the way described by the hon. Gentleman, it would of course be a serious matter. We expect authorities to apply proper child care procedures and practices to all decision making.

I assume that the hon. Gentleman was suggesting that after five and a half months a child should no longer be considered to be in care, and should be reunited, perhaps inappropriately, with other persons. That would be unsafe and unsound, and the social services inspectorate—and I—would be very concerned. I think, however, that we

will be able to deal with such issues by means of the effective monitoring arrangements that we wish to introduce.

The new special guardianship orders will provide a more legally secure permanent family than can be delivered through foster care or residence orders. That will apply particularly to children who do not want to sever all legal ties with their birth families.

In addition to all that, the Bill thoroughly overhauls and modernises the legal framework for adoption in England and Wales. It replaces the existing Adoption Act 1976 and consolidates the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999. It also includes important changes to the legal process of placing a child for adoption, and to adoption itself. It builds on the work done in the adoption law review in the early 1990s and on important proposals in the draft adoption Bill prepared by the last Administration in 1996, which was endorsed by both major parties and published for consultation.

The Bill represents a huge step forward in making the adoption system fairer and more efficient. Although we want to maintain the momentum for reform, the Government are also conscious of the need to maintain the widest possible consensus on the direction of change. We do not have the chance to legislate on this subject very often—once in a generation, perhaps—so it is vital for us to get it right.

That is why we are building on the consultation on the 1996 Bill; that is why we consulted on the new proposals in the Prime Minister's adoption review, which led to our White Paper; and that is why we now propose that the Bill be referred to a special Select Committee, so that there will be ample opportunity for proper scrutiny of the new measures as well as the fullest possible consultation with outside interests and organisations.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): One of the most disturbing aspects, which the Minister mentioned at the outset, is the frequency with which young people in care are "churned" around in the fostering system. The Minister has not so far mentioned any way of dealing with the problem; there may be no such mechanism in the Bill. Will the Minister tell us how he hopes to minimise the damage that must be caused to already damaged children by the process of "churning" and short stays in foster care?

Mr. Hutton: I shall certainly explain to the right hon. Gentleman how we intend to do that. Perhaps it would be appropriate for me to write to him with specific details.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that the Bill's main focus is on adoption. The improvements that we seek to make in the fostering service form a substantial part of the quality protects initiative that we launched in 1998, which became effective in 1999. For the first time, we set a target for reducing the number of avoidable placements to fewer than three a year. We are making progress, and I hope that later in the year we shall be able to publish new figures showing that we are on track to meet the target. It is desperately important for us to do so.

The Bill is only part of the programme of wider reforms that we seek to introduce. We have always made it clear that, as an important part of the work that we need to do to improve children's social services, we must focus on the practice of child care in local authorities throughout the country. That is what the quality protects initiative seeks to achieve. We have also—crucially—tried a number of initiatives for the recruitment and employment of more foster carers. That will be a fundamental part of reducing avoidable and unnecessary changes in foster care placements. In 1997, there were about 28,000 foster carers in England. That figure has risen to about 32,000 and, although we need to do much more—we need many more carers—we are, I hope, heading in the right general direction.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I have pressed the Minister on this matter for some time. I believe that he is right to go down what is effectively the special Committee route: the proposal is for the Bill to be committed to a Select Committee. However, in practical terms, it is possible that the election will intervene. I address my question to him and to those on the Conservative Front Bench. Will a future Government of either persuasion ensure that the Select Committee stage is picked up immediately on return after an election?

Mr. Hutton: There are some things that I can say and some that I cannot.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Minister has come over all shy.

Mr. Hutton: I am not trying to be shy. It is a serious point. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) for raising it. He is a former Whip, so he knows that there is a system—a magical, unknown system—whereby those things are resolved. I am not privy to any of the secret workings of this place. I am sure that a way will be found—I hope that it will be found—to maintain the momentum that we are setting in train. If my party is re-elected, we will certainly seek to make further progress with the legislation.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): My hon. Friend has outlined one of the areas that can cause delays in the process, with children being moved back and forth between foster homes, but there is another: attempts to reintegrate a child into its own family. During the consultation, will he liaise with those representing natural parents? There needs to be a balance between the natural parent who may wish a child to come back home and the needs of the child. Guidance needs to be offered to social workers about the point at which they should give up trying to integrate a child back into its natural home and look at the future of that child instead.

Mr. Hutton: I agree with my hon. Friend. These are difficult and sensitive issues. We are trying to be fair both to families and to children in care who have been let down by the way in which the system operates and who, as I have said, are denied the opportunity to grow up in a loving and secure family. That is not acceptable. There is an opportunity for us to look at ways in which to reinforce good child care practice and good social work practice in those areas. I hope that the social care institute, the creation of which we announced recently, might be able to look at issues to do with precisely the point that my hon. Friend has raised. Having said all that, we are trying to maintain the right balance. It is desperately important

[Mr. Hutton]

that we keep the children at the top of our list of priorities. That is not how the system works at the moment, but it is how it must work in future.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that clauses 8 and 9 cover the regulation of adoption agencies and the independent review of determinations made. Can he confirm this afternoon that the regulations in question will be subject to the affirmative procedure, so that there is a full opportunity for the House to debate them? Alternatively, if that is not possible or the preferred option of the Government, can he confirm that a draft of the regulations will be available to hon. Members before the passage of the Bill?

Mr. Hutton: It would be a very brave Minister who made the latter pledge. We are not planning any surprises. We have no tricks up our sleeve. We want to consult fully not only with hon. Members, but with outside organisations on the best way to develop the regulations that we have in mind. We have an open mind. I think that the Bill as it is currently drafted envisages the negative resolution procedure for regulations under the clauses, but if the hon. Gentleman, those on the Conservative Front Bench or others outside can make a convincing case as to why there should be a different procedure, we genuinely have an open mind. As I said, we want to proceed with the widest possible consensus in all these areas.

Following the hon. Gentleman's point, I stress that we accept that further work needs to be done on the Bill. I want to say a few words about some specific aspects that fall into that category in a minute. We want to hear if additional changes and improvements should be made to ensure that we produce the best possible Bill. That is a duty that we owe future generations of looked-after children.

I come to the specific details of the Bill. Clause 1 is a key overarching provision. As we made clear in the White Paper, the Government believe that adoption is first and foremost a service for children, and the child's interest and welfare should be at the centre of the adoption process. The Bill makes the child's welfare in childhood and later the paramount consideration for a court or adoption agency making any decision relating to the adoption of a child. That brings adoption legislation into line with the Children Act 1989.

Clause 1 also provides the court or the agency with a welfare check list of issues that it must consider in determining the child's welfare. The issues include the child's wishes and views, according to his age and understanding; the child's needs, age, sex, background and any other relevant characteristics; the impact on the child of being adopted—of becoming a member of a new family and leaving an old one—and any risk of harm to the child.

The Bill makes the child's welfare the paramount consideration in all decisions, including whether to dispense with birth parents consent to the adoption of their child. That is a change from the current position. The courts will be explicitly obliged to consider the impact on the child of ceasing to be a member of his birth family and the change in his relationship with that family that adoption would inevitably involve. The courts will consider each case on its merits, applying clause 1 and having regard to article 8 of the convention and Strasbourg case law. However, we believe that it is right that the focus of that decision should be on the child's welfare. The court may make an adoption order only when it considers that it would be better for the child than making no order. Again, that is in line with Children Act principles.

The Government are determined to bear down on harmful delays in the adoption process. Clause 1 also obliges courts and adoption agencies to bear in mind at all times that, in general, delay in making a decision is likely to prejudice the child's welfare.

In placing a child for adoption, agencies must also give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. Taken with the provisions on avoiding delay, that gives effect to the policy that we set out in the national adoption standards—that the adoptive placement of choice for a child is one that reflects their birth heritage, provided that one can be found without unnecessary or harmful delay.

Mr. David Davis: I apologise for intervening twice in the Minister's speech. However, a requirement to match the religious background of a child with that of would-be adoptive parents has previously made it difficult to find adoptive parents. Would there be such a requirement for children who are less than two years old, for example, who may not yet know their own religious background?

Mr. Hutton: The short answer is that I do not know. However, I think that that is an issue on which we shall have to take advice. We have always made it very clear that we want the system to operate as efficiently and speedily as possible, and that we shall not allow issues to do with political correctness to get in the way of a child's best welfare interests. That is why we have made the position on inter-racial adoptions as clear as we have, both in circulars to local government and, now, in the national adoption standards.

Mr. Brazier: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. Just now, he was absolutely clear about the need to eliminate unacceptable delay in the process. However, clause 1(4) omits anything about that need. Instead, that subsection includes the words "due consideration", which, legally, are not absolutely clear cut. Could not those words make it possible for courts to return to the very political correctness against which he has rightly and repeatedly spoken?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman—for whom I have the greatest respect, and who speaks very strongly in the House on these issues—has a very good point. However, I would draw his attention to the parts of the Bill that deal with the obligation on the courts to consider the effect of any delay on the child's welfare. I think that the issue is already addressed properly in the Bill—which, of course, should be considered with the guidance and circulars on the issue that we have issued to local authorities.

I am also sure that we shall be able to explore that issue in Committee and elsewhere, and that it will be up to the House to decide how to proceed on it. However, I think that the Government have made our position on the matter pretty clear. It is a difficult issue on which many people

have very strong views. Ultimately, however, we have made it very clear that we believe that there should not be unnecessary and unacceptable delay in the process. If that is one of the issues that can give rise to delay, the Bill should address it.

The next set of clauses deal with the adoption service and particularly with support for adoptive families. The Bill requires each local authority to provide an adoption service designed to meet the needs of children who may be adopted, as well as adopted children and adults, and their adoptive and natural parents and former guardians. As now, facilities provided by local authorities as part of their adoption service must include making arrangements for the adoption of children, including assessing prospective adopters and placing children for adoption.

Local authorities may provide services by arranging for them to be provided by voluntary adoption agencies or other parties prescribed in regulations. That will enable them to draw on the voluntary sector, which has a huge groundswell of expertise and resource.

The White Paper made clear our commitment to promoting greater joint working with the voluntary sector in providing adoption services, and the Bill will ensure that that happens.

Adoption is of course a challenging process. Adoptive families must be supported at all stages and helped to meet the challenges. It is unacceptable that, at present, provision of adoption support services across the country is patchy and inconsistent. Lack of support can put people off coming forward, when they otherwise would, to adopt looked-after children, some of whom have special needs and challenging backgrounds. As many as one in five adoptive placements break down before the child is legally adopted. That is simply not good enough. It is a further trauma for the children themselves. This is a crucial area in which we need to secure real improvements. The Bill will help to tackle the inconsistency.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Is it the Minister's intention that under the Bill prospective adoptive parents will be given far more information than at present about the background of the child whom they are considering adopting? Many placements break down because, for reasons of confidentiality, parents are not fully informed about often very traumatised children whom they are expected to bring up.

Mr. Hutton: There are certainly such measures in the Bill. I will set out later the provisions on access to information. The issue that my hon. Friend raises is a matter of good social work practice. We have many things to say about that, to encourage the greater success of adoption placements.

The Bill places, for the first time, a clear duty on local social services authorities to put in place arrangements for the provision of adoption support services, including financial support. That requirement will provide a basis for our new framework for post-adoption support services, in line with our key White Paper commitment.

The Bill also gives adopted children and their new parents a new right to request and receive an assessment of their needs for adoption support services. Too often, adoptive families tell us that they feel they have to fight against the system to get access to help. That cannot be right. The right to request an assessment will tackle the problem. It will run until the child reaches the age of 18. The provisions are also flexible enough to allow, for example, for the assessment to be made available from the point when a child is placed for adoption, before the final adoption order is made.

Adoption support will be planned jointly with the national health service and local education authorities. If at any time during the assessment it appears to the local social services authority that the person being assessed may need NHS services or services provided by the local education authority, the authority will be obliged to notify the relevant health authority, primary care trust or LEA. The aim is to identify, where it is needed, a co-ordinated and joined-up package of support across all the public agencies.

Local authorities will have a duty to co-operate in the provision of their functions in relation to assessment for adoption support. We will encourage them to work with each other and with voluntary adoption agencies to provide adoption support services through local consortiums. Financial support may be made available to adoptive families as a result of the assessment. The form of support and criteria will all be set out in the new framework for financial support that we will develop as we promised in the White Paper. The Bill also enables voluntary adoption agencies to make financial support available to those affected by adoption, as under the existing arrangements.

The Government are backing up these new measures with new investment, to help put in place the adoption support service that we all want. That is why we expect that a substantial amount of the extra £66 million for adoption announced in the adoption White Paper, to be made available over three years, will be used by councils to improve their adoption support services. The additional resources for adoption should be seen against the background of substantial and continuing increases in social services spending planned for the next three years.

The new provisions for adoption support are among the most important in the Bill. They will play a key role in supporting greater use of adoption for looked-after children, and I am glad to say that they have already been widely welcomed. In response to the publication of the Bill last week, the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering said:

> "We believe that this will make a real difference to adoptive parents who often parent troubled and challenging children and that this will encourage more prospective adopters to come forward".

The Bill also covers arrangements for registering adoption agencies. It takes account of the fact that voluntary adoption agencies are to be inspected and approved by the new National Care Standards Commission in England and by the National Assembly in Wales. It makes provision for the transfer of functions where a voluntary adoption agency ceases to be registered.

We are committed to ensuring that prospective adopters are treated fairly at all stages of the assessment process. Clause 9, to which the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) referred, provides for the introduction of a new independent review mechanism for prospective adopters who feel that they have been turned down unfairly—we made that clear promise in the White Paper.

[Mr. Hutton]

They will be given a truly independent right of review in cases in which the adoption agency has indicated that it is minded to turn down their application to adopt.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): Can my hon. Friend clarify what will happen under the independent review system when advice of a confidential medical nature leads to the prospective adopters, or one partner, being turned down?

Mr. Hutton: I am not sure what would happen in such a case. The independent review mechanism is there to reassure prospective adopters that they have been considered fairly and properly by the local adoption agency. There is a sense—which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) has detected—that prospective adopters do not always get that impression. There will be an opportunity, perhaps in the Select Committee and elsewhere, to discuss in greater detail how the review mechanism will work.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To be more explicit, I know of situations—I will refer to one in my contribution, if I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker—in which couples were turned down on the basis of information received in confidence from a medical authority. My point is that when an independent review takes place, will that information be communicated to the family concerned, regardless of the impact on that family?

Mr. Hutton: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is a very difficult issue. I do not want to attempt to provide a definitive answer to that question today—I will have to reflect on what my hon. Friend has said.

Mr. David Davis: This issue has been raised by the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, among others. It is not unique to the Bill. For example, since Dunblane, when shotgun licences are applied for, medical information is now available. So there are existing mechanisms that could be considered by the Select Committee.

Mr. Hutton: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that helpful intervention.

An independent body appointed by the Secretary of State will convene a review panel to re-examine the evidence and make a fresh recommendation to the agency. The adoption agency must then consider both the new recommendation and the recommendation of the original agency panel before making its final decision. I should say to my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield that the decision will remain the responsibility of the adoption agency.

The independent review mechanism will not replace the right of prospective adopters to have the matter referred back to the original agency panel; it will be an alternative. Prospective adopters will be able to choose which method of review they prefer.

The Bill requires each adoption agency, magistrates court, county court and the High Court to give the appropriate Minister general information relating to adoption. That information will be used for statistical and performance management purposes.

The Bill also gives default powers to the appropriate Minister when a local authority has failed, without reasonable excuse, to comply with any of its duties in respect of adoption—a point made by the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin). It empowers the appropriate Minister to hold an inquiry into any matter connected with the functions of an adoption agency, and provides for a person authorised by the appropriate Minister to inspect any premises where a child placed for adoption is living, and to inspect adoption agencies' records.

Chapter III deals with placing children for adoption and the making of adoption orders. It introduces important new changes to the current process for placing children for adoption through adoption agencies, which flowed from the recommendations of the adoption law review and built on the proposals in the 1996 Bill.

The aim of the new system is to ensure that decisions around whether adoption is the right option for the child, whether the parents consent and, if not, whether their consent should be dispensed with, are made earlier in the adoption process than at present, with court involvement where necessary.

The current process can leave too much to be resolved at the final adoption order stage. The new system is intended to provide greater certainty and stability for children by dealing as far as possible with parental consent before they have been placed with their prospective new family; to reduce the uncertainty for the prospective adopters, who possibly face a contested court hearing at the adoption order stage; and to reduce the extent to which birth families are faced with a fait accompli at the final adoption hearing, if the child has been placed with the prospective adopters for some time. The placement proposals were widely supported in principle in the consultation on the 1996 Bill, produced by the previous Administration, and in the performance and innovation unit report.

There are two routes for placement. Birth parents can give consent to placement for adoption or the adoption agency can secure a placement order from the court. The parents may consent to placement with specific adopters or consent to allow placement with adopters that the agency selects.

Where a child is placed with consent, the birth parents can, at any time until the point that an application for an adoption order has been made, request the return of their child. The agency and the prospective adopters must comply, unless the agency still thinks that the child should be adopted, in which case it must apply for a placement order. However, once an application for an adoption order has been made, the court's consent is required for the removal of the child. Where a parent has consented to placement for adoption, he or she may oppose the final adoption order only with the leave of the court, and the court may give leave only if there has been a change of circumstances since the parents gave their consent.

The Bill also introduces new placement orders. An adoption agency must apply for a placement order where it is satisfied that a child should be adopted but the parents do not consent to placement or have withdrawn consent. Where a child is subject to a care order and the care plan recommends adoption, the local authority may apply for a placement order or, if the parents consent to placement, go down the new route. Where a child is under a care

order, that order will be suspended for the duration of the placement order, but would automatically revive if the placement order were revoked.

Placement orders authorise the agency to place a child with any adopters whom it may select. Agencies need not go back to court if an initial placement fails. Placement orders last until an adoption order is made, the child reaches 18 or the order is revoked. The parents may not apply to revoke the order unless a year has passed since it was made, the child has not been placed and the court gives leave. The court may give leave only if the parents' circumstances have changed since the order was made.

The placement provisions will replace the current system of freeing orders, which has been widely criticised, partly because, once made, the orders leave a child without any legal parents. The new placement-with-consent route allows birth parents to agree to their child being placed for adoption, while placement orders can be sought where consent is not forthcoming. In either case, the birth parents remain the child's parents until the final adoption order.

The Bill also allows birth parents to give advance consent to the final adoption order, either at the same time that they give consent to placement or at any time afterwards. That is a means of allowing people to give up their child voluntarily for adoption.

Clauses 34 to 44 set out the process for applying for adoption other than through an agency, the conditions on making adoption orders and the effect of adoption orders. I shall simply highlight the main changes that we intend to make.

Where someone wishes to apply to adopt a child other than through an adoption agency, and it is not a step-parent adoption, the child must have lived with the person for three years before an application may be made, or one year in the case of local authority foster parents. We are not making any changes to who may adopt. As now, single people may adopt and, as the adoption law review recommended, only married couples may adopt jointly. That is absolutely right.

We are changing the law to remove the anomaly by which, for a parent and a step-parent to adopt jointly, the birth parent must first adopt his or her own child. That is frankly ridiculous. Finally, as I described earlier, we are changing the provisions around dispensing with birth parent consent to adoption in line with clause 1.

Clauses 47 to 49 implement our promise in the White Paper to deliver greater consistency of access for adopted people to information about the background to their adoption. All adopted people should have the right to find out about their family history and background when and if they wish to do so. All adoption agencies will be required to keep information on their files in accordance with requirements to be set out in regulations.

The Bill also provides for a package of information to be given to adoptive parents when an adoption order is made in order to help new adoptive parents understand about the child's background. That relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones). Adopted people will, on reaching 18, have the right to receive a copy of the information previously provided to their adoptive parents and to information from their court records.

The Bill requires adoption agencies and courts to inform adopted people of the counselling services available to them before they access information from their agency or court records. Of course, the Bill does not oblige adopted people to undergo counselling if they do not wish to do so; it will be their choice.

Sometimes, adopted people and other parties may be refused access to information about themselves for no good reason. Alongside the Bill, therefore, we will ensure that those who are refused access to personal information about themselves that is held in adoption agency files will have the right to apply to the Data Protection Commissioner for a review of that decision.

Clauses 51 to 60 mirror most of the provisions in existing legislation on the legal status of adopted children. Chapter V deals with the Registrar-General's duties concerning maintaining the adopted children register and the adoption contact register. With some minor amendment, it will reaffirm existing provisions.

Chapter VI deals with adoptions with a foreign element. The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 made provision for intercountry adoptions. It enables the UK to ratify the Hague convention on protection of children and on co-operation in respect of intercountry adoptions. Most of the provisions of the 1999 Act as regards England and Wales will be incorporated in the Bill—save the sections covering regulations to give effect to the Hague convention and associated measures, which will remain in force.

The House will know that the Government have decided to bring forward the implementation of regulations under section 14 of the 1999 Act. Those will be laid and made this week, and will come into force next month. It will then be an offence for British residents to bring a child from another country into the UK for the purposes of adoption, unless they are already approved adopters in this country. On conviction, the penalty will be imprisonment for up to three months or a fine of up to £5000, or both.

Those provisions are mirrored in the Bill. In addition, we are considering whether it would be appropriate to make other changes to primary legislation to improve the safeguards on intercountry adoptions; we may make further proposals to the House for inclusion in the Bill as it goes through its parliamentary stages.

The key measures in chapter VII cover controls on who may make arrangements for the adoption of children and who may advertise children for adoption. It is essential in the interests of children that only approved adoption agencies or certain individuals are allowed to arrange adoptions. The Bill tackles that by recasting the definition of the Adoption Act 1976—restating what is permitted and by whom and defining what making arrangements actually consists of. Anyone who makes arrangements for adoption but is not authorised to do so will commit an offence. The Bill includes provision for the definition to be modified to take account of future developments so that the legislation can remain up to date.

The chapter also deals with controls on advertising. As we all know, there is a shortage of adopters throughout the country. Advertising for prospective adopters to come forward is often an effective way of encouraging more people to consider adoption. However, that activity must be properly regulated in the interests of the children concerned. We also need to ensure that we cover all emerging technologies where they might be exploited to circumvent the safeguards approved by the House.

[Mr. Hutton]

The Bill restates and amends the existing restrictions on advertising in the 1976 Act, but it goes further—imposing a new restriction on the distribution of such advertisements and on the publication and distribution of information about how to make arrangements for the adoption of a child. It also makes it explicit—an important point—that printing and distribution include both traditional and electronic media, and should be carried out in a manner compatible with the European Union e-commerce directive. The Bill provides for future developments by giving the Secretary of State a power to make amendments if there are technological developments relating to publishing or distributing information by electronic means.

To support our drive to cut harmful delays in adoption, clause 89 includes a new provision to impose an obligation on courts, where they are dealing with any matter where there may be an issue of whether a placement or adoption order should be made, to draw up a timetable and to give any directions necessary to ensure that that timetable is maintained. That will help to tackle delays in the system. It mirrors similar provisions in the Children Act 1989.

Clauses 96 to 99 provide for the national adoption register, which will be a key means of cutting delay in the adoption process and should help us speed up the matching of children with prospective adopters. We are already working to establish an adoption register for England and Wales under existing legislation. We aim to award the contract in the spring, and the first stage of the register will be operational by July. The Bill will, however, underpin the register and place it on a proper statutory footing, helping it to expand and develop in the future.

The register will provide a national infrastructure for adoption services. It will hold information on children waiting to be adopted and on approved adoptive families from across the country. The information held on the register will be used to suggest families for a child in cases where a local match is either not in the child's best interests, or cannot be found within an agreed period. The register will also be used as a valuable source of national information on the adoption process itself.

Councils will be required to place on the register details of all children waiting to be adopted and of approved adoptive families. We will encourage voluntary adoption agencies to make full use of the register. That will help to ensure that as many children as possible are matched with suitable adoptive families.

Prospective adopters will of course be included on the register only if they have given their consent. Children will also be asked for their consent—subject to their age and understanding—before being placed on the register. However, the register will not be open to public inspection or search. The privacy of adoptive families and children will be our first priority. To ensure that their privacy is respected, the unauthorised release of information held on the register will be made a criminal offence.

The Secretary of State for Health will be able to delegate the establishment and operation of the register to another body. The Bill provides that that may be a public body or a private or voluntary organisation.

Part II deals with amendments to the Children Act 1989. Clause 91 makes an important change to provide that unmarried fathers who jointly register their child's birth acquire parental responsibility without further formality. With one in three children born to couples who are not married, it is important to encourage the commitment of unmarried fathers. We announced our intention to legislate on that in July 1998 and are pleased to be able to deliver on it.

We are also making further changes to enable a step-parent to acquire parental responsibility for a child of his spouse without having to go down the route of adoption and to allow courts to extend the duration and enhance the security of residence orders as a means of providing permanence for children who cannot be cared for by their birth parents. Most important, clause 94 amends the 1989 Act to introduce the new special guardianship orders.

Special guardianship is intended to meet the needs of children who cannot return to their birth parents and for whom adoption is not appropriate. That could include older children who are being looked after in long-term foster placements who do not want to be legally separated from their birth parents but who could benefit from greater security and permanence. Adoption might also not be the best option for some children who are cared for on a permanent basis by members of their wider family. Finally, some minority ethnic communities have religious or cultural difficulties with adoption as provided for in English law because it involves the permanent extinction of the legal responsibilities of birth families.

Special guardianship orders are to be made on application to the court by someone who is 18 or over. The Bill sets out who may apply for an order. That includes any guardian of the child, anyone who holds a residence order with respect to the child and anyone with whom the child has lived for three out of the past five years. If the child is in the care of a local authority, anyone may apply with the authority's consent.

Two people can apply jointly for a special guardianship order. They do not have to be married. If an application is made for special guardianship, the local authority must complete a report to the court about the suitability of the applicants to be special guardians. Regulations will prescribe matters to be covered. They will ensure that a proper assessment process is followed for special guardians. A court can also make a special guardianship order in family court proceedings without an application if it thinks it is in the interests of the child's welfare to do so. When a court makes such an order, it must also consider whether a contact order should be made.

A special guardianship order gives the special guardian parental responsibility for the child. It also makes it clear that the special guardian exercises those rights and responsibilities to the exclusion of others with parental responsibility—principally, the birth parents—except in exceptional circumstances when the law requires the consent of all those with parental responsibility, such as certain forms of medical treatment, including the sterilisation of a child.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I am grateful for the detailed way in which my hon. Friend is outlining the Bill's provisions, especially as they relate to special guardianship. Will there be a difference between a child who is placed under a care order on a long-term basis with foster parents and

the arrangements under a special guardianship order? Will care reviews still take place and will local authorities continue to have a role?

Mr. Hutton: No. My understanding is that once the special guardianship order has been made, that is the end of the care order. The special guardians will be responsible for the child who is placed with them.

The order retains the basic legal link with the birth parents, unlike adoption. They will remain legally the child's parents, although their ability to exercise their parental responsibility will be limited. They will retain some basic rights, such as the right to consent or not to the child's adoption or placement for adoption. Unlike adoption orders, applications may be made to discharge or vary special guardianship orders, but only a limited list of people can apply, including the child's parents, again in restricted circumstances.

The White Paper set out that special guardians would have access to a full range of support services including, where appropriate, financial support, to help the placement succeed. That is reflected in the Bill. The introduction of the new order will provide an important new way of delivering legal permanence and security with a new family for children who cannot live with their birth parents. We look forward to hearing the views on our provisions in the special Select Committee hearings.

I realise that I have been speaking for a long time, but I am about to conclude my remarks. *[Interruption.]* I could continue. The hon. Member for West Derbyshire poses a challenge, to which I might respond.

The Bill is complex; it is a substantial piece of legislation on a matter that has generally attracted great interest and is of necessary importance. Comprehensive reform of adoption law is long overdue and will benefit thousands of society's most vulnerable children who, for far too long, have been let down by the care system. The Government are committed to just such modernisation and reform, and the introduction of the Bill demonstrates the strength of our commitment.

Our focus today is on improving adoption, but that does not mean we are ignoring the needs of young people who will remain in care—far from it. We will continue to invest new resources and effort in improving the outcomes for those children. Our ambitions for those young people need to be as high as our ambitions for children who will benefit from the Bill. All children in care, whether or not they can be found a new adoptive family, deserve the best opportunity to thrive and do well in life. The Government will continue to take action to see that that happens. In introducing the Bill, we have acknowledged that changes need to be made during its progress through the House. We have an open mind about the ways in which the Bill can be further improved and shall listen carefully to any serious suggestions about how that can be done.

Today we have the opportunity to do something that will prove to be of lasting value to thousands of children in future. We have the opportunity to say loudly and clearly that we want the best for them and the chance for them to belong and to succeed in life; we want them to have a second chance to grow up in a loving, secure family. I therefore hope that the House will give the Bill a Second Reading tonight.

5.21 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Adoption is a subject that naturally attracts more consensus in the House than many other subjects. We have said that we will give the Government full support for any measures that put the interests of the child at the centre of the adoption process.

Most Members in the House today will have had constituency cases of couples who have faced the heartache of trying to conceive, but who must then travel a long, difficult journey in trying to create a family by adoption. We tend to see cases in which things are not going well because, by definition, people turn to Members of Parliament when other routes have failed. For example, we see the birth parents, from whom the child has been separated against their will; other members of the family; good neighbours who step in to take a child when something has gone wrong in the birth family; and adoptees who are still searching for their birth families.

We are under no illusion that the system needs to be overhauled, but hon. Members who have had a chance to get the Library brief—currently available only by e-mail—will know that, curiously, ever since 1926, we come round to reforming adoption legislation once a generation. The group whom, unfortunately, we rarely see and to whom my heart goes out today, is the vast number of children who languish in care, longing for permanence and a family to belong to. Unnecessary bureaucratic delay means that they wait too long for their own good, which is why we want all children in care to have access to an outside body, such as a charity, Church organisation or family to enable them to experience the full range of cultural values in society. If we want children to play a full part in society, they must be given something more than the limited cultural ethos of the care environment.

The state has not proved to be a good corporate parent and we must all share responsibility for failing many children. From the outset, Conservative Members have said that we want to play a constructive role in the expedient introduction of legislation that will improve that situation. However, we cannot let this legislative stage pass without placing on the record the fact that the delay is partly of the Government's making. It is not just me saying that; the Library brief opens with a factual statement and says:

"The present Government did not come to power committed to adoption legislation."

The best that the Government offered was a review of the present system.

The catalyst for change was the desperate Waterhouse report, which, for those of us who had to read it, revealed more clearly than ever before how vulnerable children are in care and how urgently we need to act to protect them better.

The Opposition's response was to establish a Conservative commission on adoption and fostering, to which I pay tribute for the help that it has given me in preparing my speech. The commission was chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) who, I expect, will make an important contribution to the debate. Some time later, in response, the Prime Minister undertook a review, thereby signalling his personal interest in, and responsibility for, the matter.

Co-incidentally, we were debating the relevant clauses on adoption and fostering in the Care Standards Bill at precisely the moment that the Prime Minister published

[Mrs. Caroline Spelman]

the conclusions of his review. In a spirit of co-operation, I tabled a new clause to that Bill on Report, which would have given the Prime Minister what he wanted—a national adoption register and standard eligibility criteria for adoption. The clause was rejected on 12 July on the ground that the Government would introduce their own adoption Bill in the Queen's Speech.

However, to the great disappointment of all of us who wanted adoption law reformed, the delayed Queen's Speech in December contained no adoption Bill. Foxhunting was there, but not adoption. History will record that choice for posterity. As the Adoption Forum observed:

"We wouldn't like to think, given that foxhunting is on the legislative agenda but not adoption, that the Government believes children to be less important than nice little furry animals."

Mr. Hinchliffe: We usually have a consensus and a non-political debate on issues relating to children. I am sad that the hon. Lady has chosen to make such cheap points. I could respond with a cheap point about the Government whom she supported being in power for 18 years and never bringing a Bill on adoption before the House, as the present Government are doing.

Mrs. Spelman: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not need reminding that the Conservative Government had their own White Paper, a comprehensive consultative procedure and a draft Bill, which, as the Minister pointed out, his Bill closely mirrors. Therein lies the consensus. Governments past and present have worked together to produce legislation that will bring about change.

Liz Blackman (Erewash): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No. We have dealt with that point.

When I had the chance to introduce legislation by coming sixth in the ballot of private Members' Bills, small wonder that I chose adoption as the subject. I even went so far as to offer my slot to the Government to introduce their Bill. My hope was to embarrass the Government into action, and the Bill today is proof that we succeeded. I had some help from the Prime Minister who, under pressure from my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), said on 17 January that legislation would be introduced during this Session, when it was patently obvious that there was no room for it.

Here we are, on the eve of a general election, with a Bill containing more than 100 clauses, which is, by the Minister's own admission to the all-party parliamentary group on adoption, "a first draft". He also said that

"the door is still open for suggestions."

The scramble at the Department to produce the Bill and get the Prime Minister off the hook is apparent from the Minister saying that the Government will have to table a number of amendments to correct their own draft. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says, "Oh dear."

In one respect, we are pleased that common sense has prevailed. The motion on the Order Paper today indicates that the Government anticipate that at least two months will be needed for a special Select Committee to scrutinise the Bill properly. We commend that. Those of us who were involved in the Food Standards Bill know that it benefited from detailed scrutiny in a special Select Committee. However, one wonders about the Government's sincerity, as we know full well that the Prime Minister is striving hard to hold a general election on 3 May.

I have made the point that adoption was not a Government priority. It will not have escaped the attention of hon. Members that the timing of Second Reading is just a touch malign for the hon. Member who will present a private Member's Bill on the same subject in four days' time.

We must ask whether, in preparing the Bill, the Government correctly defined the problem of adoption. Problem definition is not the Government's strong point, as we saw with the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill. Although we all want to reduce the prevalence of smoking, it is not obvious that banning tobacco advertising will succeed in that aim without closing the floodgates on smuggled cigarettes, which the Bill failed to do.

In respect of adoption, I urge the Minister to read the case studies in a document produced by the North American Connection adoptive family support group. Although its focus is on difficulties with intercountry adoption, it correctly diagnoses one reason why people resort to overseas adoption. As it states, in this country, there is

"slow, cumbersome bureaucracy, a system that hinders rather than progresses and helps, misplaced political correctness, and a negative, distrustful atmosphere."

One particularly bad case—case C—in the report, which I recommend that the Minister reads before work starts in the special Select Committee, states:

"Couple C applied to the local authority, expressing an interest in adopting a sibling group, below the age of 5—one of the hardest categories to place. This local authority currently has 800 children in foster care.

The couple was welcomed, and told that, despite a staff shortage, the assessment process would start as soon as possible. But a full year later, nothing had happened other than a few [accepted] invitations to information evenings, about the type of children awaiting adoption. There appeared to be only around 20, who were being actively considered. However, since the couple had also been told that it would take at least a year to get to the approval stage, then probably a further 2-3 years to be placed, frustration set in.

The couple adopted their child abroad."

In his opening remarks, the Minister said that there was not a great deal of evidence of political correctness. Unfortunately, however, hon. Members know that such cases are all to often brought to us. For the record, I shall read another case study from this very interesting document.

"Couple H were a farming family with 2 dogs and a country lifestyle. Although most children love farms, their social worker appeared to have difficulty relating to a rural way of life and did not like dogs. She objected to their ownership of dogs and the fact they had a legally licensed shotgun, although it was kept in a locked wall cabinet in accordance with the law. They were rejected."

Mr. Brazier: Before my hon. Friend moves from that case, which involved constituents of mine, it is worth observing that, in hedging around the rejection, a number of other factors were produced, at least one of which was easily shown to be wholly untrue. That shows that

political correctness in consideration of adoption is very often in the background and not overt. There is a real problem.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. It shows how important an independent review procedure will be in properly and objectively establishing the causes of rejection.

These case studies help us to understand some of the present problems, but until we define them correctly, we cannot hope to get the legislation right. Applicants need to feel confidence in the ability of those assessing them. One of the Bill's main purposes should be to restore confidence among all parties in the adoption system.

If we stand back and think what we are legislating for, we may conclude that it is in no small part due to big changes in British society. The advent of new methods of contraception has meant fewer babies for adoption. There is also less of a stigma attached to a young mother who raises a child on her own, although that is still not easy. As the Institute of Economic Affairs report states:

"The unmarried mother is now asked to choose between abortion and lone parenthood, with adoption scarcely mentioned as an option."

All such trends have contributed to a dramatic reduction in the number of babies who are adopted, and the total number of adoptions fell from 20,000 in 1970 to 4,100 in 1999. That is against a background of declining fertility in society. The total number of children in care fluctuates at about 100,000. As the Minister pointed out, local authorities' success rate in getting such children adopted varies hugely.

Those are some of the key trends that form the context against which the Bill should be considered. I should like to deal with some of the aspects that the Minister highlighted. The Bill's success or failure will lie in our skill in striking the right balance in the eternal triangle of the birth family, the adopters and the adoptee. We must decide whose needs take priority. The Opposition welcome the statement in clause 1 that

"The paramount consideration of the court or adoption agency must be the child's welfare".

However, we recognise also that the Bill contains other provisions that may nibble away at that apparently unequivocal statement of the paramountcy of the child. The over-arching provision contained in clause 1 may be compromised if the Bill is not seamlessly melded with the Children Act 1989. The Bill uses the word "must" to convey an imperative, but the 1989 Act uses the word "shall". Some lawyers will make hay—and, I fear, a lot of money—out of the difference between such provisions, and the child at the centre will suffer a delay.

I am not sure whether those discrepancies are deliberate or were caused simply by the rush to introduce the Bill before the election. Nevertheless, the delay described in clause 1(3) is significantly different from that described in the Children Act 1989, and problems about its meaning are likely to generate a lot of litigation. The Bill states:

"The court or adoption agency must at all times bear in mind that, in general, any delay in coming to the decision is likely to prejudice the child's welfare."

However, the 1989 Act states that the

"court shall have regard to the general principle that any delay in determining the question is likely to prejudice the welfare of the child."

Surely the wording should be tighter, to avoid unnecessary litigation. Clause 89 contains provisions to ensure that questions are determined without delay, but different wording is used in section 32 of the 1989 Act. The legislation needs to be synchronised more carefully, and the Opposition will help the Government to try to achieve that in Committee.

As an aside, I should point out that the needs of the child's siblings or half-siblings are given no prominence in the Bill. I believe that special mention should be made of the other children, as a child undeniably derives security from his or her siblings. Today's edition of *The Times* contains an article about adoption, with the headline "Adoption chiefs are advised to split up siblings". The person interviewed in the article, who represents the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, recognises that

"it was very often beneficial to keep brothers and sisters together as sibling relationships often prospered",

but states:

"If no family has been found for a sibling group within nine months of searching and if a group of children has been advertised unsuccessfully . . . then the local authorities should cut their losses and try to find two families living close to each other."

What is the Minister's view of that statement? In the Opposition's view, it is important to keep siblings together. The weakness in the proposal made by the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering is that it addresses the problem's symptoms, but not its cause. We are short of families to adopt, but that difficulty should not be resolved by jeopardising children's welfare and the security that they could gain from being placed with their siblings.

We have sought to help the Government to introduce a national adoption register to improve and speed up the matching process. When we sought to provide such help with regard to the Care Standards Act 2000, the Minister was uncertain whether the matter needed primary legislation. It was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) who pointed out the need for such provision, but it will not prove to be a delay-busting measure without two things.

First, local authorities should be under a statutory duty to place their approved prospective adopters on the list. The Bill would achieve that. Secondly, there should be a method of passporting money with the child. Without that, a local authority would have little incentive to seek the best match from the national register. It is critical for the money for recruiting adopting parents and for post-adoption support to follow the child from the local authority where the child was in care to the local authority where the adopters live. Without that, one of the old barriers in the system remains firmly in place.

We should not skate over the genuine problem that social services departments are struggling to provide services, yet the Bill imposes considerable extra requirements on them. I appreciate that the Government have allocated an extra £66 million, but there is no guarantee that it will be spent on adoption. The new requirements under the Bill create extra work, such as making timely assessments of the needs of not only the child, but the prospective adopters and even the birth family. Given the current shortage of social workers, it is difficult to understand how some local authorities will cope with that.

[Mrs. Spelman]

Although assessments of post-adoption support may be carried out, thereby raising expectations, many social services departments will simply be unable to provide what they assess that they need. The Bill leaves it open for a local authority to decide that it simply cannot provide the necessary support. The nationwide target of a 40 per cent. increase in adoptions of looked-after children is meaningless when local authorities' performance varies so widely.

We are therefore pleased that clause 12 provides for default powers for dealing with a failing authority. However, how will they complement the best-value principles in local government legislation? Will the Care Standards Commission have a role in monitoring performance, and perhaps impose penalties for non-compliance?

Mr. Hutton: I hope that I am not reading too much into the hon. Lady's words, but perhaps she will explain whether the Conservative party believes that the local authority should remain the agency that is charged with responsibility for adoption and fostering. I get the impression that she is saying that that should not be the case.

Mrs. Spelman: When we discuss independent review procedures, perhaps the Minister will realise what we have in mind for granting a greater role to the children's rights director and the children's commissioner. However, I participated in discussions on the Care Standards Act 2000 and, as the Minister was keen to point out to me then, he has powers to monitor carefully the role of the local authority; he also has powers over the voluntary agency. He said:

"If the hon. Lady wants an assurance that we will use our best-value powers if necessary, I give her such an assurance. We will use those powers when necessary to protect the welfare and well-being of children in the event of a local authority failing properly to meet its statutory responsibilities.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee G*, 22 June 2000; c. 447.]

Adoption allowances undoubtedly need an overhaul. The subject has long been unclear and the Bill does little to clarify it. When a local authority applies for a placement order and places a foster child with prospective adopters, do they get an allowance? If so, how much? Foster families who decide to adopt appear to have to pass up on three months' worth of allowances when they have tendered for adoption. Low-income families are already under-represented among adopters, and that will not help. We are generally short of couples who are willing to foster, and money can be an important factor. Those who foster informally, such as other family members or close friends and neighbours who take children in, are provided for especially poorly.

One of the most controversial aspects of adoption is the parting process, when a child leaves its birth family. Many birth parents feel sore about children being taken from them against their will. We acknowledge that it is sometimes right to do that. The Bill establishes a new method of doing that through placement orders, which replace the freeing orders of the Adoption Act 1976.

Clause 17 states that an adoption agency can

"place a child . . . with any prospective adopters who may be chosen by the agency."

That provision needs to be tightened up if we are to prevent the kind of drift that currently occurs at this stage. We must avoid the situation in which children risk being held in limbo if no adopter is found. There are also loopholes in the provisions for returning children to their birth families before adoption.

We must also assist those who voluntarily consent to their children being adopted. However, clause 21 prevents people who have given advance consent to the adoption of their child from withdrawing that consent. That is utterly draconian and will make it very unlikely that advance consent will be given in most cases. There are also inconsistencies between clauses 21 and 39, which might be as a result of the haste with which the Bill was prepared.

We understood, from the Minister's presentation to the all-party parliamentary group on adoption, that special guardianship was designed to cater for children from particular ethnic backgrounds, and from particular religious backgrounds such as Islam, in which parental rights cannot be revoked. It was also designed for older children who do not wish to sever their ties completely. I would be interested to hear the Minister confirm that, when a special guardianship is an end in itself, the placement order is a step towards adoption.

Hon. Members have raised the matter of information. Although the Bill represents an improvement on the present provisions in that respect, it could be improved further. Clause 48 provides for information to be given to an adopted person when he or she attains the age of 18, but the procedure in Scotland gives an adopted child the right to that information at the age of 16. With a copy of his or her birth certificate—easily obtained, with some recognised form of identification, from the General Register Office for Scotland—a child can obtain access to court records and thereby trace, for example, any agencies involved in the process. Also in Scotland, information is held under the child's original and adopted names.

Mrs. Humble: Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that, in many local authorities, it is already good practice for adoptive parents to work through a life story with the child whom they have adopted? Throughout the growing-up process, adopted children are told about their birth family and given appropriate information at an appropriate age so that, by the time they are adults and leave the adoptive family, for whatever reason, they already know all the background information on their birth family.

Mrs. Spelman: There is a world of difference between good practice and what happens in reality. For the unfortunate children in authorities that do not pursue that kind of good practice, access to information should be improved in the way the Bill envisages, but we should also go further and ensure that children in England and Wales have the same opportunity as children in Scotland to obtain that information statutorily from the age of 16.

On information, I would like to ask the Government to consider a duty of candour. Many adopters' experience has been that, although information is given, it is often inaccurate and out of date, and important information is often withheld. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) mentioned the importance of adoptive parents knowing key background information

about a child's experience so that they can better deal with any difficulties that the child might bring to the new relationship.

Appeals are perhaps the most serious casualty of the haste with which the Bill has been prepared. Clause 9 provides for a review procedure. The explanatory notes—which, incidentally, were not available until six days after the Bill was published—state that

"A person . . . may apply to a panel established by the appropriate Minister"

and that all the detail will be in regulations. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who has now left the Chamber, pointed out that it is important, given the lack of clarity on this issue in the Bill, that such a provision should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. We should like to debate this matter in considerable detail, with a firm assurance from the Minister that he will put the regulations up for consultation before implementation. We feel strongly that there should be a clearly defined, independent complaints procedure.

Currently, complainants complain to the people about whom they are complaining, which is nonsense. The Bill's review procedure seems to consider only a complaint from a prospective adopter, but what about the other side of the equation—the birth family and the child? Without trying to make work unduly and without creating new layers of bureaucracy, why not give the task to the newly established Children's Commissioner for Wales or the children's rights director for England and create a proper ombudsman system for adoption? We have independent watchdogs for health, for electricity, for gas and for water. Why not for children?

Here we are, at the 11th hour of new Labour's first Administration. As an afterthought, a substantial Bill on adoption law reform has been introduced with, it seems, no time left to debate it during this Session. Children see right through adults' priorities. They know what we regard as important by the way that we allocate our time. Through a child's eyes, the Government have an odd set of priorities, having chosen to legislate on foxhunting ahead of the needs of children in care and the families that are willing to give them a permanent home. It is cynical to produce a 100-clause adoption Bill a day or so, or perhaps a week, before the Prime Minister goes to the country.

We accept that legislation falls and there will have to be sacrificial lambs, but why children's legislation? The Government could have amended the Care Standards Act 2000 last July, as we suggested, but they dismissed that chance. They omitted adoption from the Queen's Speech in December and were then embarrassed by my private Member's Bill and by the Prime Minister's slip of the tongue into rushing out legislation just before the election. However, their priorities have been recorded for posterity and they can never expunge the stain of putting foxes before children.

Mr. Hutton: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No. The moral high ground was lost on the day of the Queen's Speech. Although we share the aim to reform adoption law, we decry the way in which the Government have left it until last.

5.53 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. Opposition Members who know a good deal about adoption will make telling contributions, but the previous speech was not such a contribution and, as I said in an intervention, it has cheapened the debate. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) chose to play politics with an issue of such fundamental importance to vast numbers of vulnerable people in our society. I make that point because—

Mr. McLoughlin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: I have hardly drawn breath, but go on.

Mr. McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman said that he regrets the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). Will he explain why the Bill was not in the Queen's Speech?

Mr. Hinchliffe: If the Government who were in power for 18 years from 1979 had taken the issue seriously—

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): What about the Children Act?

Mr. Hinchliffe: I shall refer to that, but had that Government taken the issue seriously, we would have had in statute long ago legislation that worked for those young people who need adoption. I honestly feel that it takes brass neck to make the point that the hon. Member for Meriden made.

The previous Conservative Government deserve commendation for the Children Act 1989 and I had the great good fortune to serve on the Standing Committee that considered it. The hon. Lady criticised my hon. Friend the Minister for introducing a Bill that needs to be fine tuned, but she should consider what happened to the 1989 Act in Committee. The Minister who steered the Bill through the House, David Mellor, the then Member for Putney, listened to a range of points raised by Labour and Conservative Members and amended the Bill accordingly. Where there is a broad consensus on issues of this nature, that is exactly how the House should work. That is the House at its very best, and I hope that that will happen in this case.

I made my Opposition Front Bench debut on the previous Government's 1992 adoption law review. They were in power until 1997, but they did not get as far as this Government have got in their first four years. I am not making a political point but simply responding to what I thought was a pretty cheap shot from the hon. Lady. In preparing my remarks, I read my 1992 speech. I described the adoption law review as

"the unfinished business of the 1989 Act."—[*Official Report*, 12 November 1992; Vol. 213, c. 1050.]

Mr. David Davis: I do not want to ruin any prospective consensus in the House, but that is the point that I tried to raise with the Minister. I asked him for an undertaking that a similar measure would be in the Queen's Speech should the Bill not complete all its stages before a general election and should his party win it. I asked the same of my own side. Is not that a reasonable request?

Mr. Hinchliffe: It is a perfectly reasonable point, but, with respect to my hon. Friend the Minister, it is not one

[Mr. Hinchliffe]

that he can answer. However, knowing the Prime Minister's views and the way in which he has championed the cause of change, I am certain that such a Bill would be on his list of priorities when the Government—in the not-too-distant future, I hope—are re-elected.

I pay tribute to the previous Government for introducing in the Children Act the key legislative principle of the best interests of the child. That has proved to be fundamental. Perhaps the most important element in the Bill is the Government's establishment of that same welfare principle as the central aspect of adoption legislation. I very much welcome that.

I chuntered when the hon. Member for Meriden spoke because I was thinking of the 20 years that I spent in local authority social work before being elected. When I listened to some of her criticisms, the word "naive" came to mind. She portrays the issue as so very black and white, but she has not had the experience, as I had on numerous occasions, of dealing with the shades of grey that one must face up to in considering the human issues raised by the adoption process.

I spent a considerable amount of my time in local authority social work on approvals of potential adopters. I took that job very seriously—it is extremely difficult—although I suspect that I was not adequately trained. Perhaps we can return to training, which is an important issue. Although my hon. Friend the Minister did not mention it, I welcome the fact that the Government have considered it and the White Paper certainly says that it will be an important element of the adoption reforms.

I was also involved in arranging adoption placements, another skilled and difficult process that is not black and white. It always involves shades of grey. I worked as a guardian ad litem—an independent referee—on other authorities' placements of children for adoption. On behalf of the courts, I considered whether those placements were appropriate and in the best interests of the child.

One of my most valuable experiences outside my involvement in professional social work was sitting on a different authority's adoption panel as a local councillor, considering how that authority dealt with adoption placements. I believe that it did so skilfully and in such a way that many local children were placed in appropriate situations and given a chance in life that they would not otherwise have had.

It has been a great privilege to chair the Health Committee in this Parliament and consider adoption and child care issues from a number of perspectives. Our inquiry into looked-after children reinforced the importance of adoption as part of the process of ensuring that youngsters who end up in local authority care are given a chance in life in an ordinary family setting.

I must also refer to our report, which Opposition Members may not have read, on British child migrants who were taken out of the care system and sent abroad. It is worth reflecting on because it contains a number of lessons that we drew from the experience up to 1967 of many thousands of British youngsters who were sent from our care system—in what was supposedly their best interest—to all sorts of highly questionable placements in other parts of the world. When I hear the hon. Member for Meriden talk about increasing the role of voluntary bodies and Church organisations, I worry. Some of the Church organisations that took part in the British child migrants scheme left a great deal to be desired.

Mr. Davis: I read the Select Committee report—and a good report it was too. No one is proposing uncontrolled subcontracting of the management of adoption to such bodies without any measurement of their performance. The point of the quality protects scheme is that it provides the option of comparing the public sector with the voluntary sector.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, who does a thorough job in the House. I draw his attention to the comments of Lady Thatcher a couple of years ago. She said that child care should be placed in the hands of Churches and voluntary organisations. At the time, I was instructed by the Select Committee on Health to write to her and to draw her attention to what happened last time our society did just that. I have heard the Leader of the Opposition make the same point. Perhaps I have misunderstood, but the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) knows that hard lessons were learned from that child migrant experience, and I hope that we never repeat it.

Mr. Brazier: The role of Church bodies, such as the Catholic Children's Society, in placing some of the most difficult children in the care system is second to none. Child migration was a Government policy, and however unsatisfactory some of the placements by Church organisations may have been, it is unfair to suggest that only they were to blame for what went wrong. The House was well aware of the process and successive Governments approved it.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I was not suggesting otherwise. The Health Committee report made it absolutely clear that successive Governments and all three parties were involved. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the Children Act 1948 should have provided a clear duty to check on the placements of those children, even though they were in Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the world. I am not denigrating all voluntary and Church organisations: I have worked with many of them, and have the greatest respect for them. However, a bland suggestion that we hand over this difficult, sensitive function to such organisations should be thought through. Some of the comments that I have heard—not from him but from members of his party—have not addressed the problem.

Mrs. Spelman: To clarify that point, I was talking about lay visiting and access to the outside world. Under the Care Standards Act 2000, voluntary agencies are regulated in the same way as local authority agencies, so that would provide some protection.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's clarification of that point, but to hand the child care function to some of these organisations wholesale would not make sense. If that is not what she meant, I am happy to accept her reassurance.

I am concerned that adoption has become a political issue, as it never has been before in the House. It has been hijacked by people who occasionally give the impression that children are commodities who can be accorded to

people who have a need because they cannot have children themselves or see their families as incomplete. That worrying process has been going on for some time. Its logical end result is people getting children for adoption over the internet, as in the obscene case that occurred recently. I appreciate that my comments on that case may be ruled out of order because it is sub judice, so I shall be careful about what I say, but most hon. Members are aware of the circumstances. I hope that hon. Members from all parties would not want that practice to be pursued further. I welcome the measures that the Minister has outlined, which will address the circumstances of that case.

What worries me about some statements and press coverage is that concern for the welfare of potential adopters has overtaken concern for the welfare and best interests of the child, which should be the central issue, and is at the heart of the Bill. The Bill is right to make the key point that the welfare of an individual child should be the central consideration in any practical steps towards adoption.

I am interested in the comments that have been made about political correctness. The term is bandied about by the tabloids time and again. It is often impossible for the people who are being accused of political correctness to defend themselves against the accusation. I have been accused of being politically correct on these issues.

We should consider in detail how to place children for adoption. Is it wrong in principle to try to find adoptive parents with physical similarities or common ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic backgrounds? From my experience, I do not think that it is politically correct to suggest that, when appropriate, that should happen. When I was on an adoption panel, we tried to do what we believed to be in the best interests of the children so that they fitted into the family and did not stand out. Many children of that age cannot handle it if they are in school or wherever and are publicly seen to be adopted. In later life they may be able to deal with it, but not as youngsters.

I do not think that it is unreasonable to try to find adoptive parents who are likely to be alive while the child is growing up. It is reasonable to try to ensure that people who adopt a youngster are likely to live long enough to ensure that the child is eased through adolescence and into adulthood. I do not think that that is politically correct.

Surely it is also right to try to find adoptive parents who are in good health. Does not a child have that right? Is not it appropriate to attempt to place a youngster with people who are in good health and will be able to offer the care that a child with a difficult and traumatic background will need? That child's behaviour will occasionally challenge those parents.

Is it wrong to try to ensure that a child is not sentenced to a life of passive smoking? We have been criticised for not placing children with smokers. A youngster may be placed with people who smoke day in, day out. Do we not have a duty to that child to ensure that he is brought up in a more healthy environment? The state says that it will take account of the child's interest, but is it in the best interests of the child to be placed where he or she will be exposed to the commonly known health effects of passive smoking through living with people who smoke like chimneys?

Those issues should be addressed. People may think that it is all right to place children with heavy smokers. It would be interesting to hear their arguments if those children grew up and sued the authority that placed them because of those health implications. Those issues need to be thought through. It is not political correctness: it is common sense.

Mr. Brazier: The hon. Gentleman is developing his argument in his customary carefully thought-through fashion. Surely in each of his examples, the point is about what options are available. Of course, if an Afro-Caribbean family is available for each Afro-Caribbean child, that is where such children should be placed. If there is a gross shortage of Afro-Caribbean families for children to go to—as there is in London—and there is a large number of Afro-Caribbean children for adoption, it becomes political correctness if adoption is stopped because the option of going to white parents is ruled out.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I think that it has been accepted on a cross-party basis that what concerns us is what is in the best interests of individual children. I certainly accept that a child should not be placed with a family who accord with that child's cultural background if such a placement is not in the child's best interests; I have no argument with that. My argument is with those who make political points about all the children whose placements are held up by lunatic social workers who are being politically correct. That is a convenient hanger on which to hook various prejudices against social workers, which, generally, has no basis in fact.

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman began by saying that there seemed to be more concern for the adopter than for the child. The intention is clearly to secure as many adopters as possible, and it is easy to confuse the two sets of interests.

I asked the Minister a question about practicality. He could not answer it—understandably, as this is a big Bill. My question concerns the requirement on religion. A child may be too young to know what religion is. The case that I had in mind involved a Turkish Muslim child. What if there are no Muslims around? Race and religion are specified in the Bill; in the circumstances that I have described, would it be possible to find a non-Muslim adoptive parent for that child? In my view, the answer should be yes, but I fear that the Bill will not allow it.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. I keep returning to my experience of meeting child migrants—placed under a scheme with which he is familiar—who were deeply offended that their background had been ignored, even in the case of babies or young children aged two to five who could not express their views.

In certain circumstances, we should also take account of the views of natural parents. Increasingly—and rightly—attempts are made to consider their views during the adoption proposals, and the Bill will enable that to happen even more. A provision near the end, which the Minister outlined, will deal with such issues.

Social workers see people when they are grown up who ask damned awkward questions about why certain things were done when they were five. We need to think about what children who are adopted will ask us in years to come. During the child migrant inquiry, my good friend Audrey Wise and I used to wonder whether, in 20 or 30 years, people would ask us why we, as Members of Parliament, had acceded to certain proposals.

[Sandra Gidley]

contain a most peculiar get-out clause. It states that, after a local authority has decided that someone requires adoption support services, local authorities

"must then decide whether to provide any such services".

Clearly, if services are required, local authorities should have a duty to provide them. Although I believe from the Minister's comments that that is the intention, the Bill does not clearly state that that is a requirement.

We all know that many children in care have complex needs, which may require the input of a health authority or local education authority. Although the local authority is obliged to notify the health authority or local education authority of those needs, again the Bill seems to contain no provision to assign a duty of care to the local authority, to ensure that children receive the best possible services. I have been greatly concerned about that issue since I first read the Bill, and, in subsequent conversations, charities and other organisations involved in adoption work have told me that they share that concern. We desperately need some joined-up thinking on the issue. I hope that we shall be able to achieve that in Committee.

The issue of financial support is related to the other issues I have mentioned. The White Paper states that, over three years, a £66.5 million package will be provided. However, if we are to do the job properly, we have to be clear about how money for the children will be allocated not only over three years, but year after year. Will money follow the children, as it does for children with special educational needs, or will local authorities have discretion in deciding how it is allocated? Across the country, most social services departments are struggling to make ends meet. They need to know that there is a formula to ensure funding.

The White Paper also said that the Government would improve the system of adoption allowances. Again, however, the Bill does not clearly address that issue. It also does not clearly address the issue of providing the necessary financial support for special guardians. We seek clarification on that issue.

I think that all hon. Members accept that we have to widen the pool of prospective carers. As has been said, caring is not the province of the rich, and a carefully worked out financial package would be helpful in assuring people that they can afford to adopt. Moreover, in the long run, such a package would save money. It would also remove part of the financial barrier for those who wish to become adoptive parents.

The provisions in clause 9 on the appeals process are also causing concern for some people and some adoption agencies. The Bill lacks detail on the type of determination with which the provision is supposed to deal and on the type of action that would follow a review if the review panel and an agency reached different conclusions. We need clarification on that issue.

There also seems to be a requirement for agencies themselves to fund such reviews. That requirement, and the fear of financial penalties, could deter agencies—particularly small, voluntary agencies—from making decisions that best reflect the interests of the child. Additionally, agencies could be financially crippled by funding the costs of appeals. The Government may have already addressed that issue. However, if they have, the Bill does not make that clear.

Adoption agencies have also expressed concerns about clauses 15 to 26, on the extremely complex issue of placement orders. I am heartened, however, that we shall have a special Select Committee to consider the Bill, as that will allow us to consult on the provisions on placement orders and other issues. Further work will have to be done before the Bill is passed, and I urge the Government to accept that we have to get it right initially.

On balance, therefore, Liberal Democrats Members welcome the Bill. Although I have outlined some issues that particularly concern us, what we really want is a clear national strategy. Currently, strategies differ from one local authority to another. Prospective parents who have been rejected by one authority as being too old, at 30, have had to go in search of another authority that may have different adoption criteria. Illnesses, too, have been treated differently by different local authorities. I differ from the hon. Member for Wakefield on this issue. Although one needs good health to be a good mother, one does not need to have perfect health. Someone who is 25 and diabetic, for example, can be a good parent throughout his or her life.

Liberal Democrat Members believe that we need sensible national standards. However, we do not think that we should become preoccupied by targets. Although it is laudable to set as our goal the adoption of 40 to 50 per cent. of children in care, and we would support such a goal, adoptions have to be arranged properly. We have to minimise the number of adoptive placements that break down. It would be far better to miss that target and have 35 per cent. of children happily settled in a home than to hit the target with a higher breakdown rate. We would also like there to be monitoring of adoption placements, to ensure that we are arranging them properly and not rushing ahead simply for the sake of hitting a target.

6.37 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. The common feature in the Bill is the clear statement that children are the main priority and that their welfare is the paramount consideration in all adoption decisions. Absolutely appropriately, that statement is the Bill's theme. I am very pleased also that the procedures and structures established in the Bill encompass the need to engage with the public and to encourage public involvement. The Bill is creating an openness and putting it at the heart of the adoptive process. Those features are crucial to me, as someone who has had the privilege of being an adoptive parent.

I was very disappointed to hear the speech by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). I say that as someone who has spent a year as a member of an all-party group that has worked on achieving a Bill that sets right the whole adoption process. In that year, there has been both consensus and a serious partnership in order to achieve this Bill. When the White Paper was published, pleasure and congratulations permeated the entire House. No one should want to kick that into touch, as I think the hon. Lady was seriously attempting to do. She will not succeed.

Everyone in the House knows that far too many children are in care. There could be 58,000 children in the care of local councils at any one time. I am not complaining about the councils or about social workers. Before I went to university, I was a house mother in a

reception centre, so I know how caring, loving and disciplined such organisations can be—but the straight fact is that no council home or centre can ever replace the personal relationship that is part of home life.

There is no room for a political football. There is definite concern that consensus about the principled way in which we pursue this issue should always be to the fore. We know that many of the children who come out of council care develop mental health problems or have few formal qualifications, and many enter relationships with adoptive parents that break down. We know what an institutional life can do. We see it too readily, and it shames us all. That is why we should not gibe at each other, but work together.

I was seriously pleased with much of the Bill, but I want to question one or two aspects. It introduces the independent review mechanism for prospective adopters who believe that they have been unfairly turned down. I have serious personal experiences—the House was most tolerant and supportive of me when I spoke of them on publication of the White Paper—that tell me that it is absolutely crucial to have an independent review mechanism that encourages people to come on board and want to be adoptive parents, because they know that they will be treated fairly and understand what the process is all about.

That is very welcome, but I hope that the Minister will take it on board that I believe that the children require an equally independent review mechanism. It does not matter what we call it—a children's ombudsman or a commissioner—but we must give children the opportunity to express their concerns to someone who will listen. Far too many children are lost and buried in the process of trying to find them a place to live and people who will love them.

The Bill does not seem to achieve—I shall be delighted if the Minister tells me that I am wrong—a tracking system that will show us where the child has been at every stage, how the child has been treated and what the child has had to cope with. Such a system is absolutely crucial. It will help to reduce the problem of children feeling that they have been left in limbo. They want adoptive parents, and many prospective adopters want them, but somewhere along the line the link has not been made.

The Bill contains clear statements about post-adoption support. Again, that is crucial. When we adopted a beautiful baby of five weeks—I know that this is borne out by others who are privileged to be in the same position—no one came to see us, check that all was well, offer advice or help, or find out whether the beautiful, healthy child we adopted was still beautiful, healthy and full of beans. In fact, she was—and remains so.

It is ridiculous that I have had the privilege of looking after another woman's baby, but nobody came to check that I was doing it effectively and that the child was developing well. I did not need regular visits, but if there is a problem and people need help, it should be available immediately and without question. Of course, no one would willingly break down a loving, supportive relationship, but children of three, five, nine or 14 come out of institutions with serious problems, and parents need support in looking after them. Post-adoptive support is an excellent innovation.

The Minister is determinedly setting targets in the Bill. The target to increase adoption from care to 40 per cent. is a very sizeable requirement. Considering the numbers, and the difficulties involved in placing many children, it will place a serious strain on many social services departments. The Minister has been very generous in adding £66 million to the £46 million already used by local authorities, but I ask him to consider topping up that amount if it proves insufficient.

I also ask the Minister to consider the work of both the new and the established voluntary adoption agencies. They comprise individuals who are often possessed of considerable experience and expertise. Their work load is significant: they are asked to do an awful lot, often including home checks for intercountry adoptions. If the 40 per cent. target is to be achieved, they will be an essential part of the process.

Many of us will have worked with the voluntary agencies—I certainly have—and one is quickly and forcefully struck by the fact that they regularly have to do serious fundraising. I ask the Minister to consider the fundraising gap and the qualities that they bring to the process, in an effort to find ways of supporting them.

I sound less positive than I am about the Bill. I am incredibly positive about it, but I would like to persuade the Government to include one or two other measures. There is no fast-track process for pre-school children. It is essential to consider such an approach. I need not labour the point that it is infinitely easier to develop binding, loving and permanent relationships with children who have not been in care or in the care system for an excessive period of time. A permanent relationship is easier to achieve by reducing the period in which a child is in care.

When I worked for Lancashire county council, I witnessed children under three who were stuck in the system It is totally unacceptable. They are loving, vulnerable little individuals who should be with families. They should not be in a dormitory along with 12 other children, however caring and loving the care home. It is very important that small children are placed in families as soon as possible.

I have a final request. Local authorities that do not at present give counselling to women with unwanted pregnancies should provide that service. Those women need someone to whom they can turn. They need someone to support them and help them decide what is best for them and their baby.

My support for the national register is without question. I believe strongly in the consultation on national standards. The introduction of an adoption taskforce for failing authorities is vital. Allowing courts to set a timetable to reduce delays in adoption cases is crucial.

Much of the Bill is valuable and should be prized by all of us. I have asked for other valuable measures to be included, such as an independent children's commissioner, resourcing for voluntary and adoption agencies and effective tracking. The Minister said that he has an open door and that he is listening. I believe that we can add to the Bill in the special Select Committee to make it first class. We must ensure that people realise that the Bill makes it clear that children must always be our first priority.

6.52 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): It is a pleasure and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), who is the new chairman of the all-party group on adoption. I am the group's treasurer, which may explain why it has no money.

[Sandra Gidley]

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I have a final request. Local authorities that do not at present give counselling to women with unwanted pregnancies should provide that service. Those women need someone to whom they can turn. They need someone to support them and help them decide what is best for them and their baby.

My support for the national register is without question. I believe strongly in the consultation on national standards. The introduction of an adoption taskforce for failing authorities is vital. Allowing courts to set a timetable to reduce delays in adoption cases is crucial.

Much of the Bill is valuable and should be prized by all of us. I have asked for other valuable measures to be included, such as an independent children's commissioner, resourcing for voluntary and adoption agencies and effective tracking. The Minister said that he has an open door and that he is listening. I believe that we can add to the Bill in the special Select Committee to make it first class. We must ensure that people realise that the Bill makes it clear that children must always be our first priority.

6.52 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): It is a pleasure and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), who is the new chairman of the all-party group on adoption. I am the group's treasurer, which may explain why it has no money.

[Mr. David Davis]

A number of right hon. and hon. Members have talked about giving the Bill a cautious welcome; I shall give it an uncautious welcome. It is an extraordinarily important Bill which, as the Minister said, comes once in a generation. I have objections to the Bill's timing—I would have liked it to come forward earlier. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). If her private Member's Bill, down for debate this week, helped to provoke the Minister—good. I know what it is like in Whitehall. As the Minister pointed out, I have been a Whip and I know that it is difficult to get Bills into the system, so if my hon. Friend helped in the process, that is wonderful because it means that we have a Bill that comes once in a generation, and that is worth having.

We can all pick holes in the Bill. I could pick a number of holes in the drafting—parts of it do not agree with other parts, but that will be sorted out, one hopes, in the special Select Committee. I also have some arguments about strategy, but they are not so much iron-clad as probing. Whatever one thinks of the detail, if the 58,000 children in care knew about the Bill, they would probably all be cheering, if not for themselves then for their successors.

The Bill's success will rely on resolving a number of major problems—almost paradoxes—of children in care. "In care" is a lovely phrase—it sounds warm, comfortable and beneficial. In practice, for most children, going into care is an awful prospect. We should recognise that. Indeed, the legislation was triggered, at least in one respect, by the Waterhouse report on abuse by paedophiles in north Wales. We know that that was not unique—there have been other organised abuse rings in other homes. We also know of non-sexual abuses such as pindown, and related issues. The fact is that vulnerable youngsters sometimes attract evil people, and we have to protect them.

This tale of neglect varies enormously according to the local authority. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said that most social workers do a fabulous job of looking after the children, and others, in their care. However, this sector is often the Cinderella of social work. It is underfunded and under-resourced, and often the youngest and least experienced social workers do the job. What is more, they are often poorly controlled, resulting in many poor outcomes. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden said, a lot of children are moved many times. That leads to a very poor outcome for them.

The starkest example that I have come across was the case a couple of years ago of Aliyah Ismail, the 13-year-old child who died from a drugs overdose, having taken up prostitution to feed her habit. That happened while she was in care. There is no excuse for that. There is even less excuse for the fact that that young child had been moved between homes 60 times in her life.

When I wrote about that sort of issue, I received a number of letters from people such as directors of social services departments and professors. They contained many attacks and might as well have been signed "Disgusted of Islington" in green ink. They said that the situation was not intentional and the social workers were not the ones making the moves. That was not true, as it happened, but that does not matter—we, as a society, have a duty of care to these children. They are our responsibility. The way that we look after our most vulnerable members is the acid test of a civilised society.

More generally—the Minister touched on this point—typical youngsters in care face a disproportionate prospect of homelessness, crime, jail and drugs dependency and, for girls, pregnancy. Some 0.5 per cent. of the country's population is in care. They make up 22 per cent. of the prison population, and 39 per cent. of those prisoners are under 21. One in three of the young people sleeping rough in London has come out of the care system, and one in four children in care over 13 does not attend school, so "in care" is at best a paradox and at worst a singular misnomer.

This is not due simply to the failure of the individual social service departments and the social workers. As the chairman of the all-party group on adoption, the hon. Member for Stockton, South said, institutions cannot replace families. Cold charity, however well intended, cannot replace the stable, loving homes that adoption provides. That is why adoption, rather than council care, is the preferred option and, quite rightly, the main thrust of the Bill.

The second problem, or paradox, relating to children in care is that the longer youngsters are in care, the harder it is to get them out of care. It is very simple, and an obvious characteristic. The absence of parental love is psychologically damaging and destabilising. Studies have been made of children in their teens who continue in the care system and those who are adopted in their early teens—the most difficult group. They show clearly that all of them, pretty much, have some degree of psychological damage. Those who are adopted at that point are not instantly cured—we should not kid ourselves about that—but, generally, they stabilise and their decline is arrested.

Those who stay in care, on the other hand, become worse. Statistics mean nothing, but they are about 50 per cent. worse off in terms of the conditions that they suffer from. We, and the Government, must break that vicious circle. Difficult children, often from cruel backgrounds, go into care, the very fact of which makes them more difficult and harder to place. The longer that goes on, the worse it all becomes.

The test of the Bill will lie in whether it can break those problems by favouring adoption. We know that adoption leads to better results. Adopted children, when they are adopted young, enjoy outcomes as good as or better than those for children from natural families. There is a 20 per cent. failure rate, as measured by break ups, but that failure rate is near zero among the under-fives, and nearer 50 per cent. for the over-10s.

Speed therefore matters more than precision, particularly in the selection of parents. Speed matters more than almost anything. I shall offer a crude example of a decision that social workers almost never have to make, but if one had to choose between having an imperfect parent quickly and a perfect one two or three years down the line, I would go for the former. After all, I am an imperfect parent myself, as I am sure my children would agree.

Much lip service is paid to that point about speed. In her response to the Bill, Moira Gibb, the president of the Association of Directors of Social Services, said:

"Despite the creation, rightly, of new targets and increased through-put, social service departments must make sure that their attention isn't drawn too rigidly towards those children deemed 'easier' to adopt at the expense of those who, despite being older, still have a right to a happy and fulfilling family life".

That is just plumb wrong. We should not have to choose between the two groups, but, as the hon. Member for Stockton, South said, we should fast-track children before they are too long in care. We can do most to rescue those children from the problem before us.

Mr. Brazier: My right hon. Friend makes such a powerful case that I am embarrassed to interrupt him. Surely, however, we must put a stop to endless statements by people such as Moira Gibb about the age profile of children in care. We should be discussing the age profile of children at the time they came into care, which, in many cases, was four, five or six years earlier.

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is right. I shall cite for him some statistics about young children, for which I am grateful to the Adoption Forum.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way first?

Mr. Davis: Of course.

Mr. Hinchliffe: The right hon. Gentleman has not yet mentioned the process of returning a child from care to his or her natural family. Indeed, that issue seems to have been sketched over generally in this debate. As one who worked in social services, I can say that one of the most difficult decisions to take is whether to place a child back in his or her natural family environment. That is where the skill of the job comes in. Frankly, it is easier to have a child adopted than to face some of the tasks involved in returning a child to his or her natural family and to work with and support that family. Where does the right hon. Gentleman think the balance lies between those two things?

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman is drawing me off to one side. One cannot deal with that point with statistics. One can only consider cases, and in those that I have examined, several futile attempts were made to reconstitute damaged families. In some cases, that went so far that it constituted institutional cruelty to the children involved as attempts were made to push families back together. They were pushed back into families in which they had been damaged—physically, in some cases—and they went back and forward like yo-yos between various homes. All that probably made it impossible for the children involved ever to form a serious bond with an adult.

Often, such action is taken with the best of intentions. Perhaps a young social worker wants to reconstitute a family and is challenged by the idea of doing so. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is tough to do that, but it is, in many cases, so tough that it is impossible. The hon. Gentleman was also right to say that that is one cause for the delays about which we have spoken.

Mr. Hinchliffe: The right hon. Gentleman has not mentioned that in many cases where an attempt is made to rehabilitate the child, the child wants to go home. I asked about the balance between the natural family, adoptive parents and remaining in care because it is a real issue that many people have to face. We may talk about the best interests of the child, but we must also talk about the wishes of the child. Frequently, children have a deep affinity with and love for their natural parents.

Mr. Davis: That may be so in some cases, though it was not highlighted in the cases that I studied. One of our problems is the question of control. We must ask about the extent to which senior members of social services departments know what is happening, and one problem is that we have few statistics relating to the failure rate of the attempts to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. Such figures would be important. Much of what the House will do in the special Select Committee will be designed to find out what maximises the odds of a good outcome for the youngster. That is all that we can do, and if it sometimes means a bit of rough justice, that justice must favour the child. That is why paramountcy is so important.

I was about to give my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) some figures that I had received from the Adoption Forum. In 1999, of 2,200 looked-after babies under one year old, 200 were adopted, 930 had been in care for between two and six months, and 770 had been in care for longer. Most were in care for more than eight weeks, in other words. How likely is it that those children will return to their birth families? Only 930 were awaiting adoption, which leaves me wondering what happened to the rest of them.

Those are the type of figures that we must deal with. Not all of them relate to the question of returning to a family. Some of them relate to what is colloquially called "lost in care". That phrase refers to children who had not been properly tracked and were floundering in the system, but who were, of course, still being harmed while they floundered and lost precious parental love at an important time of their lives.

Social work specialists often argue that there are not enough adopters. Along with the reason mentioned by the hon. Member for Wakefield, that is the other main reason for delay. In my view, however, the argument that there are not enough adopters is flawed. First, a large proportion of adopters are turned down—my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden tells me that it is as much as 90 per cent. in some cases.

Secondly, we can learn from statistics going back decades. We are often told, in a comfortable way, that not many baby adoptions are available these days, because of contraception, abortion and changes in social attitudes. There were 20,000 adoptions a year in the 1960s, which implies 20,000 families of one sort or another at that time. It is hardly surprising that many families have withdrawn from the prospect of adoption. Prospective adopters must be prepared to submit themselves to lengthy, intensive and intrusive scrutiny of their habits, health, age, weight, race, class, attitudes, number of books read and you-name-it. Any of those things could disqualify them, and that is a deterrent, a sort of non-tariff barrier to adoption. Cases can be overplayed in some tabloids, but the simple fact is that if I were considering adopting, I should think hard about opening not just myself but my family to that scrutiny.

Another point that I do not understand is the argument that would-be parents only want babies, as if that were mere sentimentality. It is not—it is an important piece of

[Mr. Davis]

emotional wisdom. Most people recognise that it is an easier, faster and stronger process to bond with a baby, and that works in both directions. It is not just that the parent thinks the baby cute, but that a strong emotional bond is easier to form with a baby than with a child of 11, 12 or more. After all, those of us with children of our own know that when they reach the age of 11 or 12 they can be difficult enough—it is a difficult time. It is thus no surprise that if children arrive damaged and have psychological problems—that is so in 60 per cent. of cases, as was pointed out earlier—due to long institutionalisation or changes in their home life, there will be incredible difficulties. There is an inherent wisdom in the fact that would-be adoptive parents look for younger children.

To repeat the point made by the hon. Member for Stockton, South, one of our strongest aims should be to fast-track younger children. That is how we shall bring that 58,000 down to a number that is tolerable rather than a shame on our nation. The national adoption register will help in that process; I commend Ministers for that.

The measure still includes provisions on race and religion. That is not necessarily sensible drafting. The question of the paramountcy of the lifetime advantage of the child ought to deal with such matters. As the hon. Member for Wakefield pointed out, when a child or siblings need to be placed with a family, we should pick the family who offer the best likelihood of success. Whether an Afro-Caribbean child is placed with an Afro-Caribbean family, a Muslim child with a Muslim family, or whatever the background, if there is a match, that should derive straight from the paramountcy consideration—it should not need to be provided for in the Bill.

I make that point because of my concern that a number of social workers interpreted some of the aims of the Children Act 1989 in ways that turned out to be unhelpful. In the special Select Committee, we might discuss the whole question of the interaction of such guidelines. Hard cases make bad law, but we do not want to find ourselves in a position in which a Muslim child of Turkish parents cannot be found a set of Muslim adoptive parents for love nor money. We must avoid that if we possibly can, especially—as I shall argue—if we want a large increase in the number of would-be parents.

That relates to a point about overall adoption strategy. I am not a great approver of President Clinton, but one has to admit that his initiative on that front was successful. He encouraged great diversity of effort, energy and imagination to increase the scope and the number of would-be adoptive parents. Startling outcomes have been achieved; for example, in three or four years, the number of adoptions in Idaho doubled. Along with the introduction of the Bill, we should look hard at the American experience for ways of extending the active search for parents, without silly rules.

On placement orders, I am rather a hawk on freeing orders. The courts have been hyper-cautious in their use of such orders. There is a simple reason for that, which sounds sensible: it is not a good idea for a child to be without a legal parent. However, given some of the parents that we are talking about, to have no legal parent is better—it may be untidy for the courts, but nevertheless better for the children. Given the reticence of the courts, the placement order route is probably correct.

I shall not be in the Chamber to hear the Minister's response—I shall have to read it tomorrow—but will she tell the House what the subsequent relationship of birth parents will be? That is not clear in the measure. In some cases, birth parents continue to have contact with the child after adoption. Will that practice end under the measure or will there be a change? What is the Government's intention? In general, however, the provisions should lead to a good outcome.

It would have been useful if a stigma-free consent route had been clearly set out—I could find no detail of that in the measure. A problem that often faces single mothers is the feeling that they have failed if they sign away their child, even though the best thing would be to give the child the prospect of a better upbringing than they can manage. An awful emotional wrench can be made worse by the stigma of having to sign away a child. If such matters are not already covered by the Bill, perhaps they could be considered in the special Select Committee. We should explore that route.

I very much welcome the paramountcy of the child's life interest although I am worried about the interpretation. We need to think hard about the relevant guidelines. Some aspects of the Children Act reinforce social workers' obsession with birth families, so we shall need greater clarity about the meaning of paramountcy.

Much of the Bill will be dependent on regulations. The drafting is poor; even to my amateur eye, parts of it do not seem to agree with one another. Much scrutiny and consideration will be necessary. Like most Members, I carry as a scar the aftermath of the Child Support Agency, which went through the House as a largely bipartisan—or accepted—measure. The result of that bipartisan approach was that perhaps we did not scrutinise the legislation well enough.

I should hate this, once in a generation, important Bill to suffer the same fate, so I make this point to the Minister—it is not meant as point scoring: the process of challenge is important. If ever a Bill needed not to be timetabled, this is it, but if it has to be timetabled, please, please make that timetable generous so as to allow proper consideration. Will the Minister please review the matter halfway through the timetable? No one in the House will filibuster the Bill; I hope that everyone will give it proper support. Furthermore, as I probably shall not be a member of the special Committee, I make a plea for the affirmative resolution procedure on the guidance rather than the negative resolution procedure currently proposed.

My next two points do not relate directly to the Bill, but to its surrounding strategy and resources. The first is on funding. Several people have been generous in their comments on funding, but I think that it is inadequate. The US experience was that there was great expense initially, but it quickly got cheaper as children came out of the care system and those costs were saved. The measure offers a classic case for a limited period of ring-fenced funding—I am talking not of tens of millions but of hundreds of millions of pounds for one or two years. We must bear in mind the fact that we are talking not only about allowances or support, but about recruitment costs. Normally, social service departments assess recruitment costs alone at about £3,000 a child; for

the voluntary agencies, the actual cost of recruiting adoptive parents is more like £14,000 a child. For difficult children, the cost is even greater. We are talking of dramatic—order of magnitude—changes.

Many of the problems thus hinge on the fact that adoption is the Cinderella of many social services departments. The youngest and the least-trained social workers are involved. It is important that we produce enough money for the measure in its first two or three years. The House does not often hear me talking about spending more money, so I shall make one point—as an aside—in self-defence: a cost-benefit analysis of bringing a high proportion of those 58,000 children out of the care system would undoubtedly show that value could be measured in many, many hundreds of millions of pounds. Homelessness, crime, prison sentences, drug dependency, unwanted young pregnancies—all those social ills are hugely expensive.

Mr. Brazier: And mental health problems.

Mr. Davis: Indeed; my hon. Friend is quite right. The sum involved might be large, but it will be justified by the social benefits that it will bring. It will not be an issue for long because if it works—and it must work—the savings made elsewhere will pay it off.

I have one mild rebuke for the Government. I do not think that the target of a 40 per cent. increase is enough. The simple fact is that the Americans, working to a similar timetable, managed a 65 per cent. increase in adoptions. The most successful states—I accept that they are the smaller ones—have managed to double the numbers. The rate of adoption from care must be greater than the number of children who come into care by a significant amount to reduce the 58,000. That is what we want to achieve. I hope that Ministers intend to hit their targets and exceed them by a large margin. I shall do all I can to support anything that they do to achieve that end.

The Bill is important. As the Minister said, such legislation is produced once in a generation. It is not easy to get such Bills into the House. The 1926 legislation started with a commission in, I think, 1920. In one respect at least, this Bill has been introduced quickly. We owe it to those 58,000 young lives to implement its provisions. It may not rescue their life chances, but I hope that it will rescue those of succeeding generations so that when the Minister comes back to the House as Secretary of State after the next Tory Government, he can tell us about the 5,000 children in care, not the 58,000.

7.21 pm

Liz Blackman (Erewash): At the start of the debate, I found myself wondering what the House would be like if it operated as a supermarket in which people with small amounts in their baskets could pass easily through. I am glad that it does not, because I have been privileged to hear the quality of the contributions of hon. Members who have a vast experience and knowledge of the subject, some of whom have worked in the sector. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) shared her experience of adopting a child.

I am pleased that the Bill has been introduced. I am also pleased by the speed with which Second Reading has followed the White Paper. If it was prompted on its way by the Waterhouse report, so much the better. With regard to what the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) said, I do not think that that is a political point. Some reports are so severe and damning that the Government have to pick them up and run with them.

I mentioned the basket-only express counter in the supermarket because there is not much in my basket. I do not have a vast knowledge of adoption, but a couple of years ago two constituents raised a specific issue with me and it is their case that prompted me to speak. They had two sad experiences of the adoption process, both involving the same issue, which is important to the process.

My constituents are a married couple with a child. For medical reasons, they cannot have any more children. They chose to adopt because they believed that they had a loving family to offer to another child. In 1998, having been accepted as approved prospective adopters, they linked up with a northern local authority. Although they constantly asked for detailed information on two small children, it was either withheld or insufficient. They ended up going to the area and spending four days with the two children. The behaviour of the younger child, who was very tiny, was challenging. It upset the parents, their child and the little boy concerned. My constituents believe that if they had been given more information, they might have made a judgment about the adoption before they got into that situation.

Last year, they hoped to adopt a small girl from a London authority, but encountered the same scenario. Information had been collected on her when she was two months old, but it had not been updated for 11 months by the time they became involved in the process. Again, they were provided with little information and, although they asked for it to be disclosed, it was not. After three months, they were told by telephone that the adoption had gone ahead with other parents. They were not told why they did not get further through the process.

In her letter to me, my constituent said:

"We believe that it is vital that adoptive families are in possession of every possible piece of information about a child before they commit themselves. After all, how many of us would enter into marriage knowing little, if anything about our future partner?"

That is how that couple felt about their experiences of the adoption process. Their evidence is anecdotal, and I know that there is superb work on the subject, but it raises the fundamental issue of disclosure.

When the adoption process breaks down, the disruption that it causes is extremely painful for all concerned. One of the main reasons for disruption is the lack of information that is given to adoptive parents. When parents are in possession of sufficient information, they should feel no shame in saying that they do not have the necessary skills to make a good home for a child, especially if he or she is challenging, perhaps because of severe abuse or neglect. Different parents offer different skills. It is not fair to decide that parents cannot be good adoptive parents in the right circumstances.

I hope that my hon. Friend can clarify one matter. Clause 47(2) deals with the point at which information is imparted to the adoptive parent. The explanatory notes state that

"an adoption agency must give the adopters as soon as practicable after the making of the adoption order such information as is to be prescribed in regulations. This information is likely to include personal information about the adopted person and information about

his background, such as birth details, details of his early development and medical history and non-identifying information . . . as prescribed under subsection (2)".

That is fair and fine, but it clearly states that the information is to be provided after the adoption order has been signed. What about parents who are in the process of adoption? What guarantees of disclosure do they have before they reach the final stage of being accepted as adoptive parents?

The Bill does not appear to cover that. It deals with the provision of information when orders have been signed, but my constituents did not get that far. Some parents are not given enough information to enable them to decide whether to adopt a child or, as with my constituents, do not have sufficient information to decide whether to withdraw from an adoption because of a child's challenging behaviour with which their family cannot cope.

In a poignant letter, my constituent described her bad experience of trying to adopt. She said that she and her husband were frightened of being identified as a problem family because they had asked for information. She said:

"But we do feel that it is important that the problems faced by families who are trying to adopt must be highlighted in some way. Our keeping quiet would not help to relieve the silent anguish which many families experience, but feel unable or afraid to complain about. Nor would it improve the care which is taken to provide vulnerable children with the best possible family for them to be nurtured in."

We do not want an adoption system that deters prospective adoptive parents. It has been pointed out several times that there are more children in care than there are prospective parents. We want to encourage parents to come forward; one way to do so is to ensure that those who do are provided with full, good-quality information on children who are available. We will then have an adoption system of which we can be proud.

7.31 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The hon. Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) is far too modest in likening herself to someone pushing a small trolley to the till. She made a valuable and useful contribution, based on her constituency experience.

I should like to praise the Minister who opened the debate for his tireless work in developing, first, the White Paper and the Bill. I do not detract at all from that by saying—this is the only partisan note in my speech—that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), I was disappointed that the Government's business managers did not give the Bill higher priority and that it was not in the Queen's Speech. Instead, it has been introduced on the eve of an election.

This is a good Bill, a tremendous amount of which has been welcomed by Members on both sides of the House. The points that I shall make in the next few minutes are designed to respond to the Minister's welcome and open statement that he would seek detailed contributions on the contents of the Bill. The spirit in which he has twice visited the all-party group of which I am co-chairman and the open-minded way in which he has been willing to discuss the broadest principles through to the smallest details is very welcome. On that note, I am sad that the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) will retire from the House, not only because she has been my co-chairman since the group was founded, but because the House will be the poorer for losing her. However, she has an excellent successor in the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor).

I shall offer one more congratulation before getting on with my speech. The Adoption Forum has played an extraordinary role in co-ordinating many special interest groups and keeping the issue prominent in the media, and that should be minuted.

In his opening speech, the Minister made the strong point that the situation is intolerable. Outcomes for children in care are awful: 40 per cent. of prisoners under 21 spent part of their childhood in care; a quarter of all girls in care become pregnant; huge numbers of children who have been in care are out on the streets; a third of homeless people were in care; and a proportion of children in care become drug addicts and end up paying for their habit by prostitution. All of that has been touched on in our debate.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) is not in his place because he might have wished to respond to the point that I am about to make. He made a powerful speech in which he made a number of interesting points, but he asked one question that went to the heart of the debate. If we make mistakes on adoption and children's futures, what will we say to those children years later? I tell him and the House that he is right: one day we will have to justify every decision to those children—but how much more do we have to justify the failure to take decisions on adoption for a generation. That should shame every Member of the House.

I shall give a specific example. I shall come to a couple of constituency cases later, but the saddest direct experience that I have ever had of adoption was a delightful girl who—and this is relevant to the story—was Afro-Caribbean. She came to me as the result of a good scheme by Kent social services to give children in care an opportunity to visit an MP's office and help out for a day. I asked her whether she would have liked to have had the opportunity to be adopted. She said, "Yes, I would. I was taken into care when I was five, but my mum objected, so I wasn't considered for adoption." I asked her how many times she had seen her mother since the age of five. She answered, "Not at all for 10 years, and then only once." I am afraid that that single case epitomises why I am fed up with people putting the case for the rights of birth parents. I shall come to worse cases later, but that was my most direct experience of adoption.

I want to look at five areas where the Bill could be strengthened or, if regulations are introduced, elucidated. First, however, may I deal with one matter that runs across all those areas? One is always a little nervous about introducing political philosophy into a subject as practical as adoption, but as a strong conservative with a small "c", as well as a Conservative with a big "C", I believe that decisions are best made closest to the ground, wherever there is local accountability. I am deeply unhappy about the idea of vast amounts of hugely centralised measures—which began under the previous Government and have increased under the present one—for services and yardsticks that local government should provide. In most cases, local electors are the right people to decide that.

The key question is whether there is genuine local accountability. Of all the services that local authorities provide there is perhaps no more extreme example than children in care, for whom there is no local accountability.

Children in care do not have votes; they do not figure in the minds of the vast majority of people, even those who would be concerned about them if they raised what was, or was not, going on. That is why I shall argue unashamedly that we need far stronger central controls and guidance. In seeking to strengthen the Bill's welcome provisions, I make no apology for that.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's arguments. Does he believe that local authorities should give up their role as local adoption agencies, and, if so, should that role be taken centrally?

Mr. Brazier: I stand by the position that I have always taken: we should allow local authorities to maintain their current role when they are doing a decent job, but the process of stripping that role from authorities that consistently fail should be greatly accelerated. It should be given either to a neighbouring local authority that is doing a better job or a voluntary agency—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I am not sure whether the Parliamentary Secretary wants to hear my reply or not.

That is the short answer, but there is a further point. The regulation of adoption should be kept separate from the provider, which is why I envisage a central structure of regulation with a local structure of providers—but with the caveat that local authorities that are doing a bad job should have their responsibilities removed and given to neighbouring authorities or voluntary organisations. That has been the view of the all-party group since it was founded. I am glad to see the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme nodding.

On political correctness, I shall be brief—the subject has been covered several times. Clause 1 is a strong measure, which states:

"The paramount consideration of the court or adoption agency must be the child's welfare, throughout his life."

That is correct. The clause lists all the right considerations, including the wishes of the child. However, subsection (5) causes a number of us concern. It states:

"In placing the child for adoption, the adoption agency must give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) argued forcefully that that should not be written into the Bill. It could be covered satisfactorily by earlier subsections. If the Government feel strongly that the provision should remain, I draw to their attention two aspects of the wording that cause me great concern. First, as the Minister rightly made clear, to prevent the provision from becoming mere political correctness, it must not cause inordinate delay. People such as me would feel greatly reassured if those very words were written into subsection (5).

Almost every Member who has spoken has agreed that the existing system is failing children miserably. We all want to speed up the procedure. That subsection could be used by vindictive birth parents again and again to hold up perfectly valid adoptions.

Mr. McLoughlin: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Does he believe that the provision could be used to stop children being placed with adoptive parents who have strong religious beliefs? If a child does not have strong Christian beliefs, that could be used by agencies to prevent him or her from being fostered or adopted by someone with strong Christian convictions?

Mr. Brazier: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There is genuine worry about that. I received a letter from a retired clergyman in which he described an experience from a long time ago—it must have been 20 years previously—when he had been refused, because the social services department thought it inappropriate to place a child with him as a strong practising Christian. Of course, I have only his word for that.

A further point about the wording of subsection (5) is that I do not know what "due consideration" means. Lawyers whom I have asked do not know, either. It would be unfortunate if lawyers could seize on such a vague phrase and read different meanings into it.

The second of the five points on my checklist relates to the need to protect damaged children, about which the Minister spoke at length. We are all present because we are concerned about children in care, almost all of whom, apart from babies, are there, sadly, because they have been damaged by abuse or long-term neglect. The hon. Member for Erewash made a powerful point in that regard. She said that if we are short of adopters, as we have long been, it is no good saying that we are considering the best interests of the child. If the best interests of the child are to find parents, we must also consider the interests of the parents. I shall reinforce that point with a further example.

There has been a trend in the courts towards open adoption, whereby the birth family is allowed to know the name and address of the adopters. That is deeply unwelcome to potential adoptive parents. Who could blame them? If the child whom they are taking on has been damaged by the former family, do the adoptive parents really want the family to know where they live?

I have constituents who took on two little boys and who are seeing that adoption through. They have had the children for several years. One of the children was kept locked in a cellar for so long that he had not developed the power of speech when he was adopted, aged seven or eight. The other child was left out in the cold for so long that the amputation of his feet had to be considered. Eventually, the gangrene was cured and he was saved. Once again, I find myself totally out of sympathy with those who appeal for the interests of birth families. Neither of those cases was an open adoption.

My reservations do not apply just to the more extreme cases. To see what a destroyer open adoption is, we need look no further than experience in Australia and New Zealand. Australia has much to teach us in many other areas of family policy, but in respect of open adoption, its views are seriously wrong. Adoption has virtually collapsed there since the courts started to make almost every adoption an open adoption. The numbers are down to pitifully low levels—300 last year, from memory.

Unfortunately, the Bill does not address the issue. It is a long Bill, and I apologise if I am wrong, but I have found in it nothing to say that the courts should be wary of breaching secrecy. I welcome the sensible though rather complicated measures in clause 15 onwards, which provide for matters to be speeded up through the courts by advance placements of children while they are awaiting outcomes, and the change in the freeing order system.

[Mr. Brazier]

Unfortunately, that will all be negated if the identity of adopters is not protected while those procedures are under way.

I come to the third point on my checklist. The Minister said, rightly, that the national register would be compulsory. Clause 9 introduces the independent review, for which we on the all-party group have argued repeatedly. We feel strongly that it is essential, but it has been left entirely to regulation. I shall discuss two aspects that are fundamental to the regulation.

The Minister made it clear that independent review would be open, in principle, to people who have been refused a place on the national register—the clause uses the words "a qualifying determination". I shall consider the case of people refused individual matching. There clearly cannot be an appeal in every case where a matching is refused, as that would place an intolerable strain on social services and inspectors' time, which is already heavily overstretched. However, if no appeals are allowed on individual matching, couples who get on to the national register will have no better chance of getting any further if there are silly objections to them.

I suggest that there are two cases in which an appeal should be allowed. The first is where a foster parent wants to adopt the children. One of the saddest conclusions that emerged two years ago from the marvellous study by Murch and Lowe at Cardiff university was that, unbelievably, some miserable local authorities had incredibly low adoption rates. There are a number of good local authorities, but some of the miserable ones, as a written policy, never allow foster parents to adopt children in their care. Strong messages have gone out about that. Where the child has been successfully placed with foster parents, whatever the local authority is planning, the foster parents should automatically be entitled to appeal if they are not allowed to adopt the children.

The second case is where a couple on the national register are refused an appeal, and the child is not placed with anyone else within a sensible time frame. That, too, should trigger an appeal. It could be a two-part appeal—a quick paperwork sort, to check that there is no obvious factor preventing the adoption, before a full appeal is undertaken.

My fourth point also involves appeals. The child has no appeal anywhere in the system. I do not mean to embarrass the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme by continually referring to her, but she has repeatedly argued eloquently for a children's commissioner. I would go halfway. There is an overwhelming case for a commissioner purely for children in care. That post would be a way station for appeals to the Minister from children.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden mentioned lay visitors. One of the best measures in the Children Act 1989 was the requirement on local authorities to ensure that children who have no visitors are appointed a lay visitor. The case for that is overwhelming. I heard a brave presentation by a lady social worker last year who had been a whistleblower in a particularly horrible scandal. That ruined her professional career; she is now out of social work. The great thing about lay visitors is that they have no career at stake or concern except for the interests of the children.

The saddest failure of the Children Act is that the vast majority of local authorities have not bothered to implement that requirement. I would like something to be done, either in the Bill or through administrative measures already in the law, to make councils appoint lay visitors. That would tie in with the idea of giving children a route of appeal. A lay visitor could tell a child that he or she could write to the children's commissioner, who could then decide whether it would be worth passing the case to the ministerial appeals panel.

My fifth and final point is on the linked subjects of statistics and structure of finance. I shall not detain the House by repeating the cogent appeal made by my right hon. Friend—a man who, as he said himself, seldom asks for such pump priming. A generous sum up front would produce huge savings down the line. What has happened in America genuinely proves that. I shall focus instead on the structure of finance.

It is easy on Second Reading to get lost in the wind, bang on and lose the attention of the House, but one fundamental point must be considered: children are disappearing in care. Surely people remember that some of those murdered by the West couple were children in care. I heard a Labour Member, whom I will not name because I am not sure whether he has made such an appeal publicly, state eloquently in private that he believes that children have disappeared in care in his constituency. They had been sent there by outside social services without local social services knowing.

I firmly believe that central Government should hold an internal register of children in care. It should be the statutory duty of every local authority to inform the Government of any child held in care for more than a very short period of, say, one or two months, so that children cannot disappear from the system. That should be central to the great scope for collecting statistics under the latter part of the Bill, which will inevitably depend on regulations. I make a financial proposal to hang on that.

There is so much in the Bill to pull together practice—to try to raise the performance of the vast number of badly performing local authorities to that of the small number that are performing very well, which are dotted around the country and are of different political affiliations. One of the best contributions that the Government could make under the Bill and as a follow-up to it would be to move the financial packages from social services departments—leaving them still to administer them—and to attach them to children. Thereby, local authorities, or foster parents where they apply, would be directly reimbursed for the services that they provide for children, instead of having to operate under an all-embracing budget that covers everybody from the youngest to the oldest and does not earmark. That would provide an incentive for people to do things for children.

I raised a specific example in an intervention on the Minister. Nobody supports more strongly than I do the provisions on timing, particularly the provision that the ball starts to roll after six months. As far as I can see, as the Bill stands, the clock is reset each time. Therefore, a social services department—it may not be badly led but just desperately short of cash—faced with an evenly balanced decision whether to send a child back to the birth family after five and a half months might consider the financial consequences of keeping that child in care for another two or three weeks, compared with the huge financial saving from giving the birth family one more

try. That might produce some very bad outcomes. Moving towards more portability or, as a second best, towards particularly close monitoring of that factor, would be best for such children.

I end where I began. This is a good Bill. I congratulate the Minister on the huge amount of work that he has put into it. In order to do the best that we can for the children concerned, as I know the whole House wants, the Bill needs to be strengthened. I have suggested five ways in which we could do so.

7.56 pm

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): First, I apologise for not being present at the beginning of the debate. I was whipped off by the Whips to serve on a Committee considering a statutory instrument. It is a great pleasure to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier). I know that he has worked long and hard to improve the status of children in care and up for adoption, and for this House to give more priority to taking action to improve the adoption system.

The Bill is yet another step taken by this Labour Government along the long road to improving the lives of all our children. Only those children who, for whatever reason, are no longer able to live with their parents can know the feelings of hurt, rejection and bewilderment of being placed in care. To be adopted, to be wanted, can give them a second chance in their young lives and a real sense of their own worth.

The Bill sets out to deal fairly with all the people and organisations involved with the best interests of the child—be they birth parents, adopting parents, pre-adopting families, voluntary agencies, social workers or the courts. The over-arching need of the welfare of the child is at the heart of the Bill. For far too long, we have lacked permanence and a clear policy on adoption. That has led to the wide variation in local authority standards that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

The Bill will provide a strong and clear basis on which to consider a stable future for some of our most needy children. That, linked to the Government's commitment to taking children out of poverty and easing the stress on families with programmes such as sure start and quality protects, together with the work of the social exclusion unit, should help to keep families together. Prevention is far better than cure.

There is much to welcome in the Bill. A national register has long been needed and should solve problems such as those in a case about which I recently heard. A couple had been waiting three years to adopt a child whose nationality rarely features in adoption cases. At long last, they adopted the child whom they had wanted for so long. Within five months, they received a phone call from another area of the country asking them please to adopt twin boys of the nationality in question. Those twin boys had been in care all their lives and it had not been possible to find somebody suitable to take them together. That should never have happened. They were prepared to take on the twin boys, but were told that they could not do so because they had adopted the previous child more recently than six months ago. I have no way of knowing whether the boys are still in care.

The couple also faced significant costs when they tried in their desperation to adopt from their country of origin. They had been vetted for adoption locally, but when they approached the local authority and explained that they could no longer wait for a suitable child and wanted to adopt from another country, they had to pay another fee of £2,000 or £3,000. Application to the country of origin seems no reason for having two lots of vetting. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), will examine the problem and consider the need for an international agreement in respect of children who are suitable for adoption in this country.

The question of keeping in touch with the wider family of children put out for adoption is a thorny one, as the hon. Member for Canterbury explained. I would welcome stronger guidelines, as members of a child's wider family, such as grandparents, aunts or uncles, often give strong support to try to prevent him or her from going into care. When I first came to the House—it now seems a long time ago—my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Sir R. Powell) spoke about grandparents' rights, and a grandmother rang me to tell me about her problems regarding adoption. She said that she was virtually looking after her daughter's child. She gave him his breakfast and looked after him when he came home from school, and he also slept at her home, but her daughter had a new boy friend who had decided that he should go into care. The decision was that the grandmother was to have nothing to do with the child, who was to be sent into care and put up for adoption. She had absolutely no rights. When she suggested that she should adopt the child, she was told that she was too old to do so. In any case, the daughter would not agree to such a decision because her boy friend would not allow it. It seems to me that the Bill should tackle such problems.

Another case has been brought to my attention in which two children whose parents were killed in a car crash were immediately looked after by their grandparents. They had little money, however, and none was given immediately by the local authority to help them to care for the children. They had to buy new school uniforms, as the children were changing schools, but had very little money to do so. When they approached the local authority, it took some time to provide financial assistance, as the children were not being fostered and were not up for adoption. Of course, the local authority had the money to give to the grandparents, who wanted to adopt the children because they had no legal responsibility for them. However, the grandparents desperately needed a right to instant financial help while the process was under way.

Many children are so severely damaged that it will be a very long time before they can be considered for adoption. I remember visiting a voluntary organisation in Shropshire, which was run by Madge Bray and which cared for badly damaged children. Such care cost a lot of money and local authorities could afford to provide it to one or two children at most. It would have taken a long time even to stabilise the children whom I met. I spoke to some of the very caring social workers who looked after them and we discussed many of their problems, which were confidential and obviously cannot be repeated here.

The Bill should take into account children who cannot go into care. Positive action is needed, and the voluntary organisations that care for such children must be listened to. They need strong rights to decide when the children can be brought forward for fostering or put into care. We cannot judge all children who are covered by the Bill as being ready for adoption.

[Mrs. Llin Golding]

We are considering yet another Bill from a Government who genuinely care for children. I look forward to seeing it progress swiftly through the House, although the timing does not matter. Whatever happens, it will have been introduced. Yes, we would have liked it to have been introduced many years ago, but it has now been provided by this caring Labour Government. The sooner it is enacted, the better.

8.5 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding). I understand that she was one of the co-founding chairmen of the all-party adoption group. If we have just heard her last speech in the House, we shall be all the sadder in the future when she is no longer here.

I want to raise a couple of issues that have been brought to my attention by constituents. I should like to give an overall welcome to the Bill, although I want also to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). Without any doubt, it was she who ensured that the Bill was brought before us. It is perhaps a coincidence—I put it no more strongly than that—that no adoption Bill was mentioned in the Gracious Speech, which set out the legislative programme. Furthermore, no such Bill was mentioned before my hon. Friend did especially well in the ballot for private Members' Bills. This Bill then somehow materialised, and she deserves credit for shaming the Government into introducing it. It is some coincidence—we all know that coincidences happen in this place—that my hon. Friend's substantive Bill is scheduled for debate on Friday, while the Government have timed Second Reading for today.

A number of hon. Members have pointed out that councils in England look after approximately 58,000 children at any time. Below that headline figure, however, many other facts form the true picture, although some of them are unimportant in themselves. Citing only the 58,000 figure does not provide a proper picture, especially as 40 per cent. of looked-after children return home after less than eight weeks. More than 28,000 of the children looked after in the year up to 31 March 1999—about half of all those who were in care at any one time—had been in care continuously for more than two years. These are some of the other statistics: almost 12,000 children have been looked after for five years or more; and by the time a child has been looked after for 18 months, he or she has an 80 per cent. chance of remaining in care for four years or more.

I pay tribute to the wonderful foster and adoptive parents who give so many children a fresh start or even a glimpse of what a happy family means. One such person came to my advice surgery on Friday. He and his wife had fostered many children during a number of years. Towards the end of their time of fostering, however, a vindictive child made an allegation against them that put a cloud over them and all the wonderful work that they had done. It is a matter of some regret that the social services department took up seriously a charge that was made maliciously, although I understand why it did so, and that a cloud hangs over the family as a consequence. I am not sure whether there is a way of avoiding such problems. Perhaps social services should be just a little more supportive to foster parents, especially when a challenge turns out to be vindictive.

Several hon. Members have pointed out that the Bill follows Mr. Justice Waterhouse's report, "Lost in Care". It originated from a report that was prepared on Clwyd county council by John Gillings, former director of social services for Derbyshire. The Gillings report could not be published for legal reasons.

We often hear about social services getting it wrong; we never hear about the times when they get it right, because they are taken for granted. Social services getting it wrong makes headlines in national newspapers. It is right to hold inquiries when matters go wrong, but we should recognise that social services operate under tough conditions. Some of the families with whom they come into contact must make them wary when placing children for foster care. However, they may also be prejudiced when they come across people with strong views, perhaps middle-class views, which they do not believe to be right.

Strangely, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme raised a point that I want to develop: the role of grandparents. I believe that grandparents sometimes suffer, and I have two cases that I want to share. Those who foster children who are not relatives rightly receive a package of financial assistance. It may include: a weekly allowance of between £55 and £112; birthday allowances to pay for presents and a party; a clothing and school uniform allowance that covers a winter coat and shoes; and a holiday allowance to take the children on holiday or to cover school trips. Some local authorities provide a settling-in bursary and a travel allowance to take the child for family contact. If the child has particular behavioural problems, a further allowance may be granted. That is right and proper.

However, if the child is a relative, the carers receive only child benefit. If they have a small occupational pension, the grandchildren for whom they care may not even receive free school meals.

A retired senior police officer in my constituency has taken on the care of his grandchild. He received a letter from Derby city council, which stated:

> "This Department does not usually enter into long term financial arrangements with individual carers as we are not a benefits agency."

Another letter stated:

> "The Department does not accept financial responsibility for"

child A. I shall not use the child's name because I do not want to identify her. In January 1999, I wrote to the Minister of State who opened the debate. In a letter, he admitted:

> "If the children were in care of the local authority then they would be placed either in foster care or a children's home."

I wonder who provides the better care and who is likely to give better protection.

Child A is one of two children. Her sister J has had to remain in the care of Derby city council because the grandparents cannot cope with two traumatised children. She is entitled to full financial support. When she is old enough, she will be able to go on school trips and have a new school uniform while her older sister might not. Is that fair? Would any ordinary parent want that?

The grandparents sent me a letter, which states:

"Where suitable parents for adoption have been identified Social Services should have the power and be encouraged to put a financial package around the child if . . . parents are deemed to need financial help until such time as the child ceases full-time education. In my experience many foster parents would adopt children if they were supported financially throughout the school years of the child, this would provide a much more stable upbringing and a sense of permanence and belonging to the children. Indeed such a package could be offered to grand-parents and other close relatives of children who suffer at the hands of criminal and drug addicted parents. In the present climate the Social Services seemed loth to offer such support when such support could bring a great sense of permanence and belonging to many abandoned children."

I understand why the Minister has rejected that suggestion, but I want to put it on record in case the Bill does not work or go far enough.

The letter continues:

"Consideration should be given to setting up a specialised adoption unit. Instead of adoption experience being spread thinly over the Social Services Department, adoption experience and problem solving and adoption initiatives should reside in a special squad, who would draw on a huge depth of knowledge to deal quickly with adoptions, which should aim to resolve all the issues within a reasonable time scale".

The Minister rejected that suggestion earlier, but perhaps we should keep it in the back of our minds. Should the Government's proposals prove less successful than we hope, we could reconsider that method of spreading best practice.

Mr. Brazier: I echo my hon. Friend's comments. However, does he agree that, as a first step, responsibility should be taken away from the few very badly performing authorities and given to better ones so that we can at least try to make the existing structure work? I agree that the suggestion that my hon. Friend has outlined should be the last resort in the long term.

Mr. McLoughlin: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Minister explained in his opening speech that there are great differences between social services departments. Perhaps the problem is not the item that is highest on the agenda of politicians who run local authorities; performance often depends on officer practice and the way in which chief officers perceive the problem. However, if the Government take a far stronger line with authorities that fail to act, that will encourage social services departments to move adoption up the agenda.

While preparing for the debate, I looked at some of the websites that are devoted to adoption. I agree with the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme that none of them mentioned grandparents or other family members as foster or adoptive parents. Yet more and more grandparents are being asked to care permanently for their grandchildren.

In two cases in my constituency, the drug addiction of adult children has led directly to their parents having full-time care of their children. In each case, the natural mother's drug problems mean that she is unable and mostly unwilling to care for the children herself. However, the mothers cannot recognise that, and make repeated failed attempts to try again. Each time they try again, the grandchildren are further traumatised and the grandparents have to cope with the problems when the children return to them.

Another lady, Mrs. P, has spoken to me about

"the emotional and physical drain on our whole family."

She looks after her grandchildren in a Derbyshire village, yet the social services department involved is not that of Derbyshire but another department in a different part of the country.

In that case, the initial estimate of a residence order was approximately £1,200. So far, the family has spent £10,000 at the request of the social services department, which believes that the child should be kept from her mother. There are particulars of that horrendous case that I do not want to discuss in the Chamber. The stability of the child or the grandparents is not guaranteed. At any time, the mother can change her mind and the process has to begin again. An additional problem is the fact that the grandparents are not funded, whereas the mother is funded by legal aid.

The grandparents have to pay twice. They have to keep their grandchild safe legally at their own expense and they have to pay for her upkeep. They receive only child benefit. It costs them more to bring up their grandchildren than it did to bring up their own children. We must remember that they do not have the rest of their working lives to make up the cost, because they are already on fixed pensions. How many grandparents would find such costs prohibitive? I think that we can all understand that many would do so.

Mrs. P. has suggested that, when a child is deemed by social services to be at great risk from her natural mother, and social services have asked the grandparents to care for the child, the child should be eligible for legal aid. Mrs. P. told me that what her granddaughter needs most is stability, and that

"that's the one thing I can't give her. Not because I don't want to, but because the system won't let me. The Residence Order works only for as long as the mother wants it to."

In a letter to the relevant local authority, Mrs. P. wrote:

"L. needs something permanent. She has no secure or solid base. She has numerous 'sleeping' addresses and must wonder where she is when she wakes. She asks when we put her to bed here at our home, if we will stay in tonight and not leave her."

Those are two families who have put their lives on hold to take on the heavy responsibility of bringing up grandchildren who have been traumatised by their early upbringing. They have given up the hope of a relaxing retirement. There will be no extended Saga holiday for them. Instead, they have been plunged back into a world of disturbed nights and homework supervision, with argumentative teenagers to come. They do not resent that, although they regret the circumstances. They have given the children a fresh start. It is a huge commitment, and one that I fear many other families are called to undertake. It does not seem a lot to ask that society should offer those grandparents practical help and support. They are good people who have done the right thing, however difficult it has been, and they will continue to do so.

I hope that when the Bill goes into Committee, some of the many wide-ranging problems will be addressed. We cannot generalise about the 58,000 cases that we have talked about, because there are different circumstances behind each one. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) said earlier, if we get the Bill right, it might cost us in the short term, but the long-term benefits for our country and our society will be great.

8.22 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): I apologise to those right hon. and hon. Members who spoke earlier and whose contributions I missed because I had to leave the Chamber for more than an hour because of a previous appointment.

I listened with interest, however, to my hon. Friend the Minister and the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). I am pleased that the Bill has the support of all parties, because if we could not join together to meet the needs of vulnerable children, we really ought not to be in this place.

I declare an interest as someone who formerly sat on an adoption panel, and I listened with interest to people's observations on the adoption process. For seven years, I sat on Lancashire county council's adoption panel, and I saw the good parts of the service and the rather less good parts. One thing that I saw was how hard many social workers worked to help to find families for children in the care of the local authority.

I also saw many detailed reports produced on prospective adoptive parents. Sometimes, prospective adoptive parents were concerned about those very details, and about the fact that social workers asked what they sometimes saw as intrusive questions. But those questions were asked so that the social workers could, in all confidence, recommend to us on the adoption panel that the prospective adopters could care for the kinds of children who were being presented for adoption.

As other hon. Members have said, it is no longer chiefly babies who are presented for adoption. We now deal mainly with older children, who bring with them the baggage of their backgrounds, some of which is dreadful. Adoptive parents need to be warned of that. They also need particular skills to cope with those damaged children. It is not just a question of caring for bright, shiny little children who will be the apple of their eye. These are children who will present problems, and adopters need to be forewarned, forearmed and prepared for that.

As several hon. Members mentioned, prospective adoptive parents need as much information about children as they can get. They need it to prepare themselves for the task ahead and to help them prepare the children. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), who mentioned open adoption. I hope that when the Bill is referred to the special Select Committee, we shall consider that issue in more detail, because there are certainly pros and cons.

One of the disadvantages is that prospective adopters can be put off if they feel that they have either to maintain a link with the birth parents or to share fairly detailed information with the child about his or her birth parents. I have seen cases in which it worked very well. I have seen adopted children who had a recollection of their birth parents. Working with their adoptive parents, they developed life story books so that they did not feel abandoned by their birth parents. It was explained to them that their birth parents had had problems, and that a stage may have been reached when the birth family could no longer look after them. It was also explained that that did not necessarily mean that the birth family did not care for them.

Adoptive parents can work with a child and give a child a sense of identity, as well as an identity within the new family. However, that is a difficult balance to strike. I have spoken to adoptive parents as well as to people who have been adopted, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider the issues of sharing information with prospective adopters before adoption, of working with adoptive parents in the initial stages of adoption, and of examining the implication of open adoption and whose best interest it is in. That might be ungrammatical.

We are here to put the needs of the child first. For many children, having a knowledge of their background that can be developed as they grow older, with more information given to them up to adulthood, will be in their best interest. For some children, however, it will not be in their best interest, so we must always consider the needs of the child and not start the process with hard-and-fast views on what is right and wrong. What is right for me might not be right for other hon. Members, and what is right for one child might not be right for another. Let us, therefore, always remember to put the needs of the children first.

In putting the needs of the children first, I especially welcome the speeding up of procedures proposed in the Bill. When I was a member of an adoption panel, I found the length of time that it took to get the child to us and make a match with prospective adopters desperately frustrating. Often, the birth family wanted the child back, so social workers would go through the process of integrating the child back into the family and supporting the placement only for it to break down, which meant taking the child back into care or arranging a placement with another foster family that the child did not know and perhaps supporting the natural parents again. It went on and on.

I know of babies who would have been snapped up, but, on reaching five, six or seven, they had been damaged by constant moves and were no longer the attractive children who would have been chosen by many prospective adopters. We cannot afford to allow that to continue. Obviously, a balance must be struck between the needs of the natural family, the needs of prospective adopters and adoptive parents and, above all, the needs of the child. However, the child should not be a counter on a board to be passed round to different adults who all want to share him or her for different reasons; that would mean that the needs of the child were not central. Therefore, I especially welcome the fact that we are considering speeding up that procedure not only because it will help children to settle more quickly in a permanent home, but because of my concern for some foster carers.

I have met foster carers who were assessed as being short-term carers and given a child to look after for perhaps two, three or six months only for that child to be with them two years later. By then, they had become attached to the child. I have also met foster carers who were given the rare baby who came up for adoption. They watched the baby grow into a toddler. Two years earlier, they too had been assessed as short-term foster carers. However, they had invested of themselves emotionally in the child and wanted to be considered as prospective adopters, but oh dearie me, they had originally been assessed as short-term carers, so they could not possibly become long-term foster carers or prospective adopters.

It is in the best interests of nobody to have hard and fast rules, so in speeding up the process we must avoid the heartache that so many foster parents encounter in taking on the care of a child for what they believe to be the short term only to find themselves making a

long-term emotional investment. Speeding up the process can achieve benefits all round: it is not in the best interests of the natural parents to argue constantly over a child, nor is that in the interests of the child or the foster carers.

Like the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding), I want to mention grandparents and the wider family. We must be aware of the fact that family relationships are much more complex than in the past. I know of court cases involving perhaps six or seven adults—blood relatives of the child—with an interest in that child's future. They all turned up for their day in court and argued, so if the new placement order can help with that process, I will very much welcome it.

I hope that we consider the wider family as well as the birth parents in our debates on the placement order because, all too often, grandparents come to see me because the relationship of their son or daughter has broken down and they have lost touch with their grandchildren. For example, a parent may be unable to continue caring for a child, who may enter the care system, and grandparents feel that the system, which should be caring for that child, puts them at one remove from it.

Many grandparents can play a positive role in the care of their grandchildren and we must always bear in mind the fact that the needs of the child must come first. Many prospective adoptive parents have approached me to say, "I have a right to have a child. You should get me a child." I have had to explain that they are offering a service to the child. The child deserves the family—the best possible family that we can provide—and we must always consider the matter from that perspective.

In recruiting prospective adoptive parents, I hope that we involve people who understand that their role will be to nurture and look after the child, providing the love that the birth family may not have offered. They are privileged to be able to do that.

Many adoptive parents do an excellent job. I praise adoptive parents and foster carers in the community who do a remarkable job caring for children, often from dreadful backgrounds.

I welcome the establishment of a national register. The lack of a register was an impediment to placing children and matching a child's background and needs. When I was on Lancashire county council, we did not always have a pool of prospective adoptive parents to meet every child's needs. It will help us better to match children to prospective adopters and speed up the process if we can consult a national register.

I also welcome the proposals on international adoption. I recall a sad case of prospective adopters who tried to adopt a little girl from a Romanian orphanage. Like many of us, they watched the television when the orphanages were opened up to the gaze of the western European media, and they saw with horror the circumstances in which children were living. They went to Romania and adopted the little girl. Prospective adopters in this country may not always be given adequate information about the children they are adopting, but that problem is writ large in the international adoption process. In spite of the hard work that those prospective parents put in, the adoption placement failed.

I hope that the process for approving prospective adopters for international adoption will ensure that they understand the special problems that they will face in adopting a child from another country and culture who speaks another language. I know of other placements that have worked because of the commitment of the adoptive parents, who have given their all to provide a happy home for the child.

I was pleased to hear the Minister give a commitment to all children in care. Not all children in care could or should be adopted. It is not the right answer for some children. The special guardianship orders are an interesting innovation. I look forward to hearing more about that scheme, because it will be an answer for some of these children.

We must recognise the hard work of social care staff in the residential sector. We often hear the bad stories—the reports on tragedies. I visit residential homes for children, and I see the hard work of staff in those homes, who care for young people with a variety of problems. We should applaud the good work that takes place. By putting the needs of young people in care first, we can decide whether fostering, adoption or residential care is the right answer.

We should listen to children in the care system, many of whom are older. They have a voice and they want it to be heard. I have had meetings with them, and they speak their minds loudly. Young adolescents in residential care tell me in no uncertain terms that in no way do they want to be adopted. They have had dreadful experiences of care in so-called families, and they do not want that. They want to remain in a well-run residential setting, and good luck to them. We should listen to children and hear what they have to say.

I welcome this legislation. Many of us, and many members of the public, have been calling for this measure for a long time. It is in the best interests of children, prospective adopters and foster carers. I wish it all speed through the legislative process.

8.40 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): This is probably the first time since 1 May 1997 that I have been able to stand up and welcome a piece of legislation promoted by the present Government. I have called the Government all sorts of things, and I regard most of their legislation as a load of old rubbish; but I pay tribute to the Ministers who have been involved with this Bill.

In my view, this has been a splendid debate. The House is probably at its best during such debates. It is noticeable and sad, however, that our Benches are not exactly heaving. I am not making a partisan point: throughout the House, we do not see the huge number of Members whom it would be nice to see. Some years ago, when we debated surrogacy—another important matter—there was a similar turnout.

I entirely understand the feelings of my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). I had the honour of promoting a private Member's Bill last year—goodness knows how we managed to get it through the House, but we did somehow—in dramatic circumstances. My hon. Friend is probably entitled to feel a bit of chagrin about the way in which matters have proceeded. Nevertheless, I welcome the Bill on the basis of its merits.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) for his magnificent efforts, and to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme

[Mr. David Amess]

(Mrs. Golding), who has also done a magnificent job in pioneering the recognition of children's rights in this context. I am very sorry to learn that she is retiring. I do not know what she intends to do if she really is going to retire, but I think any number of us believe that she could start a new career as a tipster—and I should be more than happy to back her.

I pay tribute to all members of the all-party group. I also pay special tribute to the lady mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury, who has worked so hard in directing us towards this Bill. It is a huge Bill, and I am not volunteering to serve on the Select Committee, but I think that it is the right way for the Government to proceed.

I do not wish to sound sanctimonious. We love our children, but we do not necessarily like them. Children in care, however, are often neither liked nor loved. We should bear in mind that 67 per cent. of looked-after children have mental health problems of some kind, while 30 per cent. have statements of educational need; between 2 and 3 per cent. of other children have statements. Seventy per cent. of young people leaving care have gained no GCSEs or general national vocational qualifications, and 25 per cent. of looked-after children aged between 14 and 16 do not attend school regularly. Between 14 and 25 per cent. of young women leaving care are pregnant or have a child; in the general population, the figure is only 3 per cent. Those who have been looked after are 60 times more likely to be homeless than members of the general population. Perhaps most tragically of all, 39 per cent. of male prisoners under 21 have been looked after. A huge number of children need our help.

I and other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury, have strong views on abortion. When we debate the matter on the Floor of the House, the slogan is "Every child a wanted child." People like me owe it to others who may take a different view to work together on this important Bill, so I hope that, whatever happens in the general election, the Government of the day will take the matter forward.

I thought that I would contact my local authority, Southend, to find out what it felt about the Bill, knowing that the Minister of State also had some interest in that. It welcomes it. It thinks that it fits in well with the Children Act, but it has asked me to raise some points.

One provision deals with adopted children and adoptive parents having the right to request a formal assessment of their need for post-adoption support. My local authority feels that it is an excellent proposal. It makes explicit the duty of local authorities to offer any necessary support after the adoption order is made. The local authority feels that that, in itself, is likely to reduce post-adoption breakdowns. However, rightly, from a local authority point of view, it believes that it will have substantial resource implications and hopes that the Government will have some good news in that regard.

The Bill proposes an independent review mechanism in relation to the assessment of prospective adopters. Southend council feels that prospective adopters already have access to local authority complaint schemes. It awaits information on how the proposed process will operate. In principle, local authorities are committed to transparency in assessment and decision-making processes. I am sure that they will welcome the proposal.

The Bill then reaffirms the illegality of anyone other than adoption agencies advertising children for adoption. I am called a bit of a dinosaur. With modern technology, everyone is e-mailing each other on the web, but even the most modern parliamentarians have been appalled at what has gone on recently with the tacky buying and selling of children. If the measure stops all that, local authorities such as Southend will welcome it. However, the council feels that new ways of advertising for would-be adopters need to be found. Local authority and other adoption agencies need assistance from the Government in finding other sources. Southend council feels that that will be essential if the Government's targets are to be met.

I suppose that the core of the Bill is the establishment of a national register allowing speedier matching of approved prospective adopters and children awaiting adoption. Again, Southend council welcomes that. It believes that it will help adoption agencies considerably in their work, especially in relation to children from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who have special needs. Again, it hopes that the Government will adequately resource it. Current opportunities for secure internet access should result in a largely electronic exchange between the national register and adoption agencies, so that information can be quickly accessed and acted upon. I hope that that will happen.

I am proud to say that Southend council was one step ahead of the Government. We joined Thurrock and Havering to establish a successful adoption consortium some two years ago. The three local authorities had already anticipated the proposed register. They already share information and resources to improve the matching of potential adopters with children.

The next part of the Bill deals with targets. Privately—although I suppose that this is public, really—I can tell the House that I am sick to death of targets, which are beginning to get just a bit out of hand. Governments set themselves targets, but Members of Parliament come and go. Who on earth will hold Governments to account on those targets? Targets sound marvellous, but I am beginning to become a little sceptical of them.

Southend council is also becoming a little sceptical. It feels that the target to increase by 40 per cent. the number of adoptions of children in public care by 2004–05 is somewhat optimistic. Although the council hopes that that objective can be achieved, it feels that it is very optimistic. One of the biggest obstacles in achieving the objective is the shortage of would-be adopters for older children and children with special needs. Individual local authority adoption agencies have relatively little control over that aspect of the process and feel that an attempt should be made to encourage and enhance adoption of those children.

Mr. Brazier: When one considers differences in practice and the fact that the best three or four performers achieve adoption rates that are 10 times better than those of agencies in the bottom decile, one must surely agree that it is possible to achieve an increase of 40 per cent. or

more. Indeed, a 40 per cent. increase would leave us just below the rate in America, which has a higher proportion of children with difficulties.

Mr. Amess: My hon. Friend seems to think that Southend council should perhaps revise its criticism of the 40 per cent. target.

Mr. Hutton: I confirm the point made by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier). The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) may like to know that, in the past two years, adoptions in England increased by about 25 per cent. I therefore think that a target of a 40 per cent. increase in the next three years is well within our range.

Mr. Amess: I welcome that instant reply from the Minister, with which the local authority will undoubtedly be delighted. I also agree that we must be able to hit a 40 per cent. target if a 25 per cent. target was achieved last year. I suspect that the council was speaking about older children who, as the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) said, are perhaps not quite so attractive for fostering and adoption.

Southend council is very keen to have improved incentives, and it believes that there should be a public awareness campaign on adoption. I am not sure whether the Minister mentioned the sums available for a public awareness programme, but I hope that such funding will be made available. All over the place, however, we are seeing the ridiculous posters being put up by all the parties. Although I say all sorts of things in private about politicians—particularly about Labour Members, but even about one or two Conservative Members—I do not think that those posters should be personalised, as the current ones are. It would be so much better if all the parties spent money on posters encouraging people to foster and adopt.

Southend council believes that a much higher national profile should be given to adoption. It says that, rather than rigid targets, it would prefer to have a benchmark that requires under-performing local authorities to analyse the reasons for their performance and to take the necessary action. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury has often mentioned that issue.

Southend local authority is very concerned about the adoption allowance—an issue on which some of my constituents wrote to me after the Government announced the Bill. Clause 3(8)(b) mentions "other services", including financial support. My council is unclear whether the provision will cover improvements to the current adoption allowance system. In their White Paper on adoption, the Government indicated that they would improve the adoption allowance system, but I think that that objective has yet to be clearly stated in the Bill.

Every local authority devises its own adoption allowance policy and rate. That gives rise to widely different schemes, with the danger of a postcode lottery. As the Department of Social Security is transferring benefit payments to care leavers to local authorities, will the Government consider making adoption allowances a national payment, paid through the DSS? I am advised that the numbers are relatively small.

The current excitement and interest—I am not sure that we have excited much interest in the House tonight, but the quality is here—must not be allowed to eclipse the valid role of fostering for the many children for whom adoption is not appropriate, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood.

I received a letter this morning from a constituent who had better remain anonymous, saying that the Inland Revenue wants to apply, across the board to all carers, the minimum rates that the National Foster Care Association says should be paid to foster carers to cover the cost of taking the child into their home. Any income that carers receive above those minimum rates will apparently be liable to tax. My constituent feels that that will hit most carers extremely hard, as they are generally paid a more realistic rate than that suggested by the NFCA. Apparently, the Inland Revenue says that these are interim arrangements, so the final proposal could be even worse. My constituent expressed a worry that people might be put off fostering. Perhaps the Minister will get a Treasury Minister to write to me about that.

Southend council feels that when prospective adopters are bought from one adoption agency by another that has a suitable child, a standard inter-agency fee system should be used. Abandoning such an approach in favour of a—gulp—free market approach, under which payments are negotiated case by case, would be disastrous. I know that new Labour embraces the free market, but perhaps it would not be a good idea to go down that road in this case.

I am doing some voluntary work for Barnardos. We have all heard some special pleading from any number of organisations, and it is my privilege tonight to do some special pleading for Barnardos, which we all recognise is a wonderful organisation. It welcomes the Bill, and especially how it fits in with the Children Act 1989. It is particularly pleased that consideration is to be given to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background. It is very pleased with the duty on local authorities to publish a plan for the provision of adoption services. It welcomes, too, the new provisions for special guardianship, which could provide a real alternative for children for whom adoption would not be appropriate.

Barnardos also has some constructive criticisms to make. It believes that the reference to financial support is a totally inadequate recognition of the role that adoption allowances could play in widening the pool of families able to consider adopting. Barnardos has campaigned for some time for a review of the allowance system. It believes that the current system is failing to meet the aim of facilitating adoption for more children.

As an agency placing children whom local authorities consider hard to place, Barnardos has been dismayed by how few of those children qualify for an adoption allowance. It says that only 15 out of 52 qualified in 1998-99, and 16 out of 68 last year. It is unable to advise families on what financial support they might receive, as it varies so much from one local authority to another. I hope that the Government will take seriously Barnardos' view on the matter.

Barnardos also points out that, if the Government are serious—which I think they are—about significantly increasing the number of families seeking to adopt, that will mean attracting a wider range of families. Recent research by the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering suggests that parents, single applicants and families on low incomes are under-represented among

[Mr. Amess]

approved adopters. Having come from the east end, I understand that children are expensive, particularly when it comes to buying shoes. However, to write off people on low incomes as prospective adopters is a great insult. I am not saying that the Government will do that, but I hope that they will bear that in mind.

Barnardos is also concerned at the implications of clause 9, which appears to provide for a right of independent appeal against the determinations of an adoption agency. It is unclear what is meant by determinations as opposed to decisions, and whether the right of appeal will be available only to adoptive applicants. Its concern is that covering the cost of an appeal could be crippling for small voluntary agencies, and is not consistent with policy in other sectors. For example, the right to independent review is well established in the financial services industry, but insurance companies, despite having vastly superior resources to any voluntary adoption agency, are not expected to meet the direct costs of an individual policyholder's appeal.

Finally, Barnardos says that the right balance should be struck between the conflicting rights of children and their birth parents. That is not an easy task, but Barnardos believes that in attempting to address concerns that some children might be denied the security of an alternative home because of a reluctance to act against the wishes of parents, the Bill may be steering too far in the opposite direction. It is not convinced that the grounds for dispensing with parental consent under clause 44(2)(a) are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that such action will be taken only when overriding a parent's right to family life can clearly be justified.

I congratulate the Government on bringing forward the Bill. My goodness, I can hardly believe that I said that. The House should be united on this issue and, although there have been differences in emphasis, I think that by and large we are. It is no good people with strong views on abortion, like myself, not encouraging the adoption route.

When we have difficulty getting our children to bed of an evening, we make all sorts of threats to them, in a joking way. My children are jolly lucky as, no doubt, are the children of all right hon. and hon. Members. However, 58,000 children—a huge number—are not loved and not necessarily liked. I believe that the Bill could change all that.

9.3 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I welcome the Bill and any improvements that it can make for children who are not loved or wanted. While young girls, in particular, decide whether they are capable of looking after children or want to do so, the children are becoming older and more difficult to adopt.

I am sorry that I have come late to the debate. I was giving an address this morning at a service in Keighley celebrating the contributions to society by older people. Time and again, the speakers mentioned how important the contributions of older people are. In my view, the most important contribution that an older person can make is to be a grandparent. The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), who has now left the Chamber, spoke at length about grandparents and their capacity to adopt, foster or act as guardians.

When I was first elected, one of the first organisations with which I worked a great deal was Keighley Families Against Drugs. Its members are, to a woman, women; I do not know why dads do not get involved, but those brave women take on the hardship of caring for and supporting daughters and sons who are on hard drugs. Many of them have come to me to seek help in gaining financial support from the local authority, a problem of which I have become increasingly aware. Their daughters may, after a while, have become totally incapable of looking after their children. Social services may agree that that is so, but, because the law is as it is, there seems to be little money in the kitty to help the grandparents.

Those grandparents have told me of their trauma and constant anxiety that the child may be taken into care or returned to her or his mother. They are worried not so much about their daughters as about a live-in boy friend, uncle or whoever he is, who is also on hard drugs and sometimes a pimp or a drug pusher. That is a totally unsuitable atmosphere in which to bring up a child. Those grandparents offer their grandchildren a reasonable life, but it is difficult at my age—61—to take care of grandchildren full time. I have never had to do that, but I had three of my grandsons for just three hours last night, and, without making light of the difficulties, I have to say that I was absolutely exhausted.

In addition, financial hardships make the situation awful for the worried grandparents. They may still work for a meagre wage that has to be spread between their own rent and needs and the needs of their grandchildren. Often, money goes to the daughter, but is lost to drugs without finding its way to the grandchildren. When such expensive items as shoes are needed, the grandparents often have to find the money out of a small wage or even a pension.

Another anxiety arises out of political correctitude, and I hope that the Bill will address it. I agree that we must try to match children for adoption with prospective adopters of the same ethnic background, but that can be taken too far if it means that a child of mixed race, of Asian background or who is black fails to be adopted simply because no identically matching adoptive parents can be found.

I speak from experience: three of my grandchildren are a quarter Irish and three of them are half Asian. I do not think that the three who are half Asian have noticed that I am a different colour from them. I am sure that they have not noticed that their other two grandparents are a different colour, too, or that we are at all different. We are just one family to them; we are Grandma and Grandpa Bains and Grandma Cryer.

We need to allow for children who, for whatever reason, are difficult to adopt. I understand that to some extent: in Keighley, my Asian community tends to adopt within the family. The extended family usually takes on a child who is left for whatever reason. If, however, the extended family breaks down, there is not much tradition in that community of adopting or fostering. Social services encourage it, and a few Asian women have begun fostering and do a good job, but there is no such tradition in the community. We should not allow babies and children to languish in care just because we cannot match their ethnicity identically with that of adoptive parents.

Finally, I touch on the debate that has arisen in recent months about the terribly high rate of teenage pregnancy—ours compares most unfavourably with that

of other European countries. It is difficult for a very young teenage girl to cope with a baby unless she can stay with her parents and have their support—another useful role for grandparents. However, if a girl is not given that support—if she is thrown out—it is unlikely that her baby will be given a satisfactory start in life. I do not say that we should remove babies from such mothers, but, at the first indication that the mother cannot cope—when social services are asked to take the child into care—we should rapidly look for adoptive parents.

In Keighley, young girls think it is wonderful to have a baby at first. Often, they come from fairly deprived backgrounds and have not known much love and affection, so their baby—that small person—is for them alone; it is the first time that they have been given undivided attention. That is all right for a while, but sadly, when a new boy friend comes on the scene, the baby is less attractive—perhaps the boy friend does not want the baby. I hope that the measure will encourage social services to keep a more careful eye on such very young mothers to ensure that they do not have a ping-pong relationship with their babies—baby taken into care; the mother wants him back; he is taken back into care; mother wants him back again—every time there is a new boy friend.

That may seem harsh, but I do not want to be harsh because I know how difficult it is to bring up children. However, because we allow young girls to keep their babies—despite the fact that the child keeps being taken into care—when clearly the girls do not know what they want from those relationships, the children are brought up going backwards and forwards between care and home. That becomes a vicious circle. Children brought up in that way become victims of that circle and frequently become teenage mothers themselves.

The Bill could break that vicious circle by making it easier for social services to intervene. I wish the Bill well. I hope that it succeeds where previous measures have failed—in upholding the rights of babies and children and in protecting them from the problems that we all come across in our advice surgeries.

9.13 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): I intend to ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) and the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), each have a good 20 minutes for their responses. The debate has been thoughtful, so it is right and proper that they have a decent opportunity to respond.

It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) whose speech was a model among all the fine speeches that we have heard this evening. She talked a great deal of common sense. It was a privilege to hear her comments—as it was to hear so much of what has been said during the debate, starting with the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton).

In his opening remarks, the Minister was honest about the inadequacies of current legislation. He gave us helpful indications as to how the Government intend to proceed with the Bill. The measure probably exists only because of my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman)—the Second Reading of her Adoption Bill will be on Friday. The timing of the two Bills is rather more than a coincidence—there seems to be some dissent among Members on the Front Benches as to that—but never mind, because the Bill is right.

Today's debate will send the wider world a wholly bipartisan message from the Chamber about the importance of the issues with which it deals—as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) noted. My hon. Friend drew attention to the relative lack of interest in the debate—sadly. It is a great shame that a debate has been going on in another place on a much less important issue—foxhunting—where decisions have now been taken. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) and I have also been involved in that issue as joint chairmen of the Middle Way Group. However, we have chosen to spend most of our time listening to the debate in this Chamber because the issues are of much greater importance.

I also want to pay tribute to the Chairman of the Health Select Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), in his brief and exceptional absence from the Chamber. He made a thoughtful contribution and, by staying to listen to so many speeches, has been a model parliamentarian. That is a compliment to him.

My main reason for speaking is to raise a constituency interest. A heartbreaking case was brought to my attention in November 1999 when I received correspondence from an infertile couple who had tried to get fertility treatment. The postcode lottery means that it is difficult to obtain such treatment in Worcestershire, so they settled on adoption and told me some of the problems that they had encountered.

The couple wrote to the Secretary of State on 25 November 1999. I finally wheedled out a reply on 26 May 2000 which dealt with some of the issues that they had confronted. I then saw them in my surgery to discuss their response. They remain concerned about the obstacles faced by people who want to adopt. Although there is a good and satisfactory framework of legislation and financial support for single mothers and their children, they do not think that a similar framework is in place for adoptive parents.

I hope that the special Select Committee will consider that issue. The couple are especially concerned about maternity benefits. Adopting is an expensive process and the benefits should not apply just because of biological considerations—they should be available for people who wish to adopt because they need time off work, often to settle difficult children. Conventional wisdom dictates that we are talking about three and four-month-old babies, but we are not. Children who are adopted often need a huge emotional input. Parents in full-time work often want to make a strong investment in the child in the early stages of the adoption process, but they are prevented from doing so.

I am delighted to say that that couple have been approved for adoption, having abandoned their bid for a biological child through fertility treatment. I can vouch for the fact that they are delightful, and it was a great privilege to meet them. Sadly, there are no suitable children in Worcestershire for them to adopt. However, there are across the border in Gloucestershire, but cross-border adoptions are not working in our part of the world. They know that there are children for them to adopt in Gloucestershire, but that is not possible. They

[Mr. Peter Luff]

remain anxious and eager to adopt. They asked me to tell the Minister how much they welcome the national register because that will help to address the problem and stop other parents going through the same anguish.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West, I talked to my county council about its approach to the Bill, which it welcomes. It is delighted that the Government have made progress on the issue. However, it is worried that social services are often the only body that is blamed for the delay in adoption. The Government are right to emphasise, as they did in their 1998 circular, the need to avoid delay and to put the child's requirements at the centre of the process. Legal processes can hold up adoption as much as any decisions taken by social services. The council wants me to emphasise that problem and hopes that the Bill will address it.

The Downing street website contains a report of an unusually sensitive briefing by the Prime Minister's official spokesman in February 2000, although he got characteristically robust towards the end of his comments. The report says:

"Responding to a suggestion by the BBC that we were repackaging things we were doing anyway, the PMOS"—

the Prime Minister's official spokesman—

"said he had heard the journalist's so-called flagship programme's pathetic witter about the subject of repackaging this morning. The Government had to govern. That meant legislation and use of public money."

He is right—it does mean use of public money. We think that we get an unfair deal in Worcestershire when it comes to our share of the nation's resources for social services. Money for adoption has to compete with other priorities, especially for the elderly. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden mentioned ring fencing, and he could have a powerful point.

We have to give careful consideration to the nature of adoptive parents, such as whether they are married. I come from a single-parent family. My father died when I was eight and my mother brought me up. I was cared for exceptionally well by my mother, but I do not doubt that I would have been cared for even better if I had had a father or a male role model as well. Frankly, it is generally better if that is a married arrangement; I hope that issue will be looked at too.

Worcestershire county council conducts the adoption process with great skill and thought. I want to endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West said about material considerations. In its documentation, Worcestershire county council tells prospective parents:

"Adopters need stamina, patience, the ability to 'stick with it' and a good sense of humour helps! Material considerations are far less important than affection, security and stability."

The Bill seeks to give that to many children who desperately need it.

9.20 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) outlined substantially our support for the Bill and how constructively we intend to improve it in Committee. When she related the recent history of events, however, Government Members showed an extraordinary measure of sensitivity; one might even say that they were touchy.

I do not want to dwell on that because we have had a good debate and I want to concentrate on the areas on which we agree. The Minister of State spoke for 52 minutes, holding my attention throughout his excellent exposition of the Bill. From his experience in Committee, he will know that that is an achievement, as I tend to have momentary lapses of attention, which can be prolonged at times. However, he gave an excellent exposition of the Bill, and that standard continued throughout this evening's proceedings.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) commended the previous Conservative Administration for the Children Act 1989 and the constructive way in which the then Minister, David Mellor, proceeded in Committee. We all hope and pray that the Minister of State will have the opportunity to emulate Mr. Mellor and that the special Select Committee will proceed.

The hon. Member for Wakefield gave us the benefit of his great professional experience in these matters over many years and stressed that it was a question of emphasis—not a question of black and white, but of shades of grey. I agree, although my shade of grey is slightly different from the hon. Gentleman's. His point about Churches was answered properly by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden in an intervention. The hon. Gentleman was also concerned about the political issues that arise. Clause 1, which makes it clear that the interests of the child are paramount, provides a perfect safeguard against that politicisation.

The hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) spoke about the need for balance and, early in the debate, raised the issue of grandparents, which was developed later; I shall come on to that. She said that there should be an assessment of needs, particularly in mental health, and mentioned finance.

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institutional care home. It was not a local authority home, but a private home. The experience was pretty awful. We were all untrained. Some of my colleagues were unstable, and many were quite uncouth. We must do a great deal to make sure that we raise the standards and the status of those who carry out that vital work with so many of our children.

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My hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) expanded that point with great care and concern. He spoke of the iniquitous financial position of many grandparents, with the huge costs that they face, sometimes including legal costs, and the fact that they receive only child benefit. My hon. Friend's speech was a tribute to foster and adoptive parents. He drew attention to the Gillings report, and focused our minds on the times when social services get it right and do things well. That is an important consideration.

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The hon. Lady was also concerned about the birth family wanting the child back and having to re-initiate proceedings. I hope that the Bill's provisions will address that enormous problem. Babies who could have been snapped up, she said, were unadoptable years later. That is a tragedy. Adoption delayed is often adoption denied. It is vital that our children have the chance of a normal family life.

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My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) made a short and pithy speech, stressing the importance of a bi-partisan approach and reinforcing our deliberations with the importance of a constituency case, which concerned the question of cross-county adoption and the important contribution that a national register will make to that process.

Adopted children are harder to rear than natural children, but adoptive parents are more resourceful than natural parents. They are, after all, the only parents who have to prove their ability to be good parents before undertaking the task. As I have said, it is reasonable to expect full parental involvement and investment, but not without satisfying that deeply held human desire for parental possession. This Bill, with its aim of increasing the number of adoptions and tackling the frustration and delays, which so many Members described as legion, is therefore welcome.

The lesson that we have learned is that adoption works. When considering how it works, we must not measure it against the ideal biological family. We must consider it against the reality that the child who is adopted would otherwise have experienced. Some have developed a mentality of taking no chances and search for the ideal family. There is no such thing as the ideal family, just as there is no such thing as the ideal child. One hundred per cent. expectation of success is monstrous. There is no

[Mr. Peter Luff]

remain anxious and eager to adopt. They asked me to tell the Minister how much they welcome the national register because that will help to address the problem and stop other parents going through the same anguish.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West, I talked to my county council about its approach to the Bill, which it welcomes. It is delighted that the Government have made progress on the issue. However, it is worried that social services are often the only body that is blamed for the delay in adoption. The Government are right to emphasise, as they did in their 1998 circular, the need to avoid delay and to put the child's requirements at the centre of the process. Legal processes can hold up adoption as much as any decisions taken by social services. The council wants me to emphasise that problem and hopes that the Bill will address it.

The Downing street website contains a report of an unusually sensitive briefing by the Prime Minister's official spokesman in February 2000, although he got characteristically robust towards the end of his comments. The report says:

"Responding to a suggestion by the BBC that we were repackaging things we were doing anyway, the PMOS"—

the Prime Minister's official spokesman—

"said he had heard the journalist's so-called flagship programme's pathetic witter about the subject of repackaging this morning. The Government had to govern. That meant legislation and use of public money."

He is right—it does mean use of public money. We think that we get an unfair deal in Worcestershire when it comes to our share of the nation's resources for social services. Money for adoption has to compete with other priorities, especially for the elderly. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden mentioned ring fencing, and he could have a powerful point.

We have to give careful consideration to the nature of adoptive parents, such as whether they are married. I come from a single-parent family. My father died when I was eight and my mother brought me up. I was cared for exceptionally well by my mother, but I do not doubt that I would have been cared for even better if I had had a father or a male role model as well. Frankly, it is generally better if that is a married arrangement; I hope that issue will be looked at too.

Worcestershire county council conducts the adoption process with great skill and thought. I want to endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West said about material considerations. In its documentation, Worcestershire county council tells prospective parents:

"Adopters need stamina, patience, the ability to 'stick with it' and a good sense of humour helps! Material considerations are far less important than affection, security and stability."

The Bill seeks to give that to many children who desperately need it.

9.20 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) outlined substantially our support for the Bill and how constructively we intend to improve it in Committee. When she related the recent history of events, however, Government Members showed an extraordinary measure of sensitivity; one might even say that they were touchy.

I do not want to dwell on that because we have had a good debate and I want to concentrate on the areas on which we agree. The Minister of State spoke for 52 minutes, holding my attention throughout his excellent exposition of the Bill. From his experience in Committee, he will know that that is an achievement, as I tend to have momentary lapses of attention, which can be prolonged at times. However, he gave an excellent exposition of the Bill, and that standard continued throughout this evening's proceedings.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) commended the previous Conservative Administration for the Children Act 1989 and the constructive way in which the then Minister, David Mellor, proceeded in Committee. We all hope and pray that the Minister of State will have the opportunity to emulate Mr. Mellor and that the special Select Committee will proceed.

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[Mr. Desmond Swayne]

such success in my family, never mind in other ones. That is where I differed in my emphasis, in my shade of grey, from the hon. Member for Wakefield. People who speak about the risks of adoption often fail to take enough account of the countervailing risks of keeping children in long-term care. Adoption is a success story. We have heard statistics about the relatively small number of adoptions that break up, but family restitutions have a much higher failure rate.

I believe that the human being has a tremendous ability to overcome early disadvantage. However, the later the placement, the more likely it is that problems will develop. In that respect, adoption delayed can be adoption denied. One of the most groundbreaking findings to emerge from adoption research is the high level of attachment that can exist even in respect of very late adoptions. In so far as any solution works, the only replacement for a family in bringing up a traumatised child until adulthood is a substitute family. Adopted children end up with fewer problems than non-adopted children from similar circumstances.

The available alternatives are much less suitable. We heard about the failure of local authorities to protect children from abuse, whether it is sexual, physical or otherwise. We know that children in care are more prone to psychiatric disorders, that their education and health suffer and that they graduate from care lacking in some of the most basic life skills. We are also aware that young people and young adults in care are deprived of the kin support systems that families provide. Of course, families are concerned about where their children are and keep track of them. One can go back to one's family as a young adult for love, for advice and, yes, for money. The state cannot take on that role in the institutional care system. Children in care are more likely to be unemployed and pregnant under age and to suffer a series of disadvantages because they have not been given the chance of adoption.

I believe that adoption must be considered against the possibility of family restoration, in pursuit of which social workers have often sought to enter a partnership with parents to provide a form of shared care whereby the local authority provides institutional or foster placement while the family is under stress. Perhaps that is what the hon. Member for Wakefield meant when he spoke of intensive support. Such care is an entirely proper consideration, but we must take into account what hon. Members have said and not allow parents to be pushed into keeping their children when they have rejected them. We should remember Rikki Neave.

Neither should public policy tolerate the sometimes limitless irresponsibility of a minority of natural parents who think that as long as they maintain some measure of contact, they can disturb the child and prevent the formation of new parental relationships. We must be equally realistic about the dreams of serial mothers who fantasise about a time when they can gather their children together and raise them in some ideal circumstance. We must be firm when such a fantasy is held at the cost of the life chances of children.

Adoption is not easy and will never be. The Bill will make it easier, which is a great step forward, but only one thing can alter the reality for the child of somebody having given him up. That one thing is love.

9.39 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): It gives me great pleasure to bring this debate to a close. I apologise to you, Mr. Speaker, and to hon. Members for my earlier absence. I apologised to the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) in case I missed her speech. My absence was unavoidable; I shall explain it shortly.

First, I compliment the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on an extremely competent and able resumé of our debate, which was largely well informed and wide ranging. The hon. Gentleman's contribution leads to me to conclude that he will enjoy a long and successful sojourn on the Opposition Front Bench, and I wish him all the best. His speech contrasted sharply with that of the hon. Member for Meriden, but I shall deal with some of her comments later.

We all acknowledge the overwhelming need to legislate on adoption and I am grateful to hon. Members for their keen interest in, and contributions to, our debate. I shall try to respond to all the questions that they asked. Many hon. Members made the point that every child deserves the same life chances. We are determined to promote and enhance children's opportunities in all our policies. As many hon. Members said, one of the fundamental needs of a child is a stable and strong family that provides loving care and safety, and which nurtures the child's development as an individual and as a member of society.

The damage inflicted on those who have been neglected or harmed as children is all too evident. Hon. Members may not know it, but I started my career as a residential child care worker, and I saw at first hand the sort of damage, which the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) described, that can happen in the so-called care system.

When children cannot live with their birth parents, we have a duty to ensure that other families are found for them or, if that is not possible, to provide the next best alternative. Adoption can help provide a stable and secure family life for many children who are looked after by local authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) made that point and spoke movingly and with great passion about her feelings on the matter. She complained especially about the tracking system for children in care. In a thoughtful, well-composed and interesting speech, the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) made the same point.

Although it is not a problem for legislation, and it is not covered in the Bill, the Government are taking action to improve record keeping and planning for children. In the next year, we shall develop an integrated children's system, which will bring together planning and record keeping for children in need in the community and those looked after by local authorities. It will provide a single, coherent record of the child's case history until adoption. That will help planning and decision making. I am not talking about a national database; the aim is to improve individual local authorities' information and record keeping. It is a key theme of the quality protects programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South argued strongly for children at the centre of proceedings to have a voice. Through the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, we shall reform the role of guardians

ad litem and the family court welfare service. It will provide precisely the voice that children need in the care system.

Several hon. Members, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, asked about fast-tracking adoption procedures for younger children. Our draft national adoption standards set challenging targets. They are currently out for consultation, which will end this month. Our objective is that a plan will be drawn up for a child no more than six months after entering care—sooner if appropriate for the child. If adoption is the plan, a decision should be made in six months and a match with parents made in a further six months. Those are the targets on which we are consulting. It is important for younger children that that should happen as soon as possible. We accept the points made on both sides of the Chamber on that matter. We recognise that, for babies and infants, speed is extremely important, which is why the adoption standards propose that adoption panels should meet at 48 hours' notice, if necessary, to take decisions on babies and infants.

I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden for his warm and generous welcome for the Bill. I agreed with almost everything that he said—speaking as one former Whip to another—and I contrast his constructive contribution to that of the hon. Member for Meriden. I particularly enjoyed the exchange between the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) on the judgments that social workers and adoption agencies have to make.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden questioned the degree of scrutiny that a putative adoptive family—a set of adoptive parents—will have to go through. From my own experience, I think that that is a necessary part of the process. If we are to protect children, it is right that the benefits of a detailed scrutiny of adoptive parents should be obtained. That scrutiny ought not to be overly intrusive, but it is a necessary step in protecting children. It is important to strike a balance in all such interventions.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to talk about the American experience, and he questioned placement orders and the relationship with the birth parents once a placement order had been put in place. We believe that the child's welfare should be the paramount consideration in all decisions relating to adoption. However, it is not true that the courts will not consider the child's birth family. The child's birth family remains an important factor.

The courts will also be explicitly obliged to consider the impact on the child of ceasing to be a member of his or her birth family, the relationship that the child has with his relatives and any change that the adoption would bring. When considering the child's relationship with his relatives, the courts must give specific consideration to the wishes and feelings of the child's relatives regarding the child. However, it is right that the focus should be on the child. I believe that the provision will bring adoption law into line with the Children Act 1989, as promised in the White Paper.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to talk about targets. Here we are caught in a bind, because the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) felt that our targets might be too tight and should be abandoned when necessary, but the right hon. Gentleman took the opposite view and felt that they might not be tight enough. I am sure that we shall debate those issues in greater detail in the special Select Committee.

The hon. Member for Meriden suggested that the Bill had been timed to frustrate her own private Member's Bill. I compliment and congratulate her on the progress that she has made with her Bill, but my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) approached the Vote Office and found that it had not been printed yet, so perhaps there is some confusion there.

The hon. Member for Meriden wasted at least 10 minutes of her opening speech on a badly judged party-political statement. She then raised a number of issues. She asked about the use of the terms "must" and "shall", and suggested that they might introduce unnecessary confusion between the Bill and the Children Act. "Must" and "shall" are interchangeable words in legislation. It was a shame that she wasted valuable time on that rather fatuous point.

The hon. Lady also raised a number of important points, and I shall take a little time to answer them. She asked why we should not give adopted people the right to access information about their backgrounds when they reach the age of 16. Under the Bill, adopted people will be entitled to access such information when they reach the age of 18. We shall explore, in the special Select Committee, the proposals that the hon. Lady has made. However, in some cases, the information in question might be of a sensitive nature and it is vital that adopted people are able to make an informed decision about accessing it. They must do that when they are legally adults. In practice, adoptive parents are and will continue to be encouraged informally to share information with the children about their background while they are growing up.

The hon. Member for Meriden raised the question whether sibling groups should be split up. We are determined to improve adoption services in the best interests of all the children involved in a particular case. She will agree that evidence shows that siblings generally do better when placed together and we would expect there to be a very good reason for placing siblings separately. Sometimes, splitting up brothers and sisters can be the right decision—for example, in cases of inter-sibling abuse—but it must be up to the professionals involved to judge whether that is necessary.

Like a number of Members, the hon. Lady asked about adoption allowances, making the point that they are too variable. We agree with that analysis, which is why we promised in our White Paper to develop a new, fairer and more consistent framework. Over the coming year, we shall back that proposal with £66 million.

It is important for the House to know that that is not the only resource, as we are providing record funding to children's services. Conservative Members complained about inadequate resources for social services and pleaded for adoption allowances in a range of different cases, but we might take those comments more seriously if they stood up and said that they would match the resources that we are making available for social services. They will not do it, however, and their crocodile tears on resources should be disregarded and treated as exactly that.

Mr. David Davis: The Minister knows that I do not speak as a Front-Bencher, but the simple fact is that the

[Mrs. Spelman]

Therefore, it is important to preserve the notional two and a half months that, if there were no election in the way, we would assume that such a Select Committee had to do its work. Certainly, when speaking to the all-party group on adoption, the Minister said that such a Bill could not be galloped through and that it would require at least a couple of months of proper scrutiny in that way. That is a view with which we concur. Our only concern in debating the committal motion is whether we shall be stuck with the date of 12 June if a three, four or five-week election campaign intervenes, when no progress can be made on the type of scrutiny that such a special Select Committee would offer. That is important.

It is the integrity of that point that I want to impress on the Minister. As I said, it is only those who pretend not to know what is going on, or who have been stuck in here too long today who are unaware of the unreality that surrounds the date in the motion. It is for that reason that we want to impress on the Minister the need to give the right allocation of time.

There is perhaps another element of unreality in all this. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who played an important part in the previous debate—indeed, he played an important part in considerations of adoption by hon. Members on both sides of the House—put an important question to both Front-Bench teams: whether they would ensure that an adoption Bill came back immediately after the election in the Queen's Speech. I am happy to give him that assurance. It would be good to hear the same assurance from the Government of today, although they may not be the Government of tomorrow. For that reason, it is fair to ask that question.

As I have said, we have a once in a generation opportunity to reform adoption law and to get it right. I assure the Minister that he will have the support of Conservative Members as long as the child is at the centre of the process and that principle is not compromised in any way. We have given the Minister a number of constructive suggestions on the way in which the legislation can be improved. We look forward to the opportunity to refine it further and to ensure that we contribute to getting the reform of adoption absolutely right.

10.9 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I missed the first half hour of the previous debate and did not speak in it because I had a long-standing previous engagement to speak with young people in my constituency. However, I am pleased that I did not speak in it, as I did not want to break up the modicum of consensus that seemed to be warming the hearts of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber.

It makes complete sense to commit the Bill to a special Select Committee. Today's debate made the issues seem all too simple whereas, as we know, the problems with which the Bill deals are extraordinarily complex. My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) mentioned some of the difficulties with targets. Of course targets will be different in different parts of the country, depending on the mix of children and their ages and disabilities.

Much of the earlier debate focused on the assessment of parents, but what about the assessment of children? I hope that the Select Committee will take evidence from psychologists and psychiatrists on resources—not money, but the manpower to do some of that work. Although speed is desirable in placements, achieving permanent placements is even more desirable. Nothing is worse for a child than to be rejected time after time. Rejection is depressing for children and produces extremely poor outcomes.

I also hope that the special Select Committee will examine some of the evidence taken by the Select Committee on Health, for example, in its inquiry on migrant children. In those days, when we had a particularly unsympathetic benefit system and a non-existent support system, parents were placed under great pressure—they were literally blackmailed—to give up their children for adoption. Moreover, that event is not so historical. People alive today are grieving the loss of children whom they lost in the 1960s and 1970s, after being told that they could not support them and that it would be best for them to be given up. I hope that the Select Committee will take evidence from those mothers, who were disfranchised.

Although it is important that children come first, I believe that it is most important to maintain children in a happy family relationship that is based on birth rather than on man's intervention. Of course, sometimes, we have to intervene. I am sure that the evidence would support that assertion. However, I am concerned that we should not go for the simplest and quickest outcome—an adoption with some nice middle-class people—and give up on parents and their children.

Although I appreciate that the Select Committee may not sit for long, I hope that the evidence presented to it will be available to a successor Committee. I am also sure that this motion will serve as a precedent should a subsequent, related Bill be introduced by the Government, or by a successor Government, after the next general election.

10.13 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): This is an interesting motion. If the Minister will forgive me, I rather regret the absence of the Leader of the House from the debate, as it raises some interesting issues that the Minister has not entirely addressed, as she might have done.

I have spoken to most of the timetable motions that we have had since the start of that process and opposed all of them. I shall not oppose this motion because I cannot say that the report date of 12 June provides too little time. However, we do not really know enough about this process. I therefore hope that the Minister will forgive me if I ask him some simple questions.

First, the Bill is to be committed to a special Select Committee. Will that be a specific, ad hoc Select Committee or one of the House's established Select Committees? I imagine that it will be committed to the former. If so, at some stage, we shall be invited to approve a list of proposed Committee members. Hon. Members are entitled to ask when that list of names will be presented to the House for nomination.

Secondly—the answer to this question hinges upon that to the first question—when will the Bill go to the Select Committee? Until we know when it will go to the Select Committee, we cannot say whether the exit date of 12 June provides sufficient time.

I approach this as a student not of the Bill but of the constitution. Why are we proceeding via a Select rather than a Special Standing Committee? I have long held the view that Standing Committees should take evidence. As the Minister will know—if he does not, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office is on hand to tell him—a Special Standing Committee can take evidence.

Mr. Hutton: First, if a Bill goes to a Special Standing Committee it must report within 28 days. I thought that Conservative Members were not much in favour of such deadlines. Secondly, Select Committee procedures are more flexible, which will facilitate the deeper and wider scrutiny that we want to encourage.

Mr. Hogg: Those are certainly points of substance. On the first, I am not too worried about the artificial constraint of 28 days, because I would rather that we got Bills right; on the second, I do not know whether the Minister is right about flexibility, although I am prepared to listen to the arguments. I am not yet persuaded that a Select Committee is better than a Special Standing Committee, but I accept that the process of taking evidence is worth while.

Can a Select Committee amend a Bill, or does it merely make a report to the House? I understand that the general procedure is for a Select Committee to report to a Committee of the whole House. Is that correct? It would be extremely helpful to know now that such a Committee of the whole House will not be subject to a timetable, because the House as a whole will have no other opportunity to scrutinise the detail of the Bill.

Dr. Brand: Would it not have been helpful if the right hon. and learned Gentleman had looked up the procedure followed by the Select Committee that scrutinised the Food Standards Bill? He would then have had answers to many of his questions.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman does me an injustice. I have taken some advice on the matter. In any event, the procedure is not homogeneous. For example, the Armed Forces Bill is subject to a different procedure from that adopted for the Food Standards Bill. That is why the Minister talked about flexibility. I am entitled to answers to specific questions, and I hope that even the Liberal Democrats want those answers, even though they are in bed with Labour.

I am not opposed to the timetable motion as it stands, but I hope that the Minister will give us some answers to specific questions. He will forgive my observing that I am a bit chary when I see a relatively unusual procedure laid before the House. I would like to know rather more about why it has been put before the House.

10.20 pm

Mr. McLoughlin: I wish to point out some of the anomalies that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred to last week.

We had two programme motions last week. The Regulatory Reform Bill had its Second Reading on 19 March and the timetable motion stated that it would be out of Committee by 29 March—a very short time indeed. On 20 March, we debated the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]*. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham pointed out, it is a substantial Bill of 57 pages, 43 clauses and nine schedules. The timetable motion stated that it would be out of Committee by 5 April. Therefore, we look at today's timetable motion with a little scepticism about the Government's actual intentions. The motion states that the special Select Committee will report the Bill to the House on 12 June.

I make no apology for asking the Minister again about the composition of the special Select Committee. He said that the Committee will be composed in the same way as that which considered the armed forces legislation.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman asks me about the composition of the special Select Committee. Will he indicate what he would like in terms of its membership?

Mr. McLoughlin: I can certainly do that in due course. *[Interruption.]* I said "in due course". I have 24 minutes in which to expand my comments, and I may do so if I am encouraged.

The Minister, in response to my earlier intervention, referred to the armed forces legislation. The composition of the Select Committee considering the Armed Forces Bill was sorted out on the same day as Second Reading. That may have been because there was some urgency about the Bill. There is no such motion on today's Order Paper—there is not the urgency.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) said, the Bill was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech. It has been introduced as a result of the pressure put on the Government by the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden. *[Interruption.]* It is typical of the contempt that those on the Government Front Bench have for this House that they laugh at such a matter. If it were not for my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill, I do not believe that we would be debating this Bill today.

I freely admit that I welcome the time allocated to the special Select Committee. However, we must ensure that it is set up this week so that it can start its work relatively soon and is not put on to the back burner, as I expect the Government to do. The Minister acknowledged that he expects a substantial number of changes to be made to the Bill.

I was asked what size I wanted the special Select Committee to be. I would like it to be of a decent size, with perhaps 10 or 20 members. I would be quite happy to suggest 10 Conservative members. The Government could have eight and the Liberal Democrats, who always support the Government, could have the other two. In that way, the composition of the Committee would be evenly balanced across the House.

The Bill should not be about party politics—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Ministers find that so funny. The Bill is far too important to be about party politics. That is why I welcome the timetable motion and hope that it will set a precedent for future motions.

10.24 pm

Mr. Hutton: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the genuine points put by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham

[Mr. Hutton]

(Mr. Hogg), who asked sensible questions about the composition of the special Select Committee. Many of those questions will be addressed, successfully I hope, through the usual channels, including those on the composition of the Committee and when it will start its work. As he knows, I am not in a position tonight to answer his detailed points.

The special Select Committee will not have the power to amend the Bill. It can suggest amendments, which will be considered in turn by the House. We do not envisage a Committee of the whole House to consider the Bill—we wish to convene a Standing Committee in the usual way as soon as the Select Committee completes its investigation of the Bill.

The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) made one of the most pointless and useless speeches that I have ever heard. I suspect that he knows that, and I shall not respond in any detail. I thought that he was simply going through the motions, and he almost made me sad that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) was not here to make the same points.

Mr. Hogg: I hope that the Minister will forgive me for being a little puzzled. I understood him to say that the Select Committee would report to a Standing Committee, which would subsequently report to the House on Report. I am not clear why we do not go straight to a Special Standing Committee, which would have the capacity to take evidence, consider the detail of the Bill and make any necessary amendment.

Mr. Hutton: I shall write to the right hon. and learned Gentleman and other hon. Members if I have misled them. I do not think that I have. The special Select Committee will report to the House. The Standing Committee will be set up in the normal way, and, armed with the information in the report of the special Select Committee, it will be better able to complete its deliberations on the Bill.

I should have thought, with respect, that the right hon. and learned Gentleman would welcome this opportunity for more detailed and effective scrutiny of a Bill. He was not here for most of the Second Reading debate—I do not quibble about that; it is perfectly reasonable, and I am sure that he had lots of important business to attend to. However, had he been here, he would have learned that there is strong support for and consensus around the Bill.

The hon. Member for West Derbyshire criticised me for saying that we have an open mind about the Bill and are prepared to listen to serious suggestions for amending it. Given the hysterical reaction that we usually get from Conservative Members about the attitude of the Government towards the House of Commons, I should have thought that he would welcome what I said rather than making a pathetic attempt at party political point scoring—which I must say, with the greatest of respect to him, was entirely ineffective.

I have responded to the questions raised in this debate, and I hope that the House will support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Adoption and Children Bill:

Select Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Select Committee.

2. The Select Committee shall report the Bill to the House on or before Tuesday 12th June.

ADOPTION AND CHILDREN BILL [*MONEY*]:

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Ordered,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Adoption and Children Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown by virtue of the Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

CHANNEL TUNNEL

That the draft Channel Tunnel (International Arrangements) (Amendment No. 3) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Jobseeker's Allowance (Amendment) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

NATIONAL LOTTERY

That the draft New Opportunities Fund (Specification of Initiatives) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) and Order [13 March],

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

That the following provision shall be made with respect to the remuneration and expenses of the Electoral Commissioners ("a relevant Commissioner") other than the Chairman of the Electoral Commission:

(1) In respect of remuneration a relevant Commissioner shall be paid £275 for each day on which he performs functions as such.

(2) A relevant Commissioner shall be paid the actual amount of his expenses incurred in connection with the discharge of his functions as such on travel, accommodation and subsistence.

(3) This resolution shall take effect from 19th January 2001.

That the following provision shall be made with respect to the remuneration and expenses of the Chairman of the Electoral Commission ("the Chairman"):

(1) In respect of remuneration for service between 19th January 2001 and 18th January 2002, the Chairman shall be paid £116,000.

(2) In respect of the period starting with 19th January 2002, the first anniversary of his appointment, and ending immediately before the second anniversary, the Chairman shall be paid as remuneration for that period the sum of £120,000 increased (where applicable) by the same percentage of that sum as the percentage (if any) or total of the percentages (if more than one) used to increase the salary of a High Court judge during the period of one year immediately preceding that first anniversary of the Chairman's appointment.

(3) In respect of the period starting with the second and any subsequent anniversary of his appointment and ending immediately before the next such anniversary, the Chairman shall be paid as remuneration for that period the sum payable during the immediately preceding period of one year increased (where applicable) by the same percentage of that sum as the percentage (if any) or total of the percentages (if more than one) used to increase the salary of a High Court Judge during the period of one year immediately preceding the anniversary at the beginning of the period in question.

(4) Where during any of the periods referred to above the Chairman ceases to hold that office, the sum to be paid to him in respect of that period shall be such proportion of the entire sum as reflects the portion of that period that he held the office of Chairman.

(5) The Chairman shall be paid the actual amount of his expenses incurred in connection with the discharge of his duties as Chairman on travel, accommodation and subsistence.

(6) The pension of the Chairman shall be broadly by analogy with the pension scheme of the staff of the Commission, thereby delivering a pension based on the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme which provides for a pension accruing at a rate of one-eightieth of salary per year of service, with a lump sum of three times the annual pension and provision for death benefits and dependants' pensions.

(7) This resolution shall take effect from 19th January 2001.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

GOVERNMENT TRADING FUNDS

That the draft The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory Trading Fund Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 17th January, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Professions) (Non-Exempt Activities) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 27th February, be approved.

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Designated Professional Bodies) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 27th February, be approved.

LONDON GOVERNMENT

That the draft Greater London Road Traffic (Various Provisions) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITION

Guisborough Swimming Pool

10.29 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I have great pleasure in presenting a petition signed by more than 5,000 constituents from Guisborough, a market town in my constituency, who demand the improvement or the total rebuilding of the town swimming pool. The petition was organised by Susan Johnson, the secretary of the local amateur swimming club. The petitioners are concerned

"that the existing facilities are ageing and desperately need improvement."

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

The petition has already resulted in the setting up of a group, including the swimming club, the local authority and Tees Valley Leisure, which operates the pool on behalf of the local authority.

Further to my recent visit to the swimming pool at the invitation of Guisborough amateur swimming club, when I expressed my support for a campaign to upgrade the swimming facilities, the petition addressed to me states that the signatories wish to support all efforts to improve the facilities for swimming in Guisborough.

The petition states:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to take such measures as lie within his power to improve facilities for swimming in Guisborough.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Education Funding (Wiltshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

10.30 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): This is only the fourth occasion during my parliamentary career that I have secured an Adjournment debate, which demonstrates the importance of the subject. I very much welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) has joined me to give his support from the Back Benches, although I regret that no Liberal Members, who claim to be such an important force in Wiltshire, have bothered to stay for the debate.

I also speak on behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Westbury (Mr. Faber) and for Salisbury (Mr. Key) who, with my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes, joined me recently in an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall on the bed blocking crisis in Wiltshire, which, like the crisis in education funding that I shall describe, is also caused by the chronic underfunding of Wiltshire county council.

The crisis in education funding should come as no surprise to the Minister for School Standards. After all, five months ago I brought a delegation of children from Colerne primary school in my constituency and their head, Ann Orme, to deliver a petition to the Prime Minister, which was signed by the heads of all the primary and secondary schools in the county. That petition, incidentally, had nothing but the briefest of acknowledgements from No. 10, despite the fact that I also raised it during Prime Minister's Question Time in November. The right hon. Gentleman might at least have had the decency and the courtesy to acknowledge the children's efforts in delivering the petition to No. 10. Perhaps the Minister will pass that message to her colleagues in No. 10 Downing street.

In the absence of any reaction to that petition, the Wiltshire Association of Secondary Heads wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, via me, on 12 February this year, formally requesting a meeting to discuss the crisis. That letter similarly went without so much as an acknowledgement—or at least until this morning, when—surprise, surprise—a letter arrived from the Minister. Only two months after I had written to the Secretary of State about this urgent crisis, the Minister finally responded this morning simply because—I suspect—the Adjournment debate was to be held today.

In the absence of any reaction from the Government, the chief education officer, the vice-chairman of education, the chairs of the primary schools, secondary heads and four Wiltshire MPs held a crisis meeting last Tuesday, attended by the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). As a result, we wrote again to the Secretary of State—again we received no acknowledgement. That is why it has been necessary for me to call this Adjournment debate.

It should not have come to this. It should not have been necessary for Members to demand an Adjournment debate to obtain any kind of reaction from the Government to what the people of Wiltshire perceive and believe to be a very real crisis in education. I very much regret that, and hope that the Minister will apologise to the people of Wiltshire for not having reacted sooner.

Every year until now, Wiltshire schools have met their targets and raised their levels of achievement. However, at the same time, the financial settlement—year after year—has been below the increased costs that schools face. As a result, their purchasing power has been reduced by about 10 per cent. during the past seven years. It is no longer possible to maintain that progress unless the haemorrhaging of funds is stopped; otherwise, the implications for the children of Wiltshire will be extremely serious. Schools will face a stark choice: either they will have to set a deficit budget, or they will have to try to make the budget balance by reducing staff.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): As my hon. Friend knows, I joined him in writing to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to ask for a meeting. We still await a response; I hope that we shall receive one soon. My hon. Friend mentions schools being driven into deficit. Is he aware that St. John's school, Marlborough, in my constituency, which has done everything that the Government asked, is being driven into a position where it either has to set a deficit budget or to reduce the quality of the education it provides? Is that not an example of what is happening in Wiltshire? Is not that what tonight's debate is about?

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend is right. In addition, we know about Warminster Kingdown school, which like St. John's also has a deficit budget. Clarendon school in Trowbridge and St. Laurence school in Bradford-on-Avon are in a similar position. Schools across Wiltshire are being forced to set deficit budgets or lay off staff. Some schools in the neighbouring authority of Swindon have been working a four-day week. We are determined that that will not happen in Wiltshire.

Deficit budgets mean dramatic increases in class sizes, which sharply reduce the quality of education and increase teacher stress and the number of difficult or impossible pupils. A deficit budget will without question mean a sharp reduction in the overall standard of education in Wiltshire. None of us is willing to stand idly by and watch that happen.

The cause of the crisis in Wiltshire has come about because of long-term generic faults in the standard spending assessment system and specific circumstances in Wiltshire. The county has always been a low-funded authority. In 2000, the Audit Commission found that for primary education and the under-fives, Wiltshire had the lowest-spending local education authority. In 1999, it came 30th out of 34 LEAs at secondary level.

The Minister tells me in her informative letter:

"In the three years from 1997, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 per pupil in real terms."

The truth is that an increase of £300 on an extremely low amount is not good enough. How can it be fair that the Government spend only £2,025 per primary pupil in Wiltshire compared with a county average of £2,075, ranging up to £3,300 for primary children in London? How can it be fair that they spend £2,600 per secondary pupil in Wiltshire compared with a county average of £2,675, ranging up to a high of £4,275 in London? How can it be that post-16 education in Wiltshire is funded at £2,950 per pupil compared with a county average of £3,000, ranging up to £4,600 per pupil in London?

Even if we accept that there are extra costs in providing a decent education in London compared with the county, how can London primary children be worth £1,285 a year more than pupils in Wiltshire, and how can secondary schools in Wiltshire survive on £1,675 per pupil less than the best-funded ones in London? I accept that there are difficulties in London, but surely not to that extent. Something is fundamentally wrong and the Government owe it to the people of Wiltshire at least to explain that and to do something about it.

The Minister might say, as she did in her letter, that she has some sympathy but that Wiltshire's education SSA increased by 5 per cent this year, well ahead of inflation. I am afraid that that will not do. A reasonable percentage increase is not much help if the SSA is too low to begin with—10 per cent. of nothing is nothing. A 5 per cent. increase this year is not enough.

Much of this year's SSA was eaten up before it was distributed to schools. The increased LEA contribution to the standards fund, the increased number of pupils in Wiltshire schools, the private finance initiative affordability gap, the revenue support to three new schools in the county, the effect of the transfer of adult education to the Learning and Skills Council and the under-fives funding that replaced the former specific grant have all meant that £6 million of the £9 million increase was eaten up before the SSA rose. The remaining £3 million is the equivalent of only 2 per cent. to meet inflation and the teacher pay rise of 3.7 per cent. That is not sustainable.

The bald fact is that Wiltshire's SSA is inadequate to provide the decent education that parents have a right to expect and which is more readily available in other parts of the country. There are a number of reasons for that. The county achieves a low score on formulae such as ethnicity and single mothers, and a relatively high score on formulae such as the proportion of the population who own cars. Frankly, it would be difficult to live in many parts of the county without a car.

The most important consideration, however, is that Wiltshire is the first county to the west of London not to benefit from the area cost adjustment—or at least not for education. Berkshire and Hampshire do, but not Wiltshire. That is probably because of the days when Wiltshire was a remote and primarily rural and agricultural constituency, but that is no longer the case. We are now part of the high-tech corridor, with the M4 on one side and the A303 on the other. We are the same as Berkshire. Chippenham is no different from Reading or Newbury. That has been recognised by the Department of Health in its area cost adjustment and SSA for Wiltshire, but not by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department for Education and Employment. It may be about time that the DFEE caught up with its colleagues in Richmond house. The SSA system takes little account of the costs of rurality. The sparsity factor in the SSA does not even cover the county's £8 million transport costs for education, far less any of the other costs associated with, for example, our relatively high number of small village schools.

The rural White Paper makes fine noises about supporting such schools, and so did the Secretary of State when he turned down an application to close Grafton school, which then had fewer than 20 pupils. The Secretary of State made great noises about supporting small village schools, but the truth is that Wiltshire has 70 schools with fewer than 100 pupils, and running them costs £1.5 million more than it would elsewhere. The SSA

[Mr. Gray]

system does not take account of the extra costs resulting from the high proportion of service families in Wiltshire and the consequent high turnover of pupils.

In her letter, the Minister said that of course the review of the SSA is coming along, which is all very fine. However, I must ask her when: we have an urgent education funding crisis in Wiltshire today, and waiting for an anonymous review to come along some time—and which might or might not benefit Wiltshire—is simply not good enough. I therefore appeal to the Minister to realise and understand the level of concern among heads, governors and parents in Wiltshire; to accept that something needs to be done about the chronic underfunding of education; and, at least pending the outcome of the SSA review, to find a way of improving the situation by means of a special grant. I know that Secretary of State has made £52 million available to

"those authorities which face particular pressures in the coming year."

It is extraordinary that this year, after the Government set targets for local education authorities, they helped some with significant additional funds while leaving others to struggle. Surely the situation in Wiltshire was such that it merited more generous treatment. Our situation is truly desperate.

I know that the chairman and director of education, representatives of primary and secondary schools and the four Wiltshire Members of Parliament would very much value a meeting with the Minister. I regret that she turned down that request in her letter, but she may wish to reconsider now, as the country of Wiltshire has voiced urgent and detailed considerations which may well make her see that it has special needs that would lead her to grant a special fund. Our need in Wiltshire is desperate, and a grave crisis is about to develop. Only urgent action by the Minister can solve it.

10.42 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on bringing this matter before the House. I do not doubt for a minute that all Members of Parliament take education seriously; what happens in schools in their constituencies is close to their hearts.

I shall start with two issues on which I think we agree. First, I should like to record my thanks to all the head teachers, teachers, classroom assistants and those who look after schools and work on behalf of children in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. There is agreement that their standards are good and that they work hard; his constituents have reason to be grateful to the education system for the good start in life that it gives their children.

Secondly, perhaps more surprisingly, I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the iniquities of the SSA system through which Wiltshire schools are funded. He said that he has called four Adjournment debates during his time in Parliament. I wonder whether any of the previous three were to discuss the SSA formula under the previous Government.

Mr. Gray *indicated dissent.*

Ms Morris: I suspect not; the shaking of the head indicates not.

Mr. Gray: I was not here.

Ms Morris: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman's predecessor bothered to do so. I cannot—I never have and will not—stand at the Dispatch Box and justify the iniquities of the SSA because that is not right. I do not know why a child in Wiltshire should receive less. The London comparison is not a good one to make because, as the hon. Gentleman rightly acknowledged, areas such as Tower Hamlets, Newham, Islington and Hackney have a degree of pupil mobility among asylum seekers that makes their needs different from those of Wiltshire. However, if he chose to compare Wiltshire with other shire counties, he could rightly ask why children in his county were not funded at the same level.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the characteristics that make up the formula are out of date. They served a previous era and are a bygone reflection of the economic and social needs of this country. The previous Government made no effort to change that. Year after year, they amended a formula that was already out of date. We tried to do exactly that in our first year. I always say this and shall it again: I have had to come to the House to answer for the SSA system on several occasions. Members will not be shocked to hear that not one Member of Parliament has called an Adjournment debate to tell Ministers that they are unfairly overfunded as a result of the SSA formula. That should happen soon—it would be a first. Therein lies the difficulty. Although no local authority thinks that it is overfunded, many think that they are underfunded: changing that is not easy.

In the first year, we tried hard. Those from authorities that were used to relative overfunding—I emphasise the word "relative"—did not want the change. It will be tough to manage the transition. We found that we could not get the consensus that we wanted to achieve on the change in the SSA. It was strange that when local authority organisations came to see the Secretary of State, they never came with a party label. They never came in party groupings; they always came in shire groupings, metropolitan groupings, unitary groupings, F40 groupings or former coal community groupings.

After 12 months, we decided that our brave attempt to change the SSA formula would not work, but we were not prepared to give up. As the hon. Member for North Wiltshire knows, we have published a Green Paper and put the reform of education funding in the wider context of reform of local authority funding. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, I shall tell him about two groups set up by the Department to examine different aspects of the Green Paper.

First, we have a group made up of representatives of the education world—local authorities, Churches, teacher unions and head teachers. It is considering how we can compensate for disadvantage in the formula, so that we can move away from the old characteristics that served a bygone era, and see where extra funding is needed, on top of good quality basic funding. The second group is examining tentative methods of reforming the way in which central Government pay the money to local authorities.

I know that it is almost four years since the general election. I say without any feeling of having let people down that every hon. Member knows how difficult it is

to get the formula right. The hon. Gentleman knows better than most the consequences of getting it wrong. No matter how many terms the Government serve, I expect that we will not have many more opportunities to have a good go at getting the formula right. Even if it means not having done it in the first year, I would sooner get the formula right by putting down firm markers and routing the change through a good, sensible, well thought out Green Paper, which has received many responses.

The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that the vast majority of responses to the education element of the Green Paper were about the SSA funding for . He is right to draw the iniquities to our attention, . can assure him and his head teachers that the Department for Education and Employment does not need persuading of the need for change. We spend a great deal of our time trying to explain that, and we would prefer not to have to do so. That is a note of optimism for the future.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Ms Morris: I was about to deal with the points on which I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but I shall give way.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Lady follow the lead of officials in the Department of Health and allow Wiltshire an area cost adjustment?

Ms Morris: I apologise for not being familiar with the area cost adjustment for the Department of Health. When we realised that we could not change the whole formula, we were faced with the choice between changing it piecemeal or doing nothing. We decided to leave it as it was. It is in a mess because of the tinkering that has taken place year on year. Conservative Members who served in previous Governments know that that is extremely time-consuming for the Department and leads to another round of Adjournment debates initiated by hon. Members whose areas have not come out of the process as well as the Government intended.

The area cost adjustment causes many tears to be shed, metaphorically, in schools. It is a matter that we want to address, but I cannot accept that the Government have not taken action to support schools in the hon. Gentleman's Wiltshire constituency. We have increased funding. I do not want to give a list of figures—I want to get to the heart of what is happening.

Schools in Wiltshire have not done as well as they would have done, had the formula been more equitable. Without looking into the future, which I cannot do because the formula has not been set, I suppose that the hon. Gentleman might have reason to believe, and certainly reason to hope, that his constituency might fare better under any renewed formula, but we shall have to wait and see. That would be a commitment; it would be jumping the gun, ahead of the consultation. This year, the increase in Wiltshire's SSA was slightly above average; it was more than 5 per cent. There are other moneys, too.

The SSA is no longer the only route of money to schools, which is one of the great changes that has occurred under this Government. I shall be blunt: by routing moneys by ways other than the SSA, although that remains the major source of revenue funding for schools, we have been able to be more equitable than might otherwise have been the case. I shall give two examples of that.

The share of the standards fund that Wiltshire has received has increased from £1.7 million in the last year of the previous Tory Government to £10.14 million under this Government for 2001-02. Overall spending in Wiltshire under Labour over the past three years has risen by £350 for each pupil. The hon. Gentleman can say in speeches in this House that that is not enough—as a Minister, I will certainly never be satisfied that that is enough—but he owes us a degree of honesty. He should realise that, in the last three years of his Tory Administration, funding fell by £60 per pupil. I am proud of that difference.

Over and above that, we have introduced a direct grant to Wiltshire schools. That is funded not through the SSA formula or by taking into account any deprivation needs, but by cash—a cheque in the post straight to schools. The average amount received by secondary schools is £70,000, and primary schools receive £24,000. I believe that we are now into our third year of such funding. In Wiltshire, that will make a total of £5.7 million for 2001–02 alone—in addition to an above average increase in SSA of more than 5 per cent. and a massive increase in the standards funds.

If we had put that £5.7 million through the SSA formula, Wiltshire would not have received as much as it has. Direct grant is not the bulk of the revenue, but it is an acknowledgement that we understand the difficulties of the SSA formula. Above all other grants, the direct grant has been widely welcomed by head teachers. They can make good use of it.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Morris: I will as long as the hon. Gentleman promises to allow me a few more minutes to make my points.

Mr. Gray: The Minister said that the direct grant has been welcomed by head teachers, but how does she explain the fact that every single head teacher of every single school in Wilshire, both secondary and primary, has attacked the Government in petition and by letter? They say that the Government are setting deficit budgets. It is simply not true to say that they have enough money this year.

Ms Morris: I will have to guess what the hon. Gentleman's head teachers might say to him. However, if he went into schools and asked whether head teachers liked the special grant, he would hear them say yes. His head teachers have been suffering from an iniquitous SSA formula for far longer than four years. They are fed up with it because they went through 18 years of Tory Government, during which time it was not changed. There is a cumulative feeling of being fed up with an SSA system that does not serve them well. The point that I made was that the £5.7 million special grant to Wiltshire has been widely welcomed by head teachers. I do not think that one of them would want to return it or want us to redistribute it through the SSA formula.

Another point that I should like to make concerns capital. As I said, money now goes to schools in different ways. This Government have trebled the amount of capital

[Ms Morris]

that has been spent on schools. In the last year of the Tory Government, when Wiltshire shared a local education authority with Swindon, the hon. Gentleman will know that his Government provided £4.7 million in capital. This year, the figure for just Wiltshire, without Swindon, is £54 million. I am incredibly proud of that figure.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Chippenham. I understand that the school is to be totally rebuilt, which will be widely welcomed.

Mr. Gray: That was a PFI.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman must realise that PFI credits have a cost for the Government—somebody has to provide the money to pay for the service. I have lot of time for the private sector and I welcome its involvement in education, but I would be surprised if it paid to build schools without expecting any revenue in return.

I know that education is close to the hearts of all hon. Members and that funding is one of the factors that makes for good schools and effective teaching. I am proud of the Government's record on increasing funding, which I know is recognised by schools. Of course, there is a long way to go and the hon. Gentleman is right to point out that more must be done with the SSA formula. I have sought to assure him that more is being done and that announcements will be made in due course. It is a cheek, however, for any Conservative Member to suggest that funding is worse than it ever was during the 18 years of Conservative Government. I find that teachers and head teachers always want more, but almost all of them recognise the improvement in finance; and I recognise the improvement in standards that has been made under four years of a Labour Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 27 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Zimbabwe

1. **Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks): When he next plans to meet the Zimbabwean high commissioner to discuss the rule of law in Zimbabwe. [154087]

3. **Mr. John Townend** (East Yorkshire): What plans he has to visit Zimbabwe to discuss human rights; and if he will make a statement. [154089]

8. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): If he will make a statement on the situation in Zimbabwe. [154094]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We deplore the escalating attacks on human rights in Zimbabwe. Of particular concern has been the enforced retirement of the Chief Justice following threats to his life; the destruction of the printing press of the only independent daily newspaper; the expulsion of foreign journalists for criticising the regime; and the continuing political intimidation, which has claimed more than 40 lives in the last 12 months.

In view of the deteriorating standard of human rights, we have decided that Zimbabwe is no longer an appropriate base for the British military team that provides regional training in peacekeeping. It will have left by this weekend.

We were successful in securing a statement from last week's meeting of Commonwealth Ministers recording our common concern at the intimidation of the judiciary and the media. The meeting agreed to send a ministerial delegation to Zimbabwe to convey our collective concerns and to prepare advice for Commonwealth Heads of Government.

Britain will continue to take every responsible step, both bilaterally and through the Commonwealth, the European Union and the United Nations, to impress on the Government of Zimbabwe the fact that their behaviour is unacceptable by modern standards and denies the people of Zimbabwe the freedom, the safety and the rights to which they are entitled.

Mr. Fallon: Given that the Mugabe regime is now flagrantly abusing human rights, as the Foreign Secretary described, is it not time to admit that the policy of deploring and issuing statements—all the ethical posturing—has failed? Is it not time to put serious pressure on the regime by freezing the assets of the corrupt Government, banning travel by Mugabe's associates and getting tough with that regime?

Mr. Cook: May I remind the House and the hon. Gentleman of what we have done in the past year? We have imposed an arms embargo on Zimbabwe; we have stopped the supply of Land Rovers to the Zimbabwean police; and we have cut the aid that we give to Zimbabwe and focused entirely on humanitarian aid, such as combating AIDS. We have used the Commonwealth to condemn what has been happening in Zimbabwe and to send observers to the elections; we now have dialogues with the European Union under the Cotonou agreement, which provides the possibility of restricting aid to Zimbabwe.

That is a formidable list of action that has been taken. On the question of freezing assets, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Emergency Powers Act 1964 makes provision for us to freeze assets only where there is a threat to the welfare of the United Kingdom. It has been used only twice since 1964—once against Iraq and once against Argentina, and on both occasions we were at war with those countries. That is the very reason why the previous Conservative Government considered the question, but ruled out an assets freeze against General Abacha, when he was in power in Nigeria.

Mr. Townend: This is not just a case of harassment of the opposition and the judiciary; we are talking about murder and torture. If the Government really have an ethical foreign policy, why are they not proposing that Zimbabwe be suspended from membership of the Commonwealth? Why are they not suspending unilaterally British economic aid? Why do they not declare Mugabe to be guilty of gross abuse of human rights and arrange for him to be arrested if, like Pinochet, he sets foot in the European Union or Britain? If the Foreign Secretary will not do that, is it not a sign of double standards? Will he accept that a large proportion of the Zimbabwean population are a lot worse off now than they were under Ian Smith?

Mr. Cook: I welcome the first statement that I have heard from a Conservative Member in support of our action on General Pinochet; I note that that is another Conservative U-turn. We have unilaterally suspended economic aid to Zimbabwe, and now provide no aid to the Government themselves. We have pared aid by one third, and now provide it to those who are suffering from HIV, to try to combat AIDS and provide clean sanitation in the villages of Zimbabwe. For the life of me, I cannot understand how the hon. Gentleman imagines we would increase pressure on President Mugabe if we withdrew that support for the poor people of Zimbabwe.

Mr. O'Brien: In the context of the Foreign Secretary's withered so-called ethical foreign policy, and in the light

of the terrifying and unjustified expulsion of the BBC correspondent, Joseph Winter—along with his wife Anne-Marie and their baby daughter Anenti—who reported that

"the opposition MP, Job Sikhala and his pregnant wife, white farmers and suspected opposition sympathisers in remote areas with only a mud wall and straw roof to protect themselves, have been beaten, tortured and killed",

does the Foreign Secretary accept that Mr. Mugabe is both responsible for and presides over a tyrannical regime?

Mr. Cook: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and fully endorse his description of the expulsion of the BBC journalist, about which we have protested vigorously, and shall continue to do so. The Harare declaration provides clear principles for the rule of law, freedom of speech and democratic principles. Plainly, but ironically, Zimbabwe itself is now in breach of that declaration.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): In condemning again the Mugabe regime's thuggery, murders, intimidation and its playing of the race card, does my right hon. Friend not agree that such condemnation best comes from those who have always attacked tyrannies—not the Opposition who, time and again, have defended previous tyrannies in South Africa and been apologists for Pinochet and his murderous regime? We need no lectures from Tory Members.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. To sharpen the point, the House and those on the Opposition Benches might wish to recall that it was the Conservative Government who presided over the government of Great Britain at the time of the Matabeleland massacres, which led to the killing of 10,000 people in Zimbabwe and took place over a period of two or three years, during which there was not a word of criticism from any Minister. There was no cut in overseas aid—on the contrary, Lady Thatcher increased aid by £10 million at the time of the massacres. No attempt was made to use the Commonwealth against Zimbabwe at the time. It is no wonder that President Mugabe let it be known that he was grateful for the British Government's restraint. In the light of their inactivity at the time, it is rich hypocrisy on the part of the Conservative Opposition to criticise us for not doing more.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that consistency requires that Zimbabwe should be treated the same as any other Commonwealth country that was found to be intimidating judges, expelling independent journalists and seeking to use intimidation and other weapons of repression against its political opponents? A Government adhering to the principles of the Harare declaration of 1991 would not have anything to hide. In those circumstances, does not the refusal of the Mugabe Government to receive a mission of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers tell us all that we need to know?

Mr. Cook: I agree absolutely with the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend. We will not accept it the first time President Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe says no. I welcome the statement by the Secretary-General that he will continue to press for the delegation to be received. The reason that the Zimbabwe Government seek not to receive it is that they know full well what a serious step it is for Commonwealth Foreign Ministers to agree to send a delegation. I hope that they will stop pretending that this is all a British conspiracy, when it was a decision taken unanimously—unanimously—by eight representatives of Commonwealth countries representing those members of the Commonwealth charged with keeping close tabs on violations of human rights. I believe that the delegation must be met. If not, that will send a strong signal to all the Commonwealth countries.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): I do not recall the Labour Opposition of the late 1980s fulminating much about Mr. Mugabe, either.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Mr. Mugabe was presented with a massive propaganda coup when he was received in state recently by the Prime Minister of Belgium and the President of France? The Foreign Secretary has said that written advice was given to the Belgian Government. Will he publish that advice? Is he aware that Belgian MEPs are saying that not only did the British Government appear unconcerned about the visit, but that they were privately supportive of it? What does that shabby episode say about the Foreign Secretary's willingness to stand up for ethical values, and what does it say about his influence with our European partners?

Mr. Cook: I have no problems with publishing the advice, which I will happily send to the right hon. Gentleman and place in the Library. It set out the scale of human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. We have since been advised by the Foreign Minister of Belgium that in the course of the meeting the Prime Minister of Belgium pressed President Mugabe to end the occupation of the farms, to allow foreign journalists to return and to stop the intimidation of the Chief Justice. I am glad that I provided the advice—it was plainly useful in the exchanges.

Mr. Maude: The effect of those visits was to give Mugabe a propaganda coup, and the Foreign Secretary should admit it. If the Commonwealth ministerial action group is prevented from undertaking its mission in Zimbabwe, will the Foreign Secretary confirm that, without hesitation, he will press for the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth? Will he urge the imposition of travel bans and criminal investigations of those of Mugabe's henchmen who sustain him in his murderous and repressive regime? Does the right hon. Gentleman understand that, yes, there is a case for quiet diplomacy, but that there is no case for supine inaction?

Mr. Cook: I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman has been listening to the exchanges that have taken place so far, and I am quite clear that he wrote that last line before he heard them. I have retailed to the House exactly the action that we took, which provides clear, sharp contrast with the inaction of the Conservative Government during the Matabeleland massacres. In the event of President Mugabe persisting in his refusal to see the delegation from the Commonwealth ministerial action group, we will consider that with our colleagues. We are committed by the statement that we adopted last week to provide advice to the Heads of Government, and plainly that will have to be reflected in any advice that we offer.

On the issue of suspension from the Commonwealth, I invite the right hon. Gentleman to reflect carefully on that before repeating it. I believe that the most practical thing that we have done in Zimbabwe in the past year is the deployment of Commonwealth observers during last year's parliamentary elections. That was warmly welcomed by the democratic opposition, who said that it had curbed the worst excesses of the Mugabe regime. If we suspended Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, the net effect would be that we could not provide Commonwealth observers when President Mugabe comes up for re-election next year. I do not see how it would help anybody in Zimbabwe for us to be unable to provide observers, which would give Mugabe an even clearer run at re-election.

Anglo-American Defence Co-operation

2. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): If he will make a statement on US-British co-operation on defence. [154088]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The United States is Britain's closest ally. We enjoy excellent co-operation across a wide range of defence and security issues. NATO provides the cornerstone of our relationship. Co-operation between Britain and the US has continued after the recent change of US Administration, not least because a close working relationship is the best way of advancing our mutual interests and safeguarding our collective security.

Mr. Waterson: Will the Minister confirm that the Nice treaty refers to an autonomous capacity to take decisions and to independent intelligence and logistic capabilities? Will he now come clean and accept that the duplicate and parallel structures agreed at Nice can serve only to undermine the Atlantic alliance?

Mr. Vaz: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not come to last Monday night's debate on European security, in which I explained in great detail that the reason for the problem in understanding what has happened on European defence is the activities of Opposition Members, and especially of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith). I repeat that it is quite clear that NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence policy. That means working with NATO and consulting it at every single stage before a decision is taken.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is my hon. Friend aware of the great concern that is felt in a number of quarters about the US national missile defence proposals? That concern is felt not only by the Russians, the Chinese and our EU allies, but by local people who live close to the sites that would inevitably be involved—Menwith Hill and Fylingdales. Ministers rightly pride themselves on our very close relationship with the US, but will he assure the House that our anxiety to keep in with the Americans does not outweigh our ability to make a balanced judgment about the threat to world peace that this star wars proposal might cause? We do not want to allow the threat of an escalation in the arms race because we are frightened of falling out with the Americans.

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend has long held those views, but she will also know that America is our closest friend and strongest ally. I refer her to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and President Bush at Camp David on 23 February this year. The Americans have promised the fullest co-operation and consultation with the United Kingdom and all its allies. Clearly, there is a threat, because our closest ally and strongest friend, the United States, believes that there is one. Of course it is important that we prevent the escalation and proliferation of nuclear weapons, and we will work with our allies to ensure that that threat is dealt with. I assure her that we will also work with them to ensure the fullest possible co-operation.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): Having visited the United States recently and talked to many of the people there who know about the role played by Europe in the affections of the Government, what on earth leads the Minister to believe that their suspicion about weakening NATO arises from criticisms made by Opposition Members? Surely he has greater respect for the Americans whom he meets.

Mr. Vaz: I have enormous respect for the right hon. Gentleman and I am sure that he feels strongly about these issues, but the facts are very clear. On 23 February this year, a joint communique was issued by the President of the United States and the Prime Minister. It made it clear that the United States Government support the European security and defence policy. They are relaxed about that policy because its bedrock is NATO. The right hon. Gentleman need only look at his right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) to know where the history of European security and defence began: the Maastricht treaty, which his right hon. Friend signed.

That is where the framework began. It continued at Petersberg, where Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Lord Hurd both signed up to a European security and defence policy. The policy has been accepted by both sides for many years.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Will my hon. Friend say whether there have been any discussions whatever on the national missile defence system? If such discussions take place in future, will he tell the Americans that the system will restart the cold war, and that many people here do not want to see our country turned into an unsinkable aircraft carrier?

Mr. Vaz: I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to work very closely with our strongest friend, the United States of America. No proposals are currently on the table. If there were, I assure my hon. Friend that he and the House would be aware of them, and the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence would be explaining them to the House; but there are no proposals. We told President Bush on 23 February that we would continue to work closely with the United States, and that remains the position.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Does the Minister not understand that the real American concern about the ESDP is that it is located outside NATO. It is autonomous—separate from NATO.

Does the Minister recollect what the Prime Minister said recently? He said that

"if we don't get involved in European defence, it will happen without Britain. Then those people who really may have an agenda to destroy NATO will have control of it."

Was that not a pretty astonishing admission—and who does the Minister think the Prime Minister had in mind?

Mr. Vaz: What is astonishing is the right hon. Gentleman's complete lack of understanding of what has been going on over the past 10 years. I find that particularly astonishing, because it was the right hon. Gentleman himself—St. Francis of Maastricht—who signed the Maastricht treaty, so he knows all about European defence.

The United States of America fully supports European security and defence policy. That was agreed, and the communique was set out on 23 February. What the right hon. Gentleman cannot stomach is the fact that the Prime Minister and the President could issue the statement together.

Kosovo

4. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): If he discussed matters relating to the UN administration of Kosovo when he last met his colleagues representing other member states of NATO. [154090]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed matters relating to Kosovo with his NATO counterparts at a North Atlantic Council ministerial meeting on 27 February. Hans Haekkerup, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Kosovo, briefed the North Atlantic Council on the work of UNMIK—the United Nations Mission in Kosovo—on 28 February.

We fully support Mr. Haekkerup's efforts to ensure the full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1244. We welcome the priorities that he has set, namely the establishment of a legal framework for provisional institutions for Kosovo, law and order and economic reconstruction. We also welcome his efforts to establish regular dialogue with the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will make a statement on Macedonia at 3.30 pm.

Dr. Godman: Maintaining law and order in Kosovo is an immensely difficult task: everyone knows that. Am I right in thinking that KFOR is largely a European force, and a highly trained one at that? By contrast, the UN's international police force is composed of officers from 66 countries, many of whom, regrettably, are poorly trained. When did the Minister last raise at the UN the problems caused by this ill-equipped police force? There are some first-class officers in Kosovo, but many officers are not up to it.

Mr. Vaz: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns. Having just visited the area, he knows the seriousness and the difficulties of the situation. We believe, however, that things are improving. We continue to raise these matters at the UN, and in every forum that we have at our disposal, because we believe that to be the best way of ensuring that there is a lasting legal framework that people respect.

Law and order is clearly a crucial issue. My hon. Friend will note that the murder rate has gone down dramatically over the last year. The British Government make a contribution to both forces and will continue to do so, but ultimately it is about building confidence between the communities. Unless and until we do that, we will never obtain a lasting settlement of the problems in the Balkans.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I have just returned from a visit to Kosovo with the Select Committee on Defence, and I was immensely impressed by the work that our troops are doing there; but can the Minister give us any guidance on the Government's exit strategy for our troops deployed in Kosovo?

Mr. Vaz: We will continue to be involved in trying to win the peace, as we have been throughout the past few years. The hon. Gentleman has just visited the area, and I would be keen to look at the report that he and his Committee will publish as a result of that visit. He knows that these are agonisingly difficult problems. The way to deal with the situation is, as I have just said, to build confidence between the communities. It would not be appropriate or right to talk about exit strategies. We are there to support the restoration of law and order, and to provide the necessary forces to ensure that there will be peace and security for the people of Kosovo.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I, too, was in Kosovo last week with the Defence Committee. Will my hon. Friend congratulate the British forces—the 1st Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's Regiment and the other forces—that are doing such a vital job there? Is he aware that, unfortunately, a lot of their time is at present devoted to defending the lives and protecting the religious property of the very few—only 300—Serbs remaining in Pristina? Is it not vital, given that that conflict was fought to preserve a multi-ethnic Kosovo and Serbia, to send the message firmly and clearly to Albania, to the groups in the Presevo valley and in Macedonia and to the Kosovar Albanians, that the international community will not tolerate any moves towards single ethnicity in the Balkans?

Mr. Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments about the British forces. I shall certainly pass them on to the Secretary of State for Defence. My hon. Friend's message is a powerful one, which we should heed, especially at these difficult times in the Balkans. What has happened there is a tragedy. Our role is to do exactly as my hon. Friend has suggested: to ensure that the message of multi-ethnicity is one that every country in the Balkans understands. This is the best way in which the communities themselves can work together. We have a proud record in the Balkans. We will also maintain our proud record of trying to ensure that the communities work together, and I thank my hon. Friend for his comments.

Pakistan

5. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will make a statement on relations with Pakistan. [154091]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Relations between the UK and the people of Pakistan are warm and close. However, the people of Pakistan deserve better governance, and a democracy that can deliver stability, human development and international credibility. We continue to urge General Musharraf to produce a credible timetable for national and provincial elections by autumn 2002, in accordance with the ruling of Pakistan's supreme court.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Will the Minister at least assure us that the Government will give their support and encouragement to the Government of Pakistan in coping with the enormous problem of refugees from Afghanistan? That problem has existed for years. Will the Minister also give some indication of roughly how many refugees there are in Pakistan at present, and whether the numbers are increasing or decreasing? Do the Government think that there might be a case for some kind of international effort to find a solution to one of the world's biggest refugee problems?

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. Pakistan has a good record of taking refugees from the war in Afghanistan. We believe that about 1.2 million refugees have entered Pakistan from Afghanistan. The issue has been discussed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and support is available to help to cope with the influx of refugees. Of course, the best solution to all those problems would be an end to the fighting in Afghanistan, and that, above all, is what we would urge.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): What action has the Minister taken to build on the opportunity created by India's ceasefire and Pakistan's policy of maximum restraint to make progress towards a just and peaceful future for Kashmir, based on respect for human rights and the will of the people of that region?

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We very much welcome the reduction in conflict in Kashmir and we are using that opportunity both bilaterally and through the European Union and other international bodies to urge India and Pakistan to continue dialogue and to find a solution. A solution will be found only through such dialogue. We are also urging our Indian counterparts to allow greater access to Kashmir, including for Amnesty International and the UN special rapporteurs, and I reiterate that it is important that human rights violations are investigated and that action is taken against the perpetrators. We welcome the two reports on incidents last year as a step towards such transparency. On all those fronts, we are urging dialogue and we are making it absolutely clear that nobody but India and Pakistan, through dialogue, can achieve a resolution to those problems.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Of course, the Minister will know that every friend of Pakistan in the House wants democratic elections to take place as speedily as possible, but one question bemuses most of us. Why is Pakistan suspended from the Commonwealth and not allowed to take part in any Commonwealth deliberations even though Zimbabwe is still a full member? Is not some double standard at work here?

Mr. Wilson: If I may make a fairly obvious point to the hon. Gentleman, he may have missed the fact that there was a military coup in Pakistan. Thereafter, the decision was taken by all the members of the Commonwealth.

Conservative Members seem to be under the misapprehension that Britain has some unilateral power to speak for the Commonwealth, but what is needed is consensus within the Commonwealth. These are two separate cases and Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth because of the military coup. We want not bogus analogies such as that drawn by the hon. Gentleman, but progress towards democratic elections in Pakistan, which would pave the way for a return to democratic government.

Illegal Drugs

6. **Mr. Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich, West): If he will make a statement on recent initiatives to tackle the international trade in illegal drugs. [154092]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): The Government are at the forefront of international efforts to combat the illegal drugs trade. Our aim, as stated in the 10-year drugs strategy, is to halve the availability of those class A drugs that cause the greatest harm, particularly heroin and cocaine.

Mr. Bailey: Will my hon. Friend confirm that 80 per cent. of the heroin sold in this country comes from Afghanistan? Furthermore, will he continue to work with states in the region to put pressure on the Taliban to eradicate heroin trafficking? In particular, will he continue the policy of positive engagement with Iran?

Mr. Battle: I thank my hon. Friend, who takes a serious interest in this crucial matter. I emphasise the fact that heroin and cocaine on the streets in Britain, be it in West Bromwich, West or in Leeds, West, usually come from either Colombia or Afghanistan. Our programme of counter-drugs assistance overseas is aimed at those key producer and transit countries. Through the multilateral agencies and the UN, we funded a drug crop survey in Afghanistan, and the results for 2001 suggest that opium poppy cultivation in the region is significantly lower than in 2000. That is encouraging. There is evidence that an edict by Mullah Omar in July 2000 banning cultivation is being enforced by the Taliban, but we are still worried that stockpiling and trafficking in opiates continue. We will maintain our high-level contacts to combat that activity until we tackle the problem of production.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Minister will be well aware that in many places that produce those drugs there is no alternative crop. For example, damage was done in Nepal by closing down drug cultivation without any alternative being provided, which enormously aided the arrival of the Maoist rebels.

Will he give us an assurance that he is working hard with the Department for International Development to find alternative ways of yielding an income to the peasants?

Mr. Battle: The hon. Gentleman pinpoints an important problem: if local campesinos—peasants—produce drugs, they get greater value for such a crop. Replacing it with alternatives is always difficult. However, I do not want the hon. Gentleman to leave the House with the impression that nothing can be done, because an alternative crop strategy has worked to a large extent in Bolivia. We are working closely with the Colombian authorities to develop an alternative cultivation strategy in the Magdalena Medio region to ensure that campesinos do not depend on growing drugs for their livelihoods. We will work with the Department for International Development to ensure that those programmes are successful. Alternative economic development is the genuine answer.

Mr. Frank Roy (Motherwell and Wishaw): My hon. Friend may be aware that on Sunday thousands of people will take to the streets of Glasgow to join the *Daily Record*'s march against drugs. Will my hon. Friend congratulate the *Daily Record* on its initiative, and tell those who will take part in the demonstration that the war against drugs will be waged not only in Glasgow and every other city in the United Kingdom, but against the international sources of drug supply?

Mr. Battle: We welcome the demonstration and wish it every success. Sometimes, the impression is created that there are producer countries and consumer countries and that the problem is the latter, not the former. There is more than enough evidence to suggest that production and consumption occur in both. Even in Britain, forms of drugs that are almost artificial are being produced. We must tackle the problem internationally. That is the purpose of our programmes and why we join the UN, the EU and the G8 and take an active part in the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. We must knit together our response and fight the problem from every angle.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Bearing in mind the limited success of alternative crop strategies, does the Minister know that heroin and cocaine are cheaper on the streets of the United Kingdom now than in 1995? In his discussions with the Governments of drug-producing countries, will he ask them to redouble their efforts? Will he commend the National Criminal Intelligence Service, which does so much good work in the United Kingdom and overseas in disseminating information and intelligence? That is the key to the problem.

Mr. Battle: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments on the National Criminal Intelligence Service, which is vital in discovering and analysing what is happening.

We know that the price of heroin and cocaine is falling in our neighbourhoods. That is part of a global drugs economy, which is linked to huge business. It is said that the drugs trade is now worth the value of the oil and gas industry, the car industry and the steel industry combined.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced at the Okinawa summit last July that we would convene a conference on the global drugs economy to tackle the underpinning market factor in the illegal drugs racket. It will take place in June, and we hope that it will provide some genuine detailed analysis of the macro and micro markets so that we can tackle them properly.

Ministerial Visits (Belgrade)

7. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): Which members of the Government have visited Belgrade since October 2000. [154093]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): My right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade visited Belgrade on 8 and 9 November. A visit by the Foreign Office is a high priority. The visit to Belgrade by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) participated, was also a success. Federal Foreign Minister Svilanovic was in London on 27 and 28 February.

Mr. Mackinlay: Does the Minister accept that that reply is unsatisfactory? He is responsible for the Balkan region but he has not visited it. He has not been to Belgrade, Pristina, Podgorica or Zagreb. Either there is a shortage of Foreign Ministers or the priorities are wrong. When is he going?

Mr. Vaz: With such an invitation, I should be on the plane tomorrow with my right hon. Friend. I assure my hon. Friend that Foreign Office Ministers are fully engaged in bilateral visits. He may shake his head, but a few weeks ago he chided another colleague about a visit to Poland. We must set priorities, and we have done that. Several Foreign Ministers have visited London. We organised a Balkans taskforce conference last year and several other Foreign Ministers attended it. I know that my hon. Friend is cross, but I assure him that the Balkans are a high priority, and I hope to give him some welcome news in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Further to the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) earlier, it is not so very many weeks since the man whom many regard as a dictator, a tyrant and a murderer was invited to Belgium and France. [Hon. Members: "No. 9."] The Foreign Secretary has indicated that he intends to publish the advice that he offered the Belgian and French—

Hon. Members: No. 9.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): If it is not too late, Mr. Speaker, I will answer questions 9, 13 and 14 together.

President Mugabe

9. **Mr. Roger Gale** (North Thanet): What plans he has to meet President Mugabe; and if he will make a statement. [154095]

13. **Mr. Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot): What plans he has to meet Morgan Tsvangerai to discuss the present situation in Zimbabwe. [154099]

14. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What contact he has had with the Governments of Belgium and France and with the Commission of the European Union about the recent visit of President Mugabe of Zimbabwe to Brussels and Paris. [154100]

Mr. Cook: I refer the hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier.

Mr. Gale: Having waited for that answer, I do not think that it was terribly wrong of me to proceed—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that when I called him I expected him to call out the number of the question on the Order Paper, and he should have done so. I therefore hope that his supplementary will be very brief.

Mr. Gale: It is not so very long since a man whom many people regard as a dictator and a tyrant was invited to Belgium and France. The Foreign Secretary has indicated that he intends to publish the advice that he gave the French and the Belgians, and that is welcome. However, will he say whether at any time he indicated to either of our European allies—

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): We have to provide the opposition as well.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Gale: Has the Foreign Secretary indicated to either of our European allies that this man should be treated as the pariah that he is, and not given the red carpet treatment that he received?

Mr. Cook: I have repeatedly been urged in this House to use all possible channels of communication with President Mugabe to increase the pressure on him to improve the observance of human rights within Zimbabwe. We therefore communicated to Belgium and France that if they were to meet President Mugabe, it was important that they pressed him on human rights. As I have already spoken about the Belgian meeting, perhaps I can add, for completeness, that we understand that when President Chirac met President Mugabe, he insisted that there should be dialogue with the commercial farmers and respect for the rule of law, that the violence should be curbed and that President Mugabe should halt the expulsion of foreign journalists. I welcome that message to President Mugabe.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Does the Foreign Secretary realise that what so many people in this country, myself included, find so offensive is the contrast between the Labour party's view on South Africa, when we were treated to frenetic indignation the whole time, and the Government's total lack of urgency as Zimbabwe, a once prosperous country, declines into penury, state-sponsored murder and chaos? Surely the Foreign Secretary is utterly inept to withdraw the one lever that the British Government had over the Government of Zimbabwe—the military component operating out of Harare. Why does the right hon. Gentleman not now cancel that decision so that at least he would do something that the Opposition in Zimbabwe would like the British Government to do?

Mr. Cook: As a matter of fact, for the sake of the completeness of the record, I was urged to withdraw that in April of last year by Conservative Front Benchers. It is a bit rich to do it and then to be condemned.

As for the contrast with southern Africa, let me make it quite clear that no Labour Member resiles from one single word of criticism for apartheid. It is a bit rich for the party that opposed Commonwealth sanctions against apartheid now to demand more sanctions against Zimbabwe.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Did the European Commissioner and the leading figures of two important European Union member countries remind the President of Zimbabwe that there are in his country some 20,000 European Union citizens who hold British passports and who should be the common concern of our European Union partners and of Her Majesty's Government? Have not the Foreign Secretary and our European partners betrayed them in not making it clear that any question of taking away their dual nationality, dispossessing them of their farms and perhaps ejecting them from the country is against every tenet of human rights and decent international behaviour?

Mr. Cook: Both the European figures—the Prime Minister of Belgium and the President of France—raised with President Mugabe the illegal and brutal occupation of the farmlands, and urged the use of dialogue to resolve that and bring it to an end.

A number of countries do not recognise dual nationality, but I take the opportunity with which the hon. Gentleman has presented me to deplore the threatening language that has been used against those commercial farmers in Zimbabwe who may have another nationality. They provide the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy. They have made their lives in Zimbabwe and contributed to the present economic strength of the agricultural sector there, which is being undermined. If the Government of Zimbabwe continue to take action of a vindictive character, not only those British nationals but all the people of Zimbabwe will suffer because of the disastrous impact on the economy.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not a fact that on every possible occasion the British Government and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary have made it clear to Zimbabwe and President Mugabe that this Government are extremely concerned at the erosion of democracy and the independent judicial system in that country? Is it not also a fact that within about 12 months the people of Zimbabwe will have the opportunity to elect a President? They may well choose to change President on that occasion.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend's final point is important. It is important for all of us to use every channel to ensure that when that chance comes, the people of Zimbabwe have the opportunity of a free and fair election in which they can exercise their vote without any threat of intimidation. My hon. Friend is right. We have repeatedly

condemned what is happening in Zimbabwe. We have done so within the Commonwealth, the European Union and the United Nations. If the Opposition can come up with anywhere else that we have not done so, I will be happy to do so.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Commonwealth takes action against Mugabe if the present situation continues? Would he like to remind us about any protestations or official representations from previous British Governments at the time of the Matabeleland massacres in 1982–84?

Mr. Cook: I have already made it clear to the House that we cannot discover any representations on the Matabeleland massacres. There was certainly no attempt to use the Commonwealth. We raised the situation in Zimbabwe with the Commonwealth last week. We were successful in securing unanimous agreement on the concerns, in particular the intimidation of the judiciary and the media. I am glad that there is agreement to send colleagues to Harare to express those concerns directly and to hear what answers there may be from the Zimbabwean Government. We will continue to press that Government to recognise that, as a member of the Commonwealth, they have a duty to receive the delegation from the Commonwealth.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) introduced the question of consistency. Does my right hon. Friend recall, during the bloodthirsty, murderous and repressive regime in Chile under self-styled Senator Pinochet, much opposition and condemnation from the then British Government, who are now Her Majesty's Opposition? How consistent does he believe that is with their quickness to condemn what is happening in Zimbabwe?

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is nothing to do with the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Rather than issue an all-party declaration about what the right hon. Gentleman would like to happen in Zimbabwe, would he do something practical and invite the Government of South Africa—probably the only Government to whom the Zimbabwean Government will pay any attention at the moment—to apply pressure to the President of Zimbabwe to cease his activities with regard to the judiciary, the press and the rule of law? Surely that is the most practical and effective thing to do, and he could do it now.

Mr. Cook: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes a fair point about the influence of the countries of the region on Zimbabwe. We have had regular dialogue with them ever since the Cairo European Union summit in the spring of last year. We will continue to raise the matter with them. Indeed, I spoke only yesterday with the Foreign Minister of Mozambique about our concerns about Zimbabwe and what the countries of the region can do to help. South Africa is by far the largest country in the region—it is by far the largest economy. It has a lead role in the region, which places certain responsibilities on it.

International Criminal Court

10. **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley): When he expects the UK to seek ratification of the treaty setting up the International Criminal Court. [154096]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): The UK will ratify the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court as soon as the necessary legislation is in place. The International Criminal Court Bill is before the House and we hope that it will receive strong support on all sides. Our intention is to be among the first 60 states to ratify.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Certainly, organisations and individuals in my constituency who have written to me on the issue will welcome the ratification of that important measure. That goes for groups such as Amnesty International and other human rights bodies that submitted their opinions on the draft Bill, followed by detailed scrutiny in the other place. Will my hon. Friend reassure me of the continued support of all parties in the House for a speedy resolution and ratification of the Bill, and that the all-party support still holds firm?

Mr. Battle: The draft Bill was published last August; there were about 45 submissions giving detailed comments—mainly positive and supportive—from a range of non-governmental and professional organisations, lawyers, academics and interested parliamentarians. It will be a historic Bill, which I hope all parties in the House will continue to support. That will send a signal to the world's tyrants that there is a clear consensus in Britain and in the international community that we are united in that determination to end impunity, because justice, wherever possible, is obviously the best foundation for long-term peace.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): For the record, both sides of the House support the aims of the International Criminal Court Bill to bring to justice those who commit crimes against humanity. However, the current Bill introduced by the Government has some fundamental flaws, which our military commanders have warned could lead to British troops being prosecuted for war crimes and being prevented from carrying out peacekeeping tasks. The French have protected their armed services through an opt-out. Will the Minister undertake to accept the Conservative amendments to the Bill tabled in another place that would safeguard our armed forces, or do our soldiers, sailors and airmen get less protection than the French?

Mr. Battle: It must be jitters before the election—the hon. Lady is changing her position. On two occasions, she pressed us to get on with the measure: in July 1988—[HON. MEMBERS: "1988?"]—she said she welcomed the Bill; in October 1999, I think that she said she would help Ministers in any way that she could. It does not sound like that now.

The amendments tabled by Lord Lamont in the other place did not receive support. I notice that he opposes not only the International Criminal Court but the Yugoslav tribunal and other forms of international justice. I hope that is not the case for current Opposition Front Benchers;

I hope that they will stick by their original commitment. The Bill is vital to international justice—I hope that they still support it.

Middle East

11. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on the situation in the middle east. [154097]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Following a successful European Union Troika visit to the region, Heads of State and Government discussed the situation in the middle east at the European Council in Stockholm on 23 March. The Council reaffirmed the Union's determination to contribute to peace, stability and future prosperity in the middle east. To that end, it requested the EU High Representative Javier Solana to explore how the EU can play an enhanced role in promoting the resumption of the peace process.

Although there has been an overall reduction in the level of violence in the past two weeks—notwithstanding the events of the past 24 hours—we remain deeply concerned at the continuing tensions and instability. We urge both parties to take immediate parallel steps to address the current crisis.

Mr. Dismore: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is overwhelming evidence that Palestinian terrorism—such as the mortar attack from a Palestinian police station in Gaza last week, the two bombs in Jerusalem today or the terribly tragic shooting of a 10-month-old Israeli baby girl yesterday—can no longer simply be attributed to Palestinian rejectionist groups, but is also the responsibility of the Palestine National Authority? Will my hon. Friend do all he can to ensure that Mr. Arafat does whatever he can to try to stop that terrorism and violence from the Palestinians and so allow the peace process to be resumed?

Mr. Wilson: We condemn such acts from whichever source they come. The problem is that if there is no atmosphere of dialogue—an atmosphere that appears to be leading to a just outcome to all the problems—it makes room for extremist elements to preach a doctrine of violence and to commit the acts to which my hon. Friend refers. Everything that we do and say is directed towards a resumption of the peace process with one aim—getting people around a table to discuss a solution, taking up where discussions were leading before the Israeli elections, and feeding into the process, bilaterally, through the European Union, in every way possible. Taking out isolated acts of terrorism and condemning them is perfectly legitimate, but it does not contribute to the wider solution. We condemn all violence. We must have dialogue if there is to be peace.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): What are the objectives of the Government's policy towards Iran?

Mr. Wilson: We are anxious to encourage reform within Iran. We are anxious to develop our relations, and to that end the Minister for the Cabinet Office recently made the first high-level visit to Iran in, I think, 20 years. We shall take that process forward. Where there is progress towards democratic standards we will encourage that, and that is true in Iran.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Is my hon. Friend aware that a senior Iraqi official has recently been in the UK, that he is a close friend of Saddam Hussein, that he has been given a multiple entry visa by our embassy in Jordan and that he is closely connected with an institute in Iraq that is involved in chemical and biological components? Why was he given a visa when visitors who wished to come here from Iraq and Syria—members of the Iraqi opposition—were refused visas this weekend? Has there been a change of policy on Iraq?

Mr. Wilson: I do not think that this is really the forum in which to second-guess the visa process. However, I would say that the gentleman in question was admitted as the president of the Council of Technical Colleges in Iraq. He was not judged to be a senior figure in the Iraqi regime. He came here to access educational materials and, as my hon. Friend and the House well know, the policy of sanctions against Iraq is not directed against educational materials or humanitarian goods. In that spirit, it was consistent to grant the visa to that gentleman.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): With reference to my question 33, and echoing the words of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), does the Minister agree that the overriding priority at the moment, given the extreme fragility of the middle east peace initiative, must be to encourage an end to violence and a resumption of the dialogue and negotiations? Given that the European Union countries have presented the Palestinian authorities with a very favourable economic package, does the Minister agree that he and his counterparts in Europe must use all the influence that they have at this time to encourage Yasser Arafat to meet those twin overriding objectives?

Mr. Wilson: There is a significant role for the European Union—and I think that everyone in the middle east believes that there is a role for the European Union in this process. Therefore, I am very pleased at the visit by the EU High Representative to explore how the EU can play an enhanced role. That step was strongly supported by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in Stockholm at the weekend.

What the hon. Gentleman says is correct. There is a role for the EU and I am sure that, in the discussions with Yasser Arafat and other representatives of the Palestinians, the points that the hon. Gentleman made can be pursued.

Nice Treaty

12. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): When he plans to take steps to enable the UK to ratify the treaty of Nice. [154098]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): Last week's Command Paper contains the text of the treaty of Nice. We will bring the Bill necessary to ratify the treaty before the House as soon as possible.

The treaty of Nice increases Britain's vote in the European Union, removes the veto of other countries on British priorities such as tougher budget control, and provides the institutional reforms essential for enlargement. It is in Britain's interest to ratify as soon as possible.

Mr. Cunningham: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the progress that has been made towards enlargement can certainly lead to the avoidance of the mistakes of the last century, particularly those mistakes that led to wars, and does he agree that the Opposition have not necessarily learned the lessons of the last century? Will my hon. Friend elaborate on the early warning system and human rights?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is correct on his last point. There is provision for an early warning system that would enable the European Union to intervene in a helpful way if there were any departure from human rights, but the departure has to be serious and persistent before it is triggered. I agree absolutely with his other remarks. A dozen or more countries are now seeking to join the European Union. One day they will be in the Council Chamber as full members. It is in Britain's interest that they remember us as friends of their applications and as supporters of the treaty of Nice.

I know from talking to the Governments of those countries that they are mystified that the Opposition continue to oppose the treaty of Nice. I have written several times in the past three months to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), asking him to say exactly what he believes needs to be renegotiated; he has never replied. There is just enough time for him to reply this afternoon, or to admit that he is not prepared to defend the Conservative party's policy because he knows that it has no credibility.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that the failure at Nice to halt the continuing slide to political integration will damage successful enlargement? In that vein, the Belgian presidency is seeking tax harmonisation on all savings, on personal and company taxation and on energy, labour and capital. Why is he not fighting to reform the one policy that will really jeopardise enlargement—the common agricultural policy, where British leadership is so pathetically absent?

Mr. Cook: There is not a single Government among the candidate nations who would agree with the hon. Gentleman that the treaty of Nice does not further enlargement. I ask him to reflect on the fact that if someone is the only one who holds a certain opinion, it is just possible that that person is wrong. The hon. Gentleman is probably wise to stick to his written text, rather than to try to answer my question, but the House will have noticed that he and the right hon. Member for Horsham cannot tell us what must be renegotiated in the treaty of Nice. If they cannot tell us, they might as well admit that their policy is wrong and lacking in credibility and that they have no intention of carrying it out.

3.30 pm

Mr. Speaker: We shall deal with question 24. I call Mr. Ben Bradshaw.

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

24. **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): If he will make a statement on the situation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. [154111]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): On Sunday, the army of Macedonia launched an operation to retake the hills above Tetevo. The operation appears to have been a success and the armed extremists have abandoned their positions.

I spoke to President Trajkovski on Sunday morning, when I urged on him the importance of keeping the operation proportionate to the threat and restrained from action that could cause civilian casualties. I am pleased to report that, on the information currently available to us, there have been no civilian deaths.

I spoke this morning to Javier Solana in Skopje. We both agreed that the important priority now for the Government of Macedonia is to follow up the military action by taking the political initiative to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Albanian minority. Yesterday, the Greek Foreign Minister and I held a joint conversation with the Foreign Minister of Macedonia, in which we discussed the need for progress on such issues as local government reform and the new Albanian university in Tetevo. Macedonia must not allow the terrorists to succeed in destroying its multi-ethnic society.

In the meantime, Britain will continue to take every practical measure to improve the situation on the ground. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that Britain would provide the major part of a new battle group within KFOR of 400 troops to help secure part of the Kosovo border with Macedonia. That commitment by Britain has been well received in Macedonia.

Over the past two years, we have turned the tide against the nationalists who took to violence in pursuit of a Greater Serbia or a Greater Croatia. We must now be equally firm against the extremists who are using terror in pursuit of a Greater Albania. The period in which borders in the Balkans were redrawn in blood is over and will not be allowed to return.

Mr. Bradshaw: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that statement and warmly welcome the constructive role being played by Britain in securing the Macedonia-Kosovo border, but will he make it absolutely plain to all the protagonists in the region that nationalism and attempts to redraw borders will not be tolerated by the international community? Will he do all that he can, working with his partners, to ensure that there is a just and peaceful settlement in Macedonia?

Mr. Cook: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. When the European Council met in Stockholm, it received President Trajkovski, who addressed us. In our conclusion in the declaration at the end of that meeting, the European Union affirmed its commitment to the sovereignty of Macedonia and to its territorial integrity. We want the countries of the Balkans to continue on their path towards greater association and integration with the European Union, but that can be done only under the principles of

the European Union, which involve respect for borders and an acceptance that borders can never be changed by force.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): We welcome the decision to send an extra British contingent to the frontier. British troops are particularly well suited and well trained for such work, and it is essential that the border between Kosovo and Macedonia should be properly sealed to prevent terrorists from coming across. There must be resolute support for the Government of Macedonia, who are democratic, legitimate, include Albanian parties and have endeavoured to create a genuinely multi-ethnic society.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we should also be very clear that there can be no question of a Greater Kosovo or a Greater Albania? As he has just suggested, moving the borders would risk the whole structure of the western Balkans unravelling. However, should we not also be clear that there can be no question of Kosovo being denied the right of eventual self-determination? What is the Government's position on the final status of Kosovo?

Of course, in return for a commitment to self-determination, the Kosovar Albanian leadership must do everything in its power to quell the terrorist activities of Albanian terrorists in Macedonia, but does the Foreign Secretary not agree that there is a connection between vacillation over Kosovo's long-term status and the recent terrorist activity? There has been a lamentable lack of clarity and long-term vision, and mixed messages from the west have contributed to today's crisis.

When did the Macedonian Government approach the British Government about the lack of border control between Macedonia and Kosovo? What representations did the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence make to their NATO counterparts? Why was there not earlier decisive action to step up the border controls? Did not the vacillation over the buffer zones encourage the terrorists to believe that the west was not serious about supporting the Macedonian Government?

Is not the key lesson that political leaders have to stay on the case after the television cameras have moved away? After the bombing in Kosovo was over and the victory laps were completed, there was still a problem to be dealt with. Five years after the Dayton peace accord was signed, Bosnia-Herzegovina bears little resemblance to what Dayton envisaged. There are two states, two Governments, three armies and three police forces there. Is it surprising that Macedonian Albanians believe that the door to self-government is open when the west has vacillated over requiring the leaders of Republika Srpska to conform to Dayton?

The message from the west should be utterly unequivocal: existing borders should be preserved; peace accords should be honoured and the west will not accept anything less. We should say what we mean, without vacillation or equivocation, and it should be understood that we mean what we say.

Mr. Cook: I welcome the opening two sentences of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks, and will convey to KFOR and the British troops his support for, and confidence in, their deployment to the border.

There are two vast contradictions in what the right hon. Gentleman just said. The first is that it is a bit rich for the Conservative spokesman to complain of vacillation when, for years in Bosnia, the Conservative Government appeased Milosevic and did not take resolute action.

Mr. Maude: You agreed with the policy.

Mr. Cook: I did not agree with the policy; I happen to remember because I was the Opposition spokesman at the time.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) must allow the Foreign Secretary to reply.

Mr. Cook: If the right hon. Gentleman wants a contrast—

Mr. Maude *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have given the right hon. Gentleman an instruction.

Mr. Cook: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the right hon. Gentleman wants a contrast, it is the contrast between the vigorous and resolute action that we took in Kosovo to halt ethnic cleansing and the tolerance, under a Conservative Government, of ethnic cleansing for years in Bosnia.

On support for the Macedonia Government, I agree absolutely with the right hon. Gentleman. The Government of Macedonia are under pressure at present and they require our solidarity and support. That is why at Stockholm and since we have sent messages of solidarity and support to them. The last message that the Government of Macedonia want to hear at present is the call for the independence of Kosovo that has just been made by the right hon. Gentleman. If he really believes that that is welcome in Skopje, he has no comprehension whatever of Balkan politics.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): What are the rules of engagement under which British troops could open fire?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raised that question yesterday with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and asked him to place the document in the Library. The rules of engagement is a military document, and it is not customary to make it public. It is not helpful to British troops for others to know the point at which they will open fire and, therefore, the point up to which they can go before fire is opened. It is very much in the interests of British troops that we preserve the discretion of that document.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): May I offer my support to the Government in the policy outlined by the Foreign Secretary? In circumstances where all the gains so painfully achieved in the Balkans over the past 10 years have been put at risk, will he continue to impress on the Macedonian Government the need for their forces to exercise restraint and self-discipline, and not to fall into the pattern of revenge that we have so often seen in the Balkans during those 10 years?

Will the right hon. Gentleman say to the Macedonian Government that having apparently won a military victory, now is the time for them, from that position of strength, to launch a political initiative designed to ensure the recognition, both in theory and in practice, of the human rights of all Macedonian citizens? Finally, will he remind the Macedonian Government that those who aspire to membership of the European Union have to satisfy the EU that they have achieved the highest standards of recognition of human rights before their membership application stands any chance of success?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a number of valid points. I entirely agree with him on the importance of the Macedonian army remaining disciplined, focused and proportionate in its response. I echo the welcome given by Lord Robertson in Skopje late last night for the fact that the recent action was firm and restrained. We should remember that 40 per cent. of the Macedonian army is Albanian.

I agree entirely with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's observation about the need now for a move from a position of strength. I can well understand the reluctance to take a political initiative if it is seen as a concession to terrorists, but after the success of this weekend's action and the retreat of the terrorists, the Macedonian Government can now take such steps from a position of strength and should do so. The terrorists want to undermine multi-ethnic Macedonia; we must make sure that they are defeated and that we defeat also their poisonous lie that Albanian and Slav cannot live together in the same country in peace.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): It is surely right and in our national interest to support the democratic Government of Macedonia, who have been a beacon in a highly difficult region. As my right hon. Friend said, there is the military track and the political track. What particular help is he prepared to give the Macedonian Government in addressing the legitimate grievances of the Albanian minority? What does he have in mind? Would it not be best if a Foreign Office Minister took our clear message to the Macedonian Government, who are now, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said, in a position of strength?

Mr. Cook: I am pleased to say that we are already heavily engaged in helping the Macedonian Government in practical ways. The United Kingdom has committed £500,000 to help to set up the new Albanian university in Tetevo, which should open for business this coming autumn. Obviously, we will look sympathetically at other projects.

I was in touch only yesterday with the Foreign Minister of Macedonia. I met him last Friday, and I will continue to keep in close contact with him. The next major appointment will be in two weeks, when he and other representatives of the Government will come to Brussels to sign the stabilisation agreement with the European Union. We have invited the members of the Government to bring with them Albanian representatives from the Parliament and the Government to demonstrate our support for the multi-ethnic character of Macedonia.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): What help will the British Government give the Macedonian Government in relation to the population census in that country, which is planned for next month? Will American troops be playing a greater role in policing the Kosovo-Macedonia border?

Mr. Cook: Much of the border is in the American sector. The Americans are already involved in policing that border and our troops will work closely with the local US commander when they get there. We discussed the census at Stockholm and I put it to the Commission that we should be willing to provide European Union observers because the Albanian community is keen for it to have an international legitimacy.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): May I support everything that my right hon. Friend said today and in Stockholm? I also agree with his condemnation of the demand by the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) that we should show some support for the independence of Kosovo. It is a fragile state in which a small group of extremists on the border is trying to incite discontent among the minority population in Macedonia. The last thing they need to hear is that Members of this House have been talking about independence. There is a long way to go in Kosovo. I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman does not know that his party involved others in helping to build a democracy there.

Mr. Cook: It is very important that no one speaks as if the extremists who have carried out the insurgency in Macedonia have the backing of the wider Albanian community. Their action has been condemned by the Albanian political leaders in Macedonia, the Kosovo leaders in Pristina and the Albanian Government. They represent themselves, not the wider community.

I could not agree more with my hon. Friend's comments on democracy in the region. We are pushing for the United Nations to hold Kosovo-wide elections to a constituent Assembly later this year. I hope that those will proceed and that we will be able to embark on a dialogue with legitimate elected leaders who have behind them the authority of the ballot box, not that of the bullet. It is wrong for any western politician to prejudge that dialogue.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): May I express the hope that the Foreign Secretary has studied the characteristically pungent remarks of David Lloyd George about the difficulty of influencing events in Macedonia and the experiences of the British Salonika expedition? Does he agree that the most cursory glance at the map shows that it would require tens of thousands of troops to close the Macedonian frontier to the countries that surround it? Will he also recognise that his remarks about the need to make further concessions to the Albanian minority in Macedonia will be badly received by the majority in that country who remember that almost identical language prefaced the British Government's decision to pursue policies that have replaced Serb rule with Albanian rule in Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: I have to be candid and confess that I have not had time in the past week to consult David Lloyd George on the situation in Macedonia. I have been trying to address the problems of this century, not those of a century ago. However, I rebut what the hon. Gentleman said. We should

not regard a modern pluralist democracy in Macedonia as a concession. Indeed, better and stronger local government would benefit the people of both communities in that country.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): Will the Secretary of State have discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence to establish what resources there are in both Departments to fly out as many Conservative Members as possible to the Balkans to enhance their understanding of the area? Perhaps on that visit, they could discover what the consequences of a referendum for self-determination—independence—would be for the region. If we think that we have had problems up to now, I suspect that independence for Kosovo in the foreseeable future would have catastrophic results.

The Defence Committee visited the units that are being sent to police part of the border. Their professionalism and commitment are outstanding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that most hon. Members, at least on the Labour Benches and, I hope, on the Conservative Benches, realise that the insertion of British troops to prevent people travelling from Kosovo to cause mischief in Macedonia is helpful, not destructive, to security in that troubled part of the world?

Mr. Cook: I absolutely endorse the last part of my right hon. Friend's observations. One of the strengths that our trained and equipped forces will bring to the border is a capacity for operating at night, which is the time when the terrorists try to move.

I am strongly in favour of an educational expedition of the sort that my right hon. Friend outlined. However, in my many conversations with Macedonian Ministers over the past five days, none of them has put in a plea that we should send them more Tory MPs.

Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Is it not as well to recognise that while it is a good thing that British forces should be helping to "seal" the Schar Planina range and the border between Kosovo and Albania, in reality that will be impossible? We have put 20,000 troops in Northern Ireland for 25 years, but we could not stop bombs being let off in London. We are talking of a border that is extremely difficult to police. We must do our best, but we should not promise that we can stop exfiltration of terrorism from Kosovo, not least because even if we could do a good job on that border, it would still be possible to pass through the Albanian border between the south of Kosovo and Lake Ochrid, which is already happening.

Is it not a tragic paradox that no one throughout the history of the Macedonian state has done more to address the issue of Albanian minority rights than the Government of President Trajkovski? It would be of no difficulty to him to use what is, in my view, probably a fairly limited military victory as a position of strength from which to bargain to return to his policy of addressing Albanian rights, and therefore to turn from the gun to the political plain.

Mr. Cook: First, may I correct the right hon. Gentleman? We do not use the term "seal" the border for the very reason that the right hon. Gentleman has stated. We can do much more to secure the border, but we are not pretending that in a difficult terrain we shall be 100 per cent. effective. However, that does not undermine the importance of doing what we can to prevent movements, as we have already, and we can do more. For instance, we can prevent the movement of heavy weaponry—that is certainly a feasible objective. We will enhance liaison with the Macedonian military intelligence to ensure that we co-operate as partners.

The right hon. Gentleman is correct in what he says about the Government of President Trajkovski. In my intervention at Stockholm, I said that one of the reasons for his having our support is the steps that he has taken towards providing a stable and secure multi-ethnic society in Macedonia. The support of Europe will continue to be strong so long as he continues in that direction.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): I was in Kosovo last week, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the Chairman of the Defence Committee. I saw what was happening. I find it difficult to control my anger having heard the irresponsible utterances of the Opposition spokesman, who seeks to be in a Conservative Government. May I—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should address his remarks to the matters for which the Foreign Secretary has responsibility.

Mr. Hood: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I bring to the attention of my right hon. Friend—the person who is in charge of the Foreign Office—that to give any sympathy to a campaign for independence in Kosovo is the quickest way to inflame another Balkan war. Those who give such sympathy are acting irresponsibly and threatening the lives of British soldiers who are keeping the peace. I hope that my right hon. Friend will condemn that approach, because I have heard support for terrorism in Kosovo from the spokesman on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend speaks from the experience of his visit. I have already condemned what I believe to be an unhelpful and irresponsible call for independence in Kosovo, but I am happy to do so again. My hon. Friend is right to remind us all that there are several thousand British troops in Kosovo who have to live with the consequences.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that in facing the incredibly difficult ethnic mix, the tensions and the prospective explosive situation in the Balkans, an element that has not been mentioned is the amazingly high level of criminality? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that it would be appropriate for the Government to do all that they can to assist all local Governments to have available to them the necessary mechanisms of law and order? There is a mix between ethnic nationalism and banditry and crime of every sort.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair and important point. A high priority of our policy on Kosovo and the wider region is to work with our European partners to tackle the organised crime that threatens to disfigure the region. That is why, in the early days after the liberation of Kosovo, we sent in a police contingent to look particularly at criminal investigation. We shall continue to do all that we can to make sure that we tackle

crime. The tragedy is that organised crime in the region and the drugs trade have a close overlap with the terrorist extremists whom we have seen in action in the past week.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon, especially his emphasis on seeking long-term stability in the region once we have dealt with the conflict in Macedonia. Will he express his view on the pending referendum in Montenegro, the fact that the Albanian minority will almost certainly vote for independence—but for the wrong reason—and the impact that that will have on the conflict in Macedonia? Does he agree that the secret is not the ridiculous suggestion from the Opposition, but the creation anchors of stability in Serbia and Albania, using Croatia as a model?

Mr. Cook: We have repeatedly urged on President Djukanovic the importance of any new constitutional arrangement between Montenegro and Serbia being achieved by mutual agreement, dialogue and negotiation. We have also stressed that a narrow majority in a referendum for independence is not what is required for such a major constitutional change; that would require a settled consensus of the population.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The Foreign Secretary is much better informed than the British public. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] He is a very wise man. Does he feel that the public may be a bit confused? Previously, the British Government went to war on behalf of Albanian self-determination in Kosovo—*[Interruption.]* No, it is true. Now, when another group of Albanians, admittedly rather nastier than the other lot, want to go to war for their own self-determination, they are condemned. Are the Government going to have a consistent policy and are they going to stand up for self-determination, wherever it occurs.

Mr. Cook: I know that Conservative Members are given to collective amnesia about what happened before 1997, but that is a remarkable piece of amnesia about something that happened only two years ago. We did not go to war on self-determination. We went into the conflict in Kosovo to halt a major humanitarian catastrophe, triggered by the systematic and brutal ethnic cleansing by President Milosevic. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman, who did not support us at the time, still argues about whether we were right to do so.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon. Our forces, as well as our Royal Ulster Constabulary and Ministry of Defence police officers, are doing a marvellous job in Kosovo. However, is there any truth in the claim in *The Scotsman* this morning that

"around 20 counter-insurgency specialists from the Royal Marines of the Arbroath-based 45 Commando will be sent to Macedonia"?

If there is, is the specialists' function to train units of the Macedonian army? Will my right hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence give an assurance that they will be adequately equipped and have sufficient backing to do the job?

Mr. Cook: It is the case that we have recently dispatched a 10-officer recce team to Macedonia to advise us on how we can best support the army of Macedonia by providing advice, training and equipment. It has just submitted a report, which we are considering. We are not currently contemplating the dispatch of any further team, but if a case was made for a way in which we could be of assistance, it would be responsible of us to respond to that. Equally importantly, we should be responsible for safeguarding the security and safety of any troops whom we send.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): As political initiative and diplomacy will be required to resolve the conflict, the number of troops is understandably small and ambitions for them are limited. Can the Foreign Secretary tell us who is in charge? Is it NATO, the European Union or the British Government?

Mr. Cook: The commander of KFOR is appointed by NATO and accountable to NATO. I do wish that, now and again, the right hon. Gentleman would address a serious issue under discussion, rather than trying to score his petty European points.

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I was in Kosovo in January this year. One of the many things that I learned there was that the main food supplies, as well as aid and other goods, come into Kosovo through Macedonia. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that those routes will remain open or, if that cannot be guaranteed, that contingency plans are in place to ensure food supplies?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of the strategic routes. It follows from that that there would be great difficulty in providing any alternative route in. That is one of the reasons why it is so important that we support the Government of Macedonia—not just because they are democratic and multi-ethnic, but because they have been of great support to KFOR in Kosovo. We have a debt of honour to them, and we should discharge it by making sure that we give Macedonia all the help that we can.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On the same visit under the armed forces parliamentary scheme, many of us were surprised to learn that the Americans were not policing their own border. We were told that they did not have the type of troops that would normally go out on their own and be exposed in that way. Following America's announcement that it is taking troops out of its sector, can the Foreign Secretary tell us why we are sending British troops in? Is it because only British troops are willing to put their lives at risk? Are not some of the problems of overstretch of our forces caused by the fact that whenever there is a difficult issue to be dealt with, that must be done by British troops, rather than by our allies?

Mr. Cook: On overstretch, I assure the hon. Gentleman that the 300 troops that we are supplying for the border are from our present contingent to KFOR. They are not coming from any additional deployment to KFOR, although we have not ruled that out, should it be required by the commanders on the ground. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the position, broadly, in KFOR would be much easier if other nations showed the same flexibility as we did and were also willing to accept orders from

ComFOR when he requires help in particular areas. Such a step by others would greatly enhance the capability, the achievements and the effectiveness of KFOR.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does not the international community owe a great debt to Macedonia? Would it not send a valuable signal to the Government in Macedonia, who are trying to deal with infiltration through a border that my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown) described as very permeable, if we considered re-activating UNPREDEP, perhaps with a different mandate and perhaps extending its operation around Tetevo and Gostivar, and showing that we are committed to the integrity of the Macedonian border?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about our debt to Macedonia. I have already discussed that. At present, there is no active proposal in the United Nations for a restoration of UNPREDEP. That was ended following the Chinese veto after Macedonia recognised Taiwan, and there would be internal United Nations problems in restoring it. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing all that we can to seal our side of the border, and we are working with the Macedonian military to make sure that it can secure its side of the border.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Foreign Secretary will remember the warnings that he received in 1999 that, as a product of the Government's diplomatic and military strategy, NATO and British forces would in the end be involved in opposing an ethnic Albanian insurgency. Is that what has happened?

Mr. Cook: At present we are making sure that the majority of the Albanian community in Kosovo can have the peaceful life that those people want, in their own society, free from the shadow of the terrorist, and free from the shadow of President Milosevic and the thugs with whom he was terrorising Kosovo two years ago. If the hon. Gentleman imagines that Macedonia would be any more stable now if we had allowed Macedonia to continue to be the host to half a million refugees from Kosovo, he has no grasp of reality. Macedonia is much more stable now than if we had not taken the action that we took to enable those people to go back to Kosovo.

Foot and Mouth

4.4 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about foot and mouth disease. I want to update hon. Members both on the latest position on the disease outbreak and on the range of actions that the Government have been taking since I last informed the House on Wednesday 21 March. I then want to outline what we know so far about the causes and spread of the outbreak, and to announce the measures that we propose to take as a result.

At 1 pm today, there had been 668 confirmed cases in Great Britain and one in Northern Ireland. Forty-two cases were confirmed yesterday. Out of a total UK livestock population of more than 55 million, 697,500 animals have now been authorised for slaughter and 423,000 have already been slaughtered. Outside the United Kingdom, there is one case in the Republic of Ireland, and there are two cases in France and five cases in Holland.

I made public last week the epidemiological studies that I have received on the likely cause of the disease. They differed in their detail, but they were all clear that this is an unprecedented outbreak that has not yet reached its peak.

Our strategy remains focused on three key priorities. All animals—cattle, sheep and pigs—on infected farms are to be culled within 24 hours of the infection report. All animals—cattle, sheep and pigs—on contiguous farms are then to be culled within 48 hours. We are concentrating our efforts in northern Cumbria on clearing all animals identified for slaughter in Solway, and on creating a firebreak south of the worst affected area.

Last Wednesday, I explained to the House what actions the Government were taking to speed up our response to the disease. I believe that we have taken the right actions and I will spell out what effect they are already having. We have made full use of the resources of the Army. At my Ministry's request, 780 soldiers are now deployed and are helping with the logistic operations. They include 115 soldiers in Scotland and 50 in Wales, in addition to more than 600 in England, of whom 118 are in Cumbria and a further 72 in Devon. As well as the Army unit in our headquarters in London, there are Army headquarters in Exeter, Worcester, Carlisle and Dumfries. Military liaison officers will be joining all major disease control centres. The Army's role is to enhance command and control and to assist in the disposal process. Its presence allows us to free up vets to concentrate solely on veterinary matters.

Last week, I informed the House that we had put in place senior officials as directors of operations in Cumbria and Devon and were about to do so in Worcester. In addition to those three, we have since put in place further directors of operations in Stafford, Chelmsford, Gloucester, Leicester and Newcastle. These senior administrators have also taken over operational tasks from senior vets and allowed them to get on with their veterinary work.

We are also bringing more and more vets into the front line. The total number of vets in the state veterinary service who are tackling the disease is now 1,235, and we are looking to increase this number still further. We are following up offers of assistance from the French and Spanish Governments. An appeal by the British Veterinary Association to its members has generated a large number of inquiries, which are being pursued. Enhanced rates of pay for temporary vets were announced last week.

Wherever possible, we have reduced the time between when a vet makes one inspection and when he or she can make the next one. Where the disease risk is minimal, the turnaround time has been reduced to 24 hours. We have simplified the valuation arrangements while at the same time safeguarding farmers' interests by introducing a generous standard tariff. More than 95 per cent. of confirmations now take place on clinical grounds; that is, without the need for laboratory tests. We have revised protocols to allow vets in the field to make on-site judgments and to initiate slaughter.

The key task is to reduce the time between the first report of the disease and the slaughter of the herd or flock. Our target remains that that should not exceed 24 hours. The epidemiological studies published last week confirmed that that is the crucial intervention that will enable us to get on top of the disease. We are achieving that in large parts of the country, including Devon in recent days. In Cumbria, the high density of infection and sheer number of cases has meant that we are not yet achieving that target, and work is in hand to address that.

Yesterday, I visited the two most affected areas of the country, Cumbria and Devon. I saw for myself the hard work that is being done by the state veterinary service, the Army and all the other parties involved. I also met farmers and their leaders.

There has been a good deal of speculation recently about the possible use of vaccination as an ingredient in our foot and mouth disease control strategy. Vaccination can be used in two quite different ways. One approach is to use a national policy of vaccination as the protection mechanism against foot and mouth disease. That is not a policy that is adopted or favoured by any member state or by the European Commission.

It is, however, accepted that emergency vaccination can play a role in controlling an outbreak of foot and mouth disease, either to establish zones of protection between infected areas and the rest of the country or to reduce the number of cases in disease hot spots. The Commission has already agreed to the possible temporary use of vaccination in such circumstances by the Dutch authorities. ..

Vaccination is no easy option. It would be expected to delay full return to international trade, at least for the region affected, and would be likely to require tight additional controls—again, at least in the area concerned. We would need to consider, with the Commission, whether it was necessary in due course to slaughter vaccinated animals—with compensation, of course—as part of a return to normal trading.

The Government are considering whether to use vaccination. I have therefore authorised my representative in the European Union Standing Veterinary Committee to seek a contingent decision permitting the use of vaccination during the present outbreak, so that it can be deployed immediately if we conclude that it is the right approach.

We have done a great deal to help farmers financially. Our help includes full compensation for animals slaughtered on disease grounds, the provision of

agrimonetary compensation and the preservation of common agricultural policy subsidy entitlements under EU rules on force majeure. In addition, last week I opened the livestock welfare disposal scheme as an outlet of last resort for livestock farmers whose animals face welfare difficulties as a result of foot and mouth disease-related movement restrictions. The scheme provides for the removal and disposal of animals, for which Government will bear the costs. At 90 per cent. of pre-outbreak market value, the tariffs for the animals slaughtered under the scheme are generous. The detailed payment rates are being placed in the House Libraries today. The estimated value of that optional scheme to farmers obviously depends on take-up, but it is now likely to be in excess of £200 million.

Let me now turn to what we know about the possible causes of the current outbreak, the spread of infection and the differences between this and the 1967 outbreak. It is likely that the source farm, from which the outbreak subsequently spread, was the fourth infected premises to be discovered, at Heddon-on-the-Wall. Hon. Members will be aware of speculation that the practice of feeding swill to pigs was a cause, or the cause, of the outbreak. The farm in question, at Heddon, was licensed to feed swill to pigs. Epidemiological and other investigations continue. I know that the House will understand if I do not comment on the specifics of the case.

The subsequent spread of infection is traceable to some extent. Virus from the source farm spread to seven other farms in Tyne and Wear. Sheep from one of those farms were sent to Hexham market on 13 February; sheep from the 13 February market at Hexham were sent to markets at Longtown, and further dispersed from there during the period between 14 and 24 February. So within days, at a time when we were still unaware of the disease, infected sheep were criss-crossing the country in hundreds of separate movements, and coming into contact with other livestock.

From Longtown market, sheep were sent to markets at Carlisle on 16 February and at Welshpool on 19 February; to dealers at Highampton, Lockerbie in Dumfries and Galloway, Dearham in Cumbria and Nantwich in Cheshire; and, indirectly, to markets at Hatherleigh on 20 February, Hereford on 21 February, Northampton on 22 February and Ross-on-Wye on 23 February.

While tracing movements of pigs from the index farm has proved relatively straightforward, tracking movements of sheep has proved more difficult, and in some cases impossible. That is partly due to unrecorded sales of sheep, which it seems took place around the edges of various livestock markets without passing through the markets' books.

Over the past four weeks, many comparisons have been drawn with the 1967 outbreak. The truth is, however, that the two outbreaks are very different. The key differences between this outbreak and that of 1967 are the speed and geographical scale of the spread of infection—which result from a number of factors—and the species involved. Experts agree that the current outbreak is unprecedented internationally. First, time had elapsed before the infection at the probable source farm was disclosed. The suspicious lesions found on pigs at Heddon-on-the-Wall on 22 February suggest that the pigs had been incubating the disease for at least two, and possibly up to three, weeks. By 23 February, when infection was confirmed at Heddon-on-the-Wall, infected animals had already spread through markets and dealers to Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway, Devon, Cheshire, Herefordshire and Northamptonshire.

Linked to that, the second factor in the speed and scale of the spread was the larger scale of animal movements nowadays compared to 1967, aided by a much improved network of roads and motorways. A third factor was that the infection spread quickly to sheep, and then among sheep. The nature of sheep flocks and the way in which they are traded made the course of the infection more difficult to trace. The 1967 outbreak was mainly in pigs and cattle. The strain of the virus with which we are currently dealing does not manifest itself clearly in sheep, which makes detection difficult. Apparently healthy animals may be disease carriers.

I am announcing four actions in response to this assessment of the origins and spread of the disease. The first measure relates to pigswill. I am today proposing a ban on the use of swill feeding in this country. I accept that the arguments in favour of and against allowing the practice are quite finely balanced. If the statutory conditions for feeding swill are complied with—heating at 100 deg C for one hour—it does not present a risk of transmitting foot and mouth disease and other similar pathogens.

Banning swill feeding will not necessarily prevent the risk of illegal feeding of swill and catering waste to pigs—possibly by the owners of small numbers of pigs, for example. However, I have concluded that the risk of swill feeding introducing disease to livestock farms on which swill is not used, and to the wider community, is now greater than the benefits to the relatively small number of premises that continue to adopt the practice. That is why I am proposing an early ban.

My Department is today issuing a public consultation document seeking the views of all interested parties on the principle and detailed application of such a ban. Meanwhile, let me remind the owners of all the pigs in the country, including pet pigs, to comply with the current law. It is illegal to feed untreated household waste or any other materials that may contain meat products.

I am also issuing a second consultation document today containing a proposal to introduce a 20-day standstill period, after movement, for sheep, goats and cattle. There are rules on the identification and movement of pigs, including a general requirement that no pigs should be moved off premises within 20 days of any pigs moving on to those premises. If a similar requirement had been in place, and observed, in relation to sheep in particular, it is likely that the spread of the foot and mouth virus would have been significantly slowed down, making tracing and control of the infection easier. I am minded, therefore, to introduce legislation to require a 20-day standstill period for sheep, goats and cattle, subject to the views of interested parties. That is why I am launching a full consultation exercise today.

Thirdly, we know that, somehow, infection has entered this country. One possible way is through illegal commercial imports of meat, in which contents have not been declared. There is clearly an issue in relation to carrier liability, to which the Government will give careful thought. Another possibility is that infected produce might have come in as a personal import. Rules already exist to control such imports, and they must be enforced effectively. I am co-ordinating action across government

[Mr. Nick Brown]

to ensure that this happens. I shall also write to Commissioner Byrne to stress that a consistent and tough approach needs to be taken across the European Union.

Lastly, once we are beyond the current difficulties, my Department will consider a range of other issues relating to the operation of the livestock sector, to ascertain whether more can be done to minimise disease risks still further. This work will cover the operation of markets—in particular, out-of-ring sales—and the identification and tracing of pigs, sheep and goats. In all those matters, I shall act in close consultation with the devolved Administrations.

This has been a dreadful time for farmers and others directly affected by foot and mouth disease. I believe that our policy of containing the disease is the right one, and that the massive logistical exercise required to implement it is being reinforced. We will succeed in eradicating this disease. In addition, I believe that the measures I have announced today will ensure that we learn the lessons and minimise the risks of such a tragedy in the future.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I am grateful to the Minister for letting me have a copy of his statement about 20 minutes before he made it. I begin by again expressing our warm appreciation of the work of all those who are fighting to contain the outbreak.

As the number of confirmed cases of foot and mouth disease continues its remorseless rise, let no one forget that behind each deadly statistic lies a terrible human tragedy. A farmer—often a whole family—faces the prospect of months of emptiness and inactivity and, beyond that, a very uncertain future. In urging the Government to work harder to curb the spread of foot and mouth disease, I am thinking not only of the mounting economic damage that it is inflicting: my heart is with the men, women and children on farms who sit helplessly as the disease gets nearer day by day and finally strikes.

Let me repeat that the Opposition will continue to back the Government whenever they take timely, effective and appropriate steps, as we have at every stage in the crisis, even when the action proposed was unpopular. That was the case with the cull around Cumbria, which the Government announced 12 days ago. We gave immediate and unqualified support.

On the proposals made by the Minister today, we share the concern about the use of pigswill and the large number of perfectly legal sheep movements and transactions that appear to have occurred. We support in principle the steps that he proposes and we shall examine the details when they are published.

On the origin of the outbreak, I am interested in the Minister's view that Heddon-on-the-Wall was the original source. Does that mean that the Government are now certain that foot and mouth disease was not present elsewhere in Britain before the case in Northumberland? Will he publish all the relevant reports, which may shed light on the possible origins of the outbreak? Can he assure the House categorically that no one—not even officials in his Ministry, either in London or the regions—was aware of a possible foot and mouth disease outbreak before 19 February 2001?

I welcome the Minister's recognition that the weakness of Britain's import controls probably allowed infected produce to enter our country and cause the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. He knows that the Conservative party has been calling for tougher enforcement of all rules relating to meat imports for a very long time and I hope that early action will be taken effectively.

Is the Minister aware of the surprise that many people express when they learn of the continued legal import of meat from countries where foot and mouth disease outbreaks have occurred in the recent past? Although measures to prevent foot and mouth from returning to Britain in future are important for the longer term, does he accept that none of the proposals on banning pigswill, a 20-day standstill period for livestock and carrier liability will do anything to deal with the immediate crisis or to slow down the relentless spread of foot and mouth disease across our countryside?

Does the Minister agree that vaccination is the very last resort and that if the Government decide that some form of vaccination is necessary, they will, in effect, be admitting that their other policies have failed? *[Interruption.]* Yes. Will he confirm that if Britain is to regain its status as a foot and mouth disease-free nation in a reasonable period, every single animal that is vaccinated would still have to be slaughtered eventually?

Does the Minister agree that the permanent loss of our foot and mouth disease-free status would have profound consequences that would go far wider than the livestock industry? Will he confirm that vaccinated animals cannot be slaughtered for human consumption?

Will the Minister confirm that the Government's chief scientific adviser said last Friday that, if the Government did not step up the scale of their measures to prevent the spread of the disease, in the worst-case analysis up to half Britain's livestock would be lost? Will he further confirm that one of the measures that the chief scientific officer described as essential was cutting to 24 hours the time between reporting a case and slaughtering the animal? Will he admit that in most areas the target is not being achieved?

The Minister stated this afternoon that 264,000 animals are awaiting slaughter. Will he confirm that, in the 24 hours that ended at 3 pm yesterday, only 31,000 animals were slaughtered? At the current rate of progress, it will take not 24 hours but more than eight days to clear the backlog of animals, even if no further cases are identified. In those eight days, thousands of animals run the risk of spreading the disease still further. Will the Minister confirm that the Government fell even further behind events because in the 24 hours to 3 pm yesterday, 48,000 more animals were identified as requiring slaughter, but only 31,000 were slaughtered? That means that 17,000 more remain on the waiting list.

Will the Minister confirm that the figures for carcases are scarcely better? Despite the excellent but belated work that the Army is now allowed to do in Cumbria, the total number of carcases awaiting disposal increased yesterday to 104,000. Does the Minister finally realise that the Government's failure to act promptly and adequately in response to the crisis has led directly to the scale of the emergency that now engulfs our nation?

Does the Minister accept that many of the actions that the Government are starting to take are the steps that I suggested at a much earlier date? If the Government had brought in the Army in a hands-on role, as I suggested on 11 March, instead of waiting two more weeks; started on-farm burial, as I suggested on 15 March, instead of

persisting with potentially harmful incineration and rendering methods; and authorised vets to order immediate slaughter, as I suggested on 13 March, the problem would be much less serious.

For the Prime Minister to suggest yesterday that the Conservative party had jumped on a bandwagon was deeply insulting to those whose suffering our timely proposals are designed to help, and a hideous distortion of the truth, which demeans his great office. Like other Ministers before him, the Prime Minister claims that foot and mouth disease is being brought under control when, plainly, it is not, and that his policies are succeeding before they have been fully implemented.

In the six days since the Prime Minister said that he was taking personal charge of the crisis, the number of animals awaiting slaughter has increased by two thirds. The dither and confusion in Government have continued and the actions that the Prime Minister's chief scientific adviser described last Friday as essential for curbing the spread of the disease have not been fully carried out.

Mr. Brown: The situation with which we are dealing is unprecedented. I shall not rise to the bait because a serious problem confronts our country and I honestly believe that the best way to approach it is in as bipartisan a spirit as possible.

I shall take one at a time the points that the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) raised, but first I express my thanks for his appreciation of the hard work of uniformed personnel and civilians in the field. They are working incredibly long hours to eradicate the disease, and they have to deal with a rising profile of cases, especially in Cumbria and Devon. The rise is remorseless, and the hon. Gentleman was right to describe the situation as a human tragedy. I give this commitment on the Government's behalf—we will stand shoulder to shoulder with the farming community and the broader rural community and do what we can to make the uncertain future to which the hon. Gentleman referred more certain. We will stand in the farmers' corner, not just helping them through the disease outbreak but working with them on a recovery plan afterwards.

The hon. Gentleman said that he had stood by me even when I had to make unpopular decisions. If he can think of a popular decision that I can make in these circumstances, I would welcome his advice. There are some very hard choices to be made. There is not one recommendation that does not have a good argument against it, except this—doing nothing is not an option. Some very difficult questions must be addressed.

I met farmers yesterday in the hardest of circumstances in Cumbria, where the outbreak is most intense, and in Devon. I found the farming community very upset and distressed, quite naturally. I heard personal stories that were absolutely heartbreaking. However, the farmers were being brave enough to face up to the difficult decisions and discuss with me unpalatable alternative strategies—as I said, there are no palatable ones. It behoves all of us to do the same and to treat the issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

I welcome what the hon. Gentleman said about the consultation on pigswill. On the movement of sheep and cattle, alternatives are set out in the two consultation documents, particularly with regard to how far we should restrict cattle movements. I welcome views on the proposals. There are no right and wrong answers, just alternative routes that the Government could follow.

We believe, and have done since the early stages, that Heddon-on-the-Wall was the original source of the outbreak. There is a whole series of urban legends about officials in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food knowing that the disease was in the country earlier and concealing it for some inexplicable purpose of their own. That simply is not true. I cannot publish what does not exist. There is no report marked "Secret", saying that there is foot and mouth disease in the country but we believe that no one will notice. Such a proposition is plainly absurd.

I cannot publish what is not there, but I can publish what I was told, and when. I asked for a note to be drawn up setting everything out in that crucial week from the first suspicion of the disease being present in Essex to the controls being put in place the following Friday. I am willing to put that in the Library so that people can see what Ministers were told, when, and what actions were taken.

The hon. Gentleman said that he had warned of the weakness of controls over foreign imports. They are the same controls that were in place for 18 years of Conservative government. They have not deteriorated over time. I want a hard look at how they are being enforced. There are two routes. First, is the rule on importation for personal use being abused? If so, how is it being abused and how can we tighten up enforcement? The second, separate, issue is meat products that are imported on containers, either lawfully or unlawfully, being described as something other than what they are. We need to take a hard look at those questions across Government, and I am co-ordinating that work from my Ministry.

The hon. Gentleman asked, perfectly properly, about vaccination. There are two ways, as I said in my statement, in which we might consider the use of vaccination. It would be a very serious step. There are arguments against it, and I want to consult the devolved authorities.

It is not true that in all circumstances the use of vaccination will compromise the disease-free status of the whole of Great Britain. I am determined to restore that disease-free status for the whole of Great Britain. That is the right strategy for the Government to pursue. We should not allow it to be compromised, not even by vaccination, but it may be possible to apply a policy of vaccination on a regional basis, and have the region in which it is applied treated differently. It is not automatic that vaccinated animals would be slaughtered afterwards, but there is a presumption that the Government would pursue such a policy.

The hon. Gentleman asked about our target of 24 hours from recognition of the disease to slaughter of the animals. That is by far the most important single intervention that we can make. We are achieving the target in most parts of the country, but we are still behind in Cumbria. We need to up our game to ensure that we achieve it. I understand the hon. Gentleman's criticisms, but it is a little like a back-seat driver saying, "You should have taken that left-hand turn half a mile back I now

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realise," but also saying, "Get on with it." I do not need to be told to get on with it and nor do the officials on the ground.

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that when this Government were elected, live pigs were being fed with the remains of dead pigs, with pig slaughterhouse waste and with the waste from pet food manufacture, and that it was this Government who took action more than two years ago to ban those practices, which the previous Administration had done nothing about? Does not it follow, therefore, that anyone feeding any mammalian waste to pigs today is acting unlawfully? I hope that the proper consequences will flow from that.

Will my right hon. Friend also recognise that even in the most dire circumstances in Cumbria he has the overwhelming support of farmers in taking the tough and often complex decisions that he is having to take? In that regard, will he assure me that he will spare no effort, but will use every resource and waste no time to take the steps necessary to isolate the outbreak at Seathwaite in the Cumbrian fells? If we are not able to do that, the consequences will be dire indeed.

Mr. Brown: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct about the constraints on the feeding of mammalian meat to pigs, except in the special circumstances involving heat treatment that I described to the House. I met Cumbrian farmers yesterday and I was enormously impressed by their fortitude and resilience in the most appalling circumstances. I can promise my right hon. Friend that the Government will stand shoulder to shoulder with his constituents and their neighbours until the disease is eradicated and a recovery programme is firmly in place.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his usual courtesy in providing an early copy. We, too, support in principle the measures contained in the statement. I have a few questions, however.

First, the chief scientific adviser a few days ago used words to the effect that this was a disaster waiting to happen. When did he come to that conclusion and, more important, when did he communicate that fact to the Government? Secondly, what arrangements are to be made for the disposal of the waste food that will not now go into swill? Will it be the subject of proper regulation and inspection?

Will the right hon. Gentleman consider permanently increasing the resources of the state veterinary service and, in effect, reversing the cuts that have taken place under the present Administration and under the previous Conservative Government?

Will there be additional port health inspectors to give real teeth to the inspection of imported food to ensure that this situation cannot happen again? Will the Minister also put more resources into the inspection of farms, in particular to enforce the 20-day restriction? It will be of little value if it is not rigidly controlled. Does he accept that vaccination might be a sensible precaution to protect special breeding flocks and cattle herds where valuable gene pools have to be preserved?

We still have not heard about a scheme to assist farmers with cattle over 30 months. That is becoming a real problem as more and more cattle fall into that category. Has the right hon. Gentleman been able to discuss with his colleagues a scheme to deal with that? Has he also considered the problems of healthy stock trapped within restricted areas? In some cases, they are now awaiting welfare disposal, rather than being moved for slaughter so that they go into the food chain. Is not that against basic common sense?

Is the Minister aware of a letter from a college in Germany that was passed to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster)? It states:

"Much to our regret we have to cancel our stay at your college from 28 March to 12 April . . . because of the foot and mouth disease. The Ministry of Agriculture has given advice to the Ministry for Cultural Affairs—

that is in Germany—

"to stop all trips to England within the near future".

Perhaps that is somewhat at odds with the message that we understood we would be sending to Europe to ensure that such colleges maintain at least some business during the crisis.

Mr. Brown: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should make it clear that the letter probably refers to the German regional Ministry of Agriculture and not my Ministry. I know of no reason why people cannot visit market towns and other parts of the countryside. I have been very consistent in my advice on that matter—all that people have to do is to stay away from farmed livestock and support the authorities in the necessary work that they are undertaking.

On the hon. Gentleman's perfectly proper question about the over-30-months scheme, I am looking at what can be done to help farmers in these difficult circumstances. I cannot make an announcement today, but I am looking at the matter and I hope to be able to say something about it at some stage.

On vaccination, the hon. Gentleman is right: if we are to use vaccination as part of our disease control strategy, we must make absolutely certain that the consequences have been worked through and that we have a local management plan in the circumstances where we use that strategy. The hon. Gentleman is right that it could help in our desire to preserve rare breeds and animals that are particular to a region. That is one of the arguments in favour of using it. However, we need to be clear precisely how we would use it and why, and what the exit strategy will be.

On the 20-day standstill, yes, it will be inspected. There are other consequences; for example, looking at movement records for sheep, including the possibility of a recording system in the future that is similar to that currently used for cattle—so that the process is more transparent and more easily monitored.

The work of port health inspectors forms part of the work that I am taking forward within government.

I do not believe that the size of the state veterinary service has been substantially reduced since the Labour party came into government, but we shall clearly have to take a hard look at the ability of the service to respond to a rapidly changing situation when viral disease breaks out among animals.

If the chief scientist said that foot and mouth disease was a disaster waiting to happen, he was certainly behind the times; the disaster has already happened and we are trying to get on top of it. I did not hear him say that; he is advising the Government on the epidemiology. That is useful work.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): As we are now burying carcases, will that reduce the need to send them to rendering plants such as the one in my constituency? I am concerned that my right hon. Friend says that there seem to be some unrecorded movements of livestock. In his view, are there perhaps deliberate attempts to hide things for financial gain? There were some dodgy practices leading to BSE. A National Audit Office report on set-aside policy found more than 1,000 irregularities. Is there something wrong in the farming industry that we should know about?

Mr. Brown: I cannot comment on individual cases that may come before the courts. It is perfectly clear from the tracing work undertaken by MAFF officials that some anomalies still need to be reconciled; a possible explanation is the unrecorded movement of livestock.

Where on-farm burial can be used as a disposal route, it is used. There have been about 42 such disposals in Cumbria alone. However, there are also difficulties—the most obvious of which is the presence of the water table. It really is not a good idea to put a large number of dead and decomposing animals into the watercourse.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): In Westminster Hall this morning, I raised the serious problem that farmers will shortly have to decide whether to turn their stock out from the cowsheds on to the pastures, because they will soon run out of fodder. When the stock are turned out on the pastures, that is likely to spread the disease more quickly and to a larger geographical area. Farmers will need clear advice from the Ministry as to whether they should turn their stock out. Will the Minister comment on that this afternoon?

Mr. Brown: Yes. One of the purposes of the proactive cull that I announced some 12 days ago is to make a pre-emptive strike on the disease, which mostly involves sheep but some pigs, so that the disease in sheep can be firmly contained before cattle are let out on to summer pastures, because by and large we have managed to keep the disease out of cattle so far. I know that there are exceptions to that, especially in the hot spots, but this problem is predominantly associated with sheep, and the hon. Gentleman is right that it is important that we get on top of it now. It is also important that we give clear advice to those who are thinking of turning cattle out into pastures that have recently been vacated by sheep.

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): May I reassure my right hon. Friend that in my constituency, adjacent to Heddon-on-the-Wall, there is a clear understanding that the sole cause of the spread of the disease is its virulence?

However, there is confusion among the people on the question of vaccination--which I believe has been fuelled today. There is not an understanding of the distinction between vaccination as a way of preventing the entry of foot and mouth into a body of beasts or a country, and vaccination as part of a programme of culling to rid a country, an area or a group of beasts of an existing foot and mouth infection. Clearly, it would be in relation to the latter that my right hon. Friend's officials have given consideration to the subject. I urge him to make it absolutely clear to the public that that is the case, that any vaccination policy would be, in effect, part of the culling policy, and that any beasts that were vaccinated should therefore be immediately slaughtered.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. It is in the second context that he describes that the Government are considering a vaccination policy, but we have not yet decided whether such a policy would help us with our disease eradication proposal. The Government have no intention whatever of generally vaccinating livestock in Great Britain. I cannot envisage our undertaking such a policy.

My understanding of the outbreak in Heddon-on-the-Wall and in my hon. Friend's constituency in Newcastle is the same as his: that his constituents were affected by the plume that rose from the intensively farmed pigs that had the disease, we now know, for two, perhaps three, weeks.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): If the Minister is so convinced that the outbreak did not begin before 19 February, how come the sheep that left Great Britain on 31 January, shipped by Mr. Hugues Inizan, arrived in France and were tested positive by the French authorities?

Mr. Brown: It is perfectly possible that those sheep lay over in a lairage with, or after, sheep carrying the virus, or at least the antibodies, when they arrived in France. In other words, there are explanations as to the route by which the infectivity was brought there, other than the conspiracy theory that it was in our country before the beginning of February. I have looked quite hard at this question and I must tell the hon. Gentleman and others that there is not a shred of evidence that the first outbreak was the result of anything other than events at the farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I strongly support my right hon. Friend's decision to appoint Brigadier Birtwhistle to take control of part of this exercise, in Cumbria. He is doing a first-class job, along with his 118 troops, and he is inspiring confidence in the population.

There is growing support for ring vaccination in Cumbria. Can my right hon. Friend ensure the future of the Herdwick sheep, the future of which worries us because they play such an important part in land management in the county?

Mr. Brown: I understand the very special points about Herdwick sheep, and I tried to refer to them, and the principles more generally, in an earlier answer. Yes, we will do what we can to preserve the Herdwick sheep, but that action must be compatible with the rest of the disease containment strategy. That is a reason, although I have to tell my hon. Friend that it is a subsidiary one, why we might consider a vaccination strategy in the localised circumstances in Cumbria, but I emphasise that we are not there yet and any decision will be made in discussion

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not just with the NFU nationally, but with the territorial departments and farmers locally. I met local farmers on my visit yesterday, and I found them to be very brave, resilient and willing to face up to difficult decisions. I also found them very appreciative of the leadership of the armed forces and of the contribution that the armed forces are making to disease control.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Does the Minister recall that the first revelation appears to have been in Essex, not in Northumberland, so there is something of a question mark about the extent to which sufficient analysis was done, by officials or others and/or by Northumberland county council, in respect of the Heddon incident? That matter needs to be properly investigated. No doubt the Minister is giving the best answers that he can on the basis of the best evidence that he has at the moment, but will he give a guarantee to the House that a public inquiry will be held in due course, so that everyone can be fully satisfied that the statements made so far can be verified?

Mr. Brown: There has already been an inquiry into the matter. The farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall was farm No. 4 in the order of infected premises. It was discovered as a suspect on a Thursday and confirmed on the Friday morning, when Parliament was in recess. In fact, I telephoned the Prime Minister that day—he was in the United States—and we had the movement restrictions imposed, as the hon. Gentleman will recall, by 5.30 that afternoon, so we acted pretty promptly. The issue is that disease was incubating on those premises for a fortnight, perhaps three weeks. In other words, it had been present; it had not been reported to the Ministry; it had formed a plume and we now know that other animals had been infected, including those in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) and in that of the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson).

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to Carlisle yesterday, meeting the MAFF staff and seeing the excellent work that they have done, together with the vets and the Army. I understand that Brigadier Birtwhistle is due to retire in a week's time, so I hope that good offices will prevail and that he will be kept there for a little longer. There is dispute in Cumbria about vaccination, but people want clarity. Although we must take the right decision on vaccination, will my right hon. Friend try to take that decision as speedily as possible, so the options become available to Cumbrian farmers?

Mr. Brown: I give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. I also promise to return to his constituency to discuss the issue personally with farmers' leaders before any decision is taken. It is an important decision; it affects the livelihoods of those in my hon. Friend's constituency, as well as those in neighbouring constituencies. I will return to Carlisle, and I will discuss the issue very carefully with farmers before any decision is made. I will also make it abundantly clear precisely what the decision is; in which circumstances, if at all, vaccination would be used; and what the exit strategy would be for the animals. When I visited Cumbria, I found a yearning for clear-cut advice and to have the policies clearly stated and well understood.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I am sure that the Minister will agree that one of the most important things for farmers is to have information. Much of my constituency is now in an exclusion zone. Pig farmers and other livestock farmers need to know when and if they can move their animals to slaughter, or whether there will be welfare slaughter schemes. In fairness, they are getting no information at all. They cannot get any information from MAFF. They asked the NFU, but the NFU local secretary tells me that he cannot get any information. When I have tabled parliamentary questions to Ministers on their behalf, I have received the reply:

"I will reply to the hon. Member as soon as possible."

Somewhere, somehow, the Ministry must be able, through the NFU or others, to let farmers know what is happening. It is grossly unfair to keep all those who are desperately concerned in the dark and to deny them information.

Mr. Brown: We have been quite successful in getting a fair bit of the domestic livestock industry back to some form of movement. I accept that it is not taking place under normal conditions; the licensing requirements are tight, severe and bureaucratic. However—believe me—if unlicensed movements of livestock were taking place throughout the country, the chances of eliminating the disease would be dramatically diminished. I know that people find the licensing regime burdensome, but I assure the House that it is necessary.

There is a whole, separate set of questions about the welfare disposal scheme which is designed to help farmers in circumstances in which the animals cannot move through the trade and cannot be managed locally. I agree that there have been teething troubles, but we are trying to resolve them. Potentially, the scheme will be very popular.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): My right hon. Friend will know that we have a major outbreak in the Berkeley area of my constituency where seven farms have already been infected. We are now about to embark on the proactive cull. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend define what is meant exactly by contiguous holdings, because the issue is causing concern? Will he also tell us how the chain of information goes to such holdings, because there have been difficulties in the way in which that has taken place? Will he consider the issue of disposal, because we must get on top of that problem very quickly—and will he also consider the role of slaughterhouses in areas of infectivity, because they have a major influence on what animals can move and where?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on his final point but, to some extent, that problem is unavoidable.

Infected premises will be slaughtered out within 24 hours; that is the target that we have set and, as I have said before, it is the single most important intervention that we can make. There is a target of 48 hours for the contiguous premises, but clearly veterinary resources have to be prioritised. Infected premises—including any that might exist in other parts of my hon. Friend's county—

are the priority but, when the infectivity is less dense, it is perfectly possible for a vet to take a slaughter team with him, identify the animals and slaughter can take place at once. Although I cannot promise that it will always happen, it is possible in some cases that the surrounding premises can then be visited and slaughter—I know it is hard, but it is necessary—can commence there as well.

My hon. Friend asked about the definition of contiguous premises. It covers those that border the infected farm holding, but it is possible to make a case in exceptional circumstance. However, the circumstances must be exceptional—the general rule is that the animals are to be culled out.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): We now have the voluntary livestock welfare disposal scheme, but I assure the Minister that it is not working. A pig farmer in my constituency—who I believe the Minister met yesterday—now has 3,000 more pigs on his farm than the buildings can accommodate. That is absolutely disastrous. Yesterday, the farmer was ready to move his pigs to the licensed abattoir at Hatherleigh, which was ready to receive them, and transport was laid on to start the process.

At 7 pm, an official from MAFF rang and cancelled everything. He stated that animals should be slaughtered on the farm. The Minister must concede that that would be dreadfully inhumane, a danger to public health and appalling for animal welfare purposes. I dare not dwell on the consequences of partial culls being handled on the farm, especially in pig buildings. I am told that the official who cancelled the arrangements was a Whitehall official, so will the Minister please resolve the chaos and confusion and issue instructions immediately that the scheme should proceed through the abattoir at once?

Mr. Brown: I will take a hard look at the individual case that the hon. Gentleman mentions. However, there may be countervailing reasons why the instruction was given—I do not know and I do not want to rush to judgment. The hon. Gentleman is right—I spoke to his constituent yesterday—and I assure him that I shall have a hard look at that case and get it resolved.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I welcome my right hon. Friend's frank and detailed statement and the spirit with which he is trying to address the genuine concerns of Members of all parties. I remind him that we now have eight confirmed cases in my constituency and perhaps another two about to be confirmed. It looks as though the situation in the county of Durham is continuing to deteriorate. I welcome the evidence of the speed with which slaughter is already following identification. Will my right hon. Friend tell me whether the rumours that the Army may come to the county are true?

Mr. Brown: There will be a military presence to help with the logistics in controlling the outbreak in Durham, in my right hon. Friend's constituency and in neighbouring constituencies. The response time from discovery to slaughter is vital in preventing the spread of the disease in County Durham.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Is the Minister aware that I was contacted earlier this afternoon by Mr. Colin Keron, a constituent of mine who is working as a temporary vet in Carlisle? He described the position in Carlisle as a continuing complete absence of management. When MAFF is scouring the world to find additional vets, I am told by Mr. Keron that vets in Carlisle are spending two to three hours at a time cooling their heels, waiting to be assigned, and when they do go out on assignment, it can take them up to an hour to get through to MAFF's phone line to get a new assignment. Mr. Keron describes the foot and mouth situation in the county as absolutely and completely out of control, and he joins the call of many others, including Members of all parties, for vaccination to be adopted immediately. The Minister will recall that I raised the case for vaccination with him six days ago. Can he please move beyond the consultation phase to action?

Mr. Brown: No, I cannot, because there are serious reasons why one might not want to use vaccination. That strategy is not to be rushed into just because some people call for it; others are bitterly opposed to it. It is important to explain carefully what we are doing, why we are doing it and what our exit strategy is, and it is vital that we explain ourselves properly to farmers and carry them with us. I did hear something of the complaints that the hon. Gentleman mentioned when I visited Carlisle yesterday, and I am taking action to make the best possible use of veterinarians' time.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the supportive remarks made by vets and farmers in Dover, Deal and other parts of east Kent. Will he consider the particular circumstances prevailing in east Kent, where two cases have been confirmed purely on observations, but all the blood and tissue tests have proved negative and local vets and certainly local farmers are convinced that there is not a foot and mouth outbreak? Yet we have the imposition of all the restrictions about which we have heard this afternoon, and tomorrow a massive cull is threatened of what I consider to be healthy cattle.

Mr. Brown: I said earlier that there is not a popular announcement that I could make. If I lifted the movement restrictions, as my hon. Friend asks me to do, and the disease spread throughout the southern parts of our country, I would be justly criticised. I am afraid that it is necessary to keep those restrictions in place for the time being and to work through the licensed movement system where we can. I know that that is hard news. I understand why people who believe that their animals are healthy resent it, but there is not an easy option and the right thing to do is to keep the restrictions in place. I apologise to my hon. Friend's constituents for that, but it is for the greater good.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that whenever I speak to farmers they ask for two things: clarity of advice and co-ordination of operations? He heard what the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) said about Brigadier Birtwhistle. Will he consider, as I asked him on Friday, appointing a senior military officer, to be directly answerable to him, to take charge of the operations nationwide, rather than merely having a series

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

of regional commanders? When will the Minister give Members of Parliament the briefing that he promised us last week?

Mr. Brown: The briefing is placed in the Library daily and should have been placed in the Opposition Whips Office. As for last Friday's presentation to journalists and Members of Parliament who could attend, I aim to repeat that exercise this week or at the beginning of next week at the latest. I shall try to hold it at a time that is convenient for hon. Members, which I understand is mid-week.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Has my right hon. Friend or his ministerial colleagues had a moment to reflect on the proposal in *New Scientist*, which I sent to him, that napalm could be used to destroy carcases quickly? If there is a shortage of napalm in Britain, surely the Americans could help. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Brown: I understand the question. It is not as frivolous as Opposition Members seem to think. We are considering a range of disposal routes, but napalm is not one of them—not even as a fuel, which is, I think, what my hon. Friend means.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Now that the epidemic has become a pandemic, I welcome the Minister's commitment at least to look at the possibility of using vaccines. How much vaccine is in the United Kingdom and how much might have to be imported? What contingency plans does he have to distribute the vaccine to vets?

Mr. Brown: Purely on a contingency basis, plans are quite far advanced. Some 500,000 shots are lined up for this strain of foot and mouth disease and I have access to an additional 5 million vaccinations, if they are needed. A vaccination strategy requires repeat vaccination. It is not an intervention that is carried out just once. We must also consider the time that it takes for the vaccine to have an effect. The shot that we have had made up is particularly vigorous and would have an impact on the animals between four days and a week.

Mr. Fabricant: What about distribution?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman, from a sedentary position, asks about distribution. We can get our hands on it fairly quickly.

Ms Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Calderdale is part of a severely restricted blanket exclusion zone, but local farmers have complained to me that they are not being officially told that they are in such an area. They are finding that out through the NFU, through conversations with neighbours or when they apply for movement licences. A number of those farms are more than 17 km from the outbreak in neighbouring Queensbury and the NFU has made representations to the Ministry to get the restriction limited to the 10 km exclusion zone. Clearly, welfare problems are an issue for anyone in a restricted area and I am not pleading a special case. However, it appears that a decision has been made to blanket an area when the normal restrictions might be more appropriate. Secondly—

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has one bite at the cherry.

Mr. Brown: I shall consider the control zones in my hon. Friend's constituency. However, they take into account local circumstances, are imposed on veterinary advice and are vital to prevent the spread of the disease.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister acknowledge that there are three crises in the countryside? First, that of the farmers who have foot and mouth on their holdings, with the tragedy that that entails; secondly, that of the farmers who are caught in the restricted areas, which are widely drawn from London without regional guidance and where enormous problems of animal welfare and of running a business are building up; and, thirdly, the difficulties experienced by hundreds of thousands of ordinary businesses because there are tourist attractions with no tourists, visitor attractions with no visitors and businesses with no customers. Will he deal with those issues?

In addition, will the right hon. Gentleman recognise that he cannot build a firebreak on the fells? If the disease gets on the Pennine uplands, it will sweep south like a brush fire. Vaccination might be necessary to stop that. Will he take that decision quickly? If he does vaccinate, will he ensure that he has got the vets to do the job? I am afraid that there is a history of a long interval between the Minister announcing policy intentions and their implementation.

Mr. Brown: It would not be necessary to have vets to pursue each individual vaccination. That can be done by others who are trained only to vaccinate the animals. For once, veterinary resources are not a constraint on policy. I have been as candid as I can be with the House. We have a vaccination strategy under consideration, which I am not announcing today. A contingency plan is being moved into place if we decide to go down that route. If we decide to stand it down, we shall stand it down.

We have tried to respond to the broader difficulties in the rural community, including those faced by the operators of tourist businesses and others. I have introduced the farm animal welfare scheme to deal with those who cannot move their animals and cannot manage them in their local circumstances. The rates have been widely welcomed by the trade. They are as close to market conditions as we would dare get without disrupting the market. That has been done to try to help hard-pressed farmers. Where the disease is found, we buy the animals on the basis of 100 per cent. compensation. I agree that that does not solve the problem, but it goes some way.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): May I ask my right hon. Friend about abattoirs such as Farmers Fresh, which is a producer-owned and producer-led business in Warwickshire? I met some of its representatives last night. It is a high-standard abattoir and

it was making significant progress in securing export markets for British lamb. With the present low throughput, it is facing awkward difficulties.

As my right hon. Friend said, we need to think also about recovery. The Farmers Fresh abattoir will need to exist when, as is to be hoped, we arrive soon at recovery. What help is he thinking of giving such abattoirs in the intervening period?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to set out the difficulties that are faced by other parts of the food chain, including abattoirs. We are trying to get work moving where we safely can. We are trying to do other things to help the sector. He talks of a business being geared up for the export market. I do not know the circumstances in detail, but any recovery plan—we are working on such a plan with the industry—must take into account the fact that the export trade, especially for the sheep sector, is likely to be constrained for some time.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Will the Minister consider urgently the practical issue of pedigree breeding flocks and breeding herds? Owners of such flocks—the sheep have genes that go back more than 100 years—are petrified that if the disease gets into them they will lose them for ever. I would like the right hon. Gentleman to press that issue.

Will the Minister consider the question of price? It is welcome that cattle and sheep can now be moved to abattoirs, but the prices that are being paid, especially for sheep, are extremely low. There is a feeling that farmers are being ripped off by the trade. Will he look into that? Does he agree that one way to resolve the issue is to encourage both consumers and Government Departments to buy British?

Mr. Brown: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about buying British. I appeal to everyone: if we want to help the British livestock market in these difficult times, we should buy its product. It is clearly identified in retail outlets. Let us make a special effort to buy British. That would help to reinforce the supply chain and reinforce prices within it. I have appealed to everyone in these difficult circumstances to treat one another fairly, and I am happy to repeat the appeal today.

I note what the hon. Gentleman says about rare breeds. I want to do what I can to save pedigree stock and rare breeds. He is right to say that a local vaccination strategy may help us to achieve that objective, either directly or indirectly.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I commend my right hon. Friend and his Department for their approach to this terrible problem. I am aware that he has documentary evidence, supplied by Sky Television and others, of illegal activities. Does he agree that the real issue involves livestock dealers and markets? Will he consider what I feel is a reasonable suggestion made by Commissioner Byrne, which is the tagging of sheep?

Mr. Brown: We are in close contact with the European Commission about all that. I have not yet received the evidence that Sky Television said that it would send me, but when I do, naturally I shall examine it very carefully indeed.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Having listened to the Minister and to the Market Bosworth branch of the National Farmers Union earlier in the day, I have to tell him that he has no chance of meeting the 24-hour and 48-hour deadlines in west Leicestershire. He must bring the Army in if he expects to have an extended cull.

Why has MAFF got a block on the use of homeopathic borax, which has been used in previous outbreaks with great success? Does he remember that Nye Bevan said:

"Why read the crystal ball when he can read the book?"?

Will the Minister read the homeopathic medicine book, and understand that borax is well documented as being very effective in preventing foot and mouth?

Mr. Brown: Getting our response time down to 24 hours from discovery to slaughter is essential; all our endeavours drive in that direction. In response to a question on a previous statement, I promised the hon. Gentleman that I would have the issue examined. I have asked for that to be done, but I have not yet seen the response.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): What progress has been made in identifying more carcase disposal sites in Devon?

Mr. Brown: A great deal of progress has been made. There are a number of possible sites and I know that there is a lot of interest in exactly which one will be used; all sorts of rumours are going round the community, as always happens on such occasions. I am not in a position to make a statement to the House today; in fact, I expect the announcement to be made locally. However, we are looking to open other disposal routes, and I understand that we are pretty close to getting those arrangements in hand and announced.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): May I personally thank the right hon. Gentleman for the support that he and his Ministry offered at the meeting of the European Commission's Standing Veterinary Committee today, which agreed to give Northern Ireland regional export status? That was very good news for Northern Ireland. Given that the principle of regionalisation in the United Kingdom has now been accepted, will he consider opening up other areas on the mainland that do not have cases of foot and mouth so that they too can benefit from that development?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is right: the Government want to pursue a regionalisation strategy where possible. I am pleased that we have got acceptance in principle for the strong and perfectly justified case made by Northern Ireland. As our efforts bear down on the disease and we confirm the disease-free status of the north of Scotland, western Wales and East Anglia, it may well be possible to make adjustments to localised movement controls and perhaps, in time, for trade more generally to resume. It is early days, but clearly we have that at the forefront of our minds.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): My right hon. Friend is right that British consumers who want to support British farmers can go out and buy British products. Does he agree that if British people want to support their tourism sector and the broader rural economy, they should go out and do so now? Will he prevail on Opposition Members and perhaps the media to desist from their unhelpful assertion that the countryside is closed?

[Mr. Peter Bradley]

Even in infected areas such as my constituency there are small family businesses, such as the hotel in Shifnal, which has lost 75 per cent. of its trade in March for no good reason, and the village pub that I visited on Saturday, which has lost 30 per cent. of its trade for no good reason. Does my right hon. Friend agree that careless talks costs livelihoods and jobs and will he seek to instil that point into Opposition Members?

Mr. Brown: We are facing a serious disease outbreak in animals; that is no reason to avoid the countryside. All people have to do is stay away from farmed livestock. There are many things in our market towns, heritage sites and so on that people can visit; they should just stay away from farmed livestock. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): As one who has an unforgettable memory of the outbreak in 1967, may I ask the Minister to confirm that the then Minister, Fred Peart, was advised not only that the slaughtered animals should be buried immediately, but that if the carcases were burned, there was a serious risk that the virus was so viable that it could be carried a considerable distance beyond the infected area?

Mr. Brown: I do not know what advice was given to Fred Peart in 1967—I was at school at the time—but I do know that the business about the virus being spread by on-farm burning is a myth. The risk of the virus being spread as a result of the fires destroying the animals is vanishingly small. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that on-farm burial should be considered as an option. Indeed, it is used as an option, but only where that is compatible with the water table and with other very necessary disease—I include prion disease—control measures.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to movement controls? Clearly, we must be vigilant about authorising any movements, particularly within restricted areas. However, the experience reported by my constituents, of very long distances being travelled from areas as far as the north of Scotland into my constituency for slaughter under the licence to slaughter scheme, contrasts with the extraordinary bureaucratic process that must be followed to obtain an occupational licence, with a paper chase across two regional service centres, and a vet's authorisation as well.

Mr. Brown: I understand what my hon. Friend says, but he describes two quite separate operations. No matter how long it is, there is very little risk in the final journey of the livestock to the abattoir. Such journeys cannot be interrupted, and the animals are supposed to be certified clear of the disease, but even if it is incubating in them without having yet come to fruition, they are going to an abattoir, where they will be examined by a vet and killed. They will therefore cease to breathe out the virus. There is an enormous difference between that and animals that are moved for perfectly proper reasons but will live on and risk meeting other animals, which thereby risk contracting the disease.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): The Minister is aware that the number of cases in Northumberland and County Durham is rising, and there is great concern about the length of time that it is taking to detect the disease and slaughter the animals. For example, in one of the last two cases discovered in my constituency, it took five days from detection to slaughter, and in the other case, the animal, which was identified on Saturday morning, had still not been slaughtered two or three hours ago. That is causing serious concern that the disease will spread. One answer would be to take responsibility for the region away from Carlisle, which is clearly overwhelmed, and set up an independent control centre in Newcastle, so that we could get the help of the Army and have a chance of beating the disease. Will the Minister also confirm that farmers selling directly to other farmers or to dealers is not illegal, and that that has more to do with saving auctioneer's commission than fiddling any EU subsidy?

Mr. Brown: I am no expert, but my understanding is that the hon. Gentleman is right about dealing outside the market. It does relate to the auctioneer's commission. If people can come to an arrangement among themselves, that in itself is not illegal. With regard to controlling the outbreak in Hexham, we are setting up a localised control headquarters in Newcastle. I cannot say with certainty whether that would embrace all his constituency, but I will check for him and make sure that he is told. He is absolutely right: we must get our response times down to 24 hours. Bringing in localised control is an effort to do that.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Was my right hon. Friend told earlier of any recommendation to ban the use of pigswill? Does he agree that it is not sufficient for Governments to take scientific advice when a crisis occurs, but that Departments should have the means to seek out and respond appropriately to scientific advice that can anticipate problems, so that pre-emptive action can be taken before they arise? Will he ensure that his Department does so?

Mr. Brown: I agree with the principle that my hon. Friend sets out and I try to work to it when carrying out my ministerial responsibilities. I have taken particular note of the Phillips report recommendations, which are guiding me in our handling of the outbreak, even though we are dealing with an animal disease. She will have heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) told the House regarding advice about the recycling of mammalian meat. I confirm that that assurance is correct and that the Government were acting on scientific advice, even though it related to transmissible spongiform encephalopathies rather than to viral infections.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Many farmers who are affected by this dreadful outbreak will be concerned about their position with regard to the payment of various moneys under Community livestock schemes. I understand that the Minister has had discussions about the matter with the European Commission. Will he report to the House on the progress that has been made? On the Seathwaite outbreak, can he give any indication about why the disease seems to have leapt a very long distance in a situation that he deems to be under control? Farmers in my part of Lancashire are now deeply worried that the disease can spread rapidly over long distances, and they are struggling to understand why.

Mr. Brown: I cannot give a complete answer to the right hon. Gentleman about the spread of the disease,

except to say that it is highly unlikely to have been airborne, which narrows down the possibilities. With regard to livestock premiums, there are five separate premium schemes and I have the Commission's consent to the application of the force majeure rules. We have an agreement in principle, although one or two issues of detail still have to be sorted out in relation to inspections. However, the essential point is that the premiums will be paid and that the Commission is standing in our corner on the issue.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): When the Minister considers vaccination, on which I welcome his comments, will he think about the positive effects that could be achieved for the tourism industry if it were introduced as a double-barrelled approach to the disease? For example, it could restore confidence in the northern part of my constituency, which has no foot and mouth cases, but is an infected area, and might allow tourism to return there. Finally, has MAFF made any assessment of the effect of census enumerators on the control of foot and mouth? I understand that their visits are due to occur at the end of April.

Mr. Brown: As I understand it, the census is not yet under way, but we are keeping the matter under review, as nothing should be done that would risk spreading the disease. That includes all inappropriate movements on and off farms. We have not announced a vaccination strategy, but as I said, we are actively considering it and contingency plans are being put into place. I assured my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) that I would talk to his constituents—the people who would be most affected—before anything was done. I hope that we can restore visitors and tourist business to the countryside. People can visit all sorts of things without going near farmed livestock, so it is not vaccination itself that would turn the situation around. However, if it played a part by happenstance, that would be welcome.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The Minister spoke about a recovery programme for abattoirs. One step that he might care to take is to allow or encourage licensed abattoirs to participate in a welfare disposal scheme. As we heard from the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), no such encouragement is currently provided. We will need these abattoirs after the epidemic is brought under control. They have spent a lot of money on their equipment and they are under-used, and proper encouragement would ensure their survival. As the over-30-months scheme allows meat for human consumption and cull meat to be dealt with in the same abattoir, why does not he take that necessary step?

Mr. Brown: We are encouraging abattoirs to participate in such a scheme, but it must be compatible with the other necessary restrictions on products that are entering the food chain. It is not intended that animals that are dealt with in the welfare scheme should proceed into the food chain, so we need to ensure separation. Do I know of any human health reason why that should be so? I must candidly tell the House that I do not.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I use this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Speaker, for taking up the issue that I raised yesterday in a point of order. Members' briefings have now appeared in the Opposition Whips Office, but I should like to reiterate the request for an MPs' hotline to enable us to deal immediately with all the urgent matters that our constituents are raising. In addition, I asked two weeks ago whether emergency powers were needed to achieve the necessary speed in implementing the strategy that the Minister has introduced. We now read reports from No. 10 that there is an admission that Cumbrian farmers with healthy stock that needs to be culled cannot be compelled to allow that to happen and must give their consent. Will he review whether emergency powers are required? That also involves the question of vaccination as an option in the context of the contingency planning, which I welcome.

Finally, rather than just giving holding answers, will the Minister consider responding to my questions about when the inception of the disease in this country took place?

These are important issues. As I am sure the Minister agrees, they affect the epidemiology and, perhaps, the strategy that is used in treating the on-going epidemic.

Mr. Brown: I think that I answered the hon. Gentleman's last question in my statement. As for the daily report to Members, it has always been available in the Library. I had intended that Members should be able to obtain it through their party Whips Offices; I am sorry if there has been a breakdown in the process, but if there has, it results from no act of mine.

We are considering establishing a Members' hotline through the Cabinet Office communication network. I hope that an announcement can be made about that in a few days.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Cheshire is one of the top three cattle counties in the United Kingdom. Between 9 am and 1 pm today, 240 cattle belonging to my constituent Anthony Dale were shot on Shirdfold farm in Adlington. They were shot before the existence of foot and mouth disease had been confirmed: indeed, it still has not been confirmed. This was a pre-emptive cull, very much along the lines advocated by the Minister.

My farmers are experiencing problems in dealing with MAFF and the MAFF vet at Stafford—in getting hold of people, and in being given decisions. Following the shooting of 240 cattle, the immediate problem is disposal. Those on the farm want to bury them there, and people and equipment are available to enable that to be done. Will the Minister ensure that those responsible have the ability to make a decision?

Mr. Brown: Those responsible do have that ability. I will ensure that the individual case raised by the hon. Gentleman is examined as a matter of urgency. There is no ideological reason not to allow on-farm burial, but there may be other reasons that I do not know about. The most obvious is the water table; I do not know what the position is in that regard.

It is because there may be reasons that I do not know about that we have Environment Agency officials in our control centres—there is a new one in Stafford, as the hon. Gentleman said—looking into the issue. In the case of cattle aged over 30 months, there is also the question

[Mr. Brown]

of BSE prions. A range of matters must be taken into account. This is not just bureaucratic delay; we have to worry about all those matters.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the Minister accept that farmers genuinely want to co-operate with culls, but are enormously frustrated by, on occasion, not being part of the consultation loop for local cull plans? Will he commit himself to reviewing the procedures, in order to help farmers—including those in mid-Wales—to be as co-operative as they can?

Will the Minister also address himself to the specific issue of the Rogers pig farm, which has 2,000 head of pigs? That means the infectivity equivalent of 6 million cattle, in the heart of an infected area. I fear that it represents a time bomb for mid-Wales, and also for the west midlands. Will the Minister please ask his staff to review the issue, and to proceed with a cull as soon as possible—preferably tomorrow?

Mr. Brown: These are incredibly difficult issues. Enormous risks are associated with intensive pig farming. I think that a farm in Wales would fall within the competence of the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Secretary in the Welsh Assembly; I expect to talk to him on the telephone later, and I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's question to his attention.

As for communications, representatives of the National Farmers Union are working with officials from my Ministry in Carlisle and Devon, which helps. There are also regular meetings with representatives of local farmers, a practice that I would like to see replicated more generally.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): The Minister has rightly expressed concern about infection caused by illegally imported meat. According to the chairman of the East Anglian branch of the National Pig Association, the Minister was informed in a letter dated 20 May last year from Mr. Clive Lawrence of Ciel Logistics that gross abuses were involved in illegal imports of meat for personal use from African countries through Heathrow. There were, apparently, examples of baggage leaking, and of rotting deer and monkey carcases. What did the Minister do about that, when he was informed? Have there been further such incidents? What checks can put in place to reassure the House?

Mr. Brown: I think that the material to which the right hon. Lady referred was seized by the authorities—in this case, Customs and Excise. However, I shall look at the specific complaint that she has raised.

The right hon. Lady is right that there are more general issues that relate to the importation of surprisingly large quantities of meat for personal use and to the use of container transportation to bring meat that is not always accurately described into the country. Both those matters need to be looked at, with regard not only to the effectiveness of the law—I do not think that that is the problem—but to the effectiveness of the inspection regime. We must ensure that the intervention powers are adequate in the current circumstances, and they may well not be. If they are not, I shall come back to the House, and I expect that I should get all-party support in dealing with the problem.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman has announced a consultation on the 20-day standstill. That might be a very sensible thing to do. Will he, however, approach the consultation with a genuinely open mind? He will appreciate that he does not have to come to an immediate conclusion on the 20-day standstill. He will also appreciate that the advice that he is receiving on the matter comes from a fairly narrow source. I make no criticism of that, but the source is narrow. He will appreciate further that such a proposal would interfere with legitimate business. Finally, is he aware that it might constitute a barrier to the free trade in goods that is an EU requirement?

Mr. Brown: The right hon. and learned Gentleman's last point was a fair one. They were all fair points, but the last one was particularly so. On that point, I want to assert the disease control imperative over the more general rule of the free movement of goods and services. After all, the 20-day standstill rule would apply to everyone; it would not be discriminatory. I shall approach the consultation with an open mind, and when he examines the consultation document, he will see that—certainly as far as cattle are concerned—because of the traceability scheme in this country, there are options. I genuinely welcome views on all the options.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): May I turn the Minister's attention to the suspect cases at Uffington referred to by the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser)? Is the Minister aware that a number of my constituents have animals—lambing ewes and cattle approaching the 30-month threshold—on land in the vicinity of Uffington? Will he at least tell local vets and farmers who believe that those suspect cases were not confirmed whether they are right in that belief? If they are right, will he explain to them why licences previously granted to them have been revoked, and why they cannot now move their animals?

Mr. Brown: I do not want to give the right hon. and learned Gentleman an answer here and now, because I do not have sufficient knowledge of the case. I shall write to him setting out my formal response, and I promise to examine the letter personally before it is sent to him.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister has been answering questions for more than an hour. I think that we must now move on.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Previous Speakers, when faced with a difficult situation such as this, involving many hon. Members trying to speak, have said that either they or their secretary would very kindly keep a list of those who failed to get in, so that next time there was a statement,

they might be given priority. Several hon. Members have been trying for some time to ask questions without being called.

Mr. Speaker: That goes without saying. In fact, the hon. Gentleman might have noticed that in the early stages I called hon. Members who were not called at the previous statement, some of whom are still present.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I request that those of us who were not called on the previous three occasions could call for an Adjournment debate at the earliest convenience?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Lady can apply; I do not make any promises.

BILLS PRESENTED

Local Elections (Free Delivery of Election Addresses)

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, supported by Dr. Norman A. Godman, Mr. Dennis Skinner and Mr. Eric Illsley, presented a Bill to provide for the free delivery of one election address to each household from each candidate in the local government elections to be held in May 2001: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 30 March, and to be printed [Bill 72].

Representation of Gibraltar at Westminster and in the European Union

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, supported by Dr. Norman A. Godman, Mr. Eric Illsley and Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, presented a Bill to provide for representation of Gibraltar by a Member of Parliament, subject to limitations, in the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; for the inclusion of Gibraltar in a European parliamentary constituency; for the right of the chief minister to petition the House of Commons at the bar of the House; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 20 July, and to be printed [Bill 73].

Pardon for Soldiers of the Great War

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, supported by Dr. Norman A. Godman, Mr. Harry Barnes, Mr. Dennis Skinner, Mr. Tony Benn and Mr. Eric Illsley, presented a Bill to provide for the granting of pardons to soldiers of the British Empire Forces executed during the Great War of 1914 to 1919 following conviction for offences of cowardice, desertion or attempted desertion, disobedience, quitting post, violence, sleeping at post, throwing away arms or striking a superior officer; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 20 July, and to be printed [Bill 74].

European Union (Implications of Withdrawal) (No. 2)

5.40 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a Committee of Inquiry into the implications of a withdrawal by the United Kingdom from the European Union.

It is no secret that while I have concluded that Britain's best interests would be served by withdrawing from the European Union, I have to point out that that is neither the position nor the policy of the party that I represent in Parliament. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, is on record as saying that he would never take Britain out of the EU and the official policy of the Conservative party is still that we remain in Europe, but not run by Europe.

There are undoubtedly other parliamentarians who would, were they free agents, support my wish to leave the EU and, it has to be said, millions of our fellow countrymen would applaud such a move, so surely the time has come to strike a balance—to ascertain as nearly as is humanly possible exactly where the balance of advantage lies. That is the purpose of the Bill. It would establish a committee of inquiry that would impartially investigate the pros and cons of our membership of the EU and report back to the House its findings so that we might be in a position to consider the full implications and ramifications of withdrawal.

Just over 12 months ago, I embarrassed my shadow Cabinet colleagues by asking them individually to let me know what they perceived to be the benefits of Britain's membership of the EU. They decided that my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), then shadow Foreign Secretary, should be deputed to respond. I have his letter of 18 November 1999 in front of me.

Right hon. and hon. Members who follow the European debate will not be surprised that my hon. Friend's response relied not so much on fact as on assertion—for example, that membership of the EU has

"been of great benefit to the UK"

and that it

"is vital for British trade".

Furthermore, he stated:

"The internal market has been of real value for British business and for foreign direct investment in the UK."

He went on to say that, as a consequence of our EU membership,

"Britons are able to live or work anywhere they like in the EU, with practically no restrictions."

He also said that, in terms of world trade liberalisation, our membership

"gives us collectively far greater bargaining power".

My hon. Friend, who is also a former shadow Secretary of State for Defence, further asserted that one should not ignore the EU's contribution to European security—an aspect of our membership that has an increasingly hollow ring to it as our so-called European partners do their best to undermine the transatlantic alliance and to establish an EU defence organisation in competition with NATO, which has so successfully kept the peace in Europe since 1949.

[Mr. Christopher Gill]

In responding to me on behalf of all his shadow Cabinet colleagues, my hon. Friend relied heavily on assertion, and one should not be surprised by that. The whole debate thus far has been conducted on the basis of unsubstantiated assertion. It has indeed been a fact-free zone. The advocates of European integration have consistently advanced their cause by making a series of unproven assertions and, what is more, they have learned to make those assertions in forums where, as often as not, they cannot be challenged.

However, if there is a party represented in Parliament that should understand better than any other the hazard of making major political decisions based on assertions rather than fact, it is the Conservative party. In October 1990, based on the glib but unquantifiable assertions that interest rates would be lower, unemployment would be reduced and economic growth rates would improve, the Conservative Government took Britain into the exchange rate mechanism. The result, as hon. Members will recall, was that the United Kingdom was forced to abandon the ERM 23 months later because interest rates had risen to record levels—15 per cent. on the afternoon of Black Wednesday—unemployment had soared from 1.67 million in 1990 to 2.85 million in 1992 and, far from experiencing economic growth, thousands lost their businesses and even more had their homes repossessed.

For the Conservative party, it has been downhill in the opinion polls ever since, all because we accepted at face value the bogus assertions that continue to dominate the debate. On 17 April 2000, at column 733 in *Hansard*, I challenged my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who is a staunch advocate of economic and monetary union and a former Chancellor of the Exchequer. He clearly did not know that, behind the assertion that EU membership is "vital for Britain's trade" lay the fact that our trade with Europe represents less than 11 per cent. of gross domestic product. I have the figures to prove it, and as I come from a business background, I stress that it is advisable and customary to carry out a cost benefit analysis before embarking on any project. However, successive Governments have failed to do precisely that. Indeed, when requested to do so, they have refused point blank.

The purpose of the Bill is to remedy that position and seek the approval of Parliament for the establishment of a committee of inquiry, which would be charged with presenting a properly considered and costed report that dealt exclusively with the implications of withdrawal from the EU.

That exercise has already been carried out in at least one other country. I refer specifically to a recent study entitled "The Impact on the US Economy of including the UK in a Free Trade Arrangement with the USA, Canada and Mexico". It concluded that the UK's balance of trade will worsen at the rate of $1 billion per annum in the EU, whereas it would actually improve by a hefty $5 billion per annum outside it.

Let me make it clear that the committee of inquiry would be charged with considering not only the economic but also the constitutional and practical implications of withdrawal. One accepts that it is difficult to put a price upon the value of self-governance, but clearly it is an important part of the overall consideration.

The committee of inquiry might do worse than seek the opinions of those in any one of the 50 or more dominions, colonies and overseas possessions of the former British empire, to which Parliament has, in the past 70 years, granted full independence. It seems probable that, regardless of size and notwithstanding the poverty of some countries, and the political trials and tribulations of others, there would be little or no demand for a return to rule by London. The committee might also consider the experience of those parts of the former empire where federal Governments were established and the reasons for their fairly peremptory demise.

Hon. Members will be aware of the many calls in recent years for a proper debate about our future relationship with the EU. The Bill would enable that debate to be conducted on the basis of fact rather than assertion. Making available factual information, free from political bias and Government spin, would be inestimably valuable to the general public. They have every right to demand the facts, not least because, in the final analysis, they will pay the price, not only literally through their taxes, but with their historic right to live in a self-governing nation under laws made by people whom they elect to their British Parliament here in Westminster.

I trust that the House will accept the logic of my case and allow the Bill to progress.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Christopher Gill, Sir Richard Body, Mr. Christopher Chope, Mrs. Teresa Gorman, Mr. Austin Mitchell, Mr. Laurence Robertson, Mr. William Ross, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Sir Teddy Taylor, Mr. William Thompson, Mr. John Townend, and Mr. Charles Wardle.

EUROPEAN UNION (IMPLICATIONS OF WITHDRAWAL) (No. 2)

Mr. Christopher Gill accordingly presented a Bill to establish a Committee of Inquiry into the implications of a withdrawal by the United Kingdom from the European Union: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April, and to be printed [Bill 75].

Orders of the Day

Social Security Fraud Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

5.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill marks a further step in our drive to tackle fraud and error as part of our wider reforms of the welfare state. As the House will know, we inherited a social security system in which spending had doubled between 1979 and 1997, but at the same time, child poverty had trebled and the number of households with children with no one in work was the highest in Europe. Spending had doubled because of economic failure. It is now under control for the first time in three decades. That is because we are getting more people into work but also as a result of tighter gateways to the benefit system.

We also inherited a benefit system that was losing more in fraud and error than it cost to run the entire Department of Social Security. That is the legacy of 18 years of Conservative Government. They did not even attempt to measure fraud for the first 15 years and they did precious little to stop it for their entire 18 years in office. No business would put up with that, and neither should we.

Stopping fraud and error is essential. For example, we have already saved £1 billion during this Parliament by halving the number of income support claims paid out with insufficient evidence. We are prosecuting and sanctioning more people than ever before. Last year, the figure was 22,000, which is 60 per cent. up on the previous year. Those sanctions cost people 100 per cent. of the benefit that they wrongly take plus an additional 30 per cent. That's the price that they pay for doing so.

Fraud not only takes money away from where it is needed most—money that would be far better spent on schools and hospitals or invested in transport—but, crucially, the presence of fraud in the system undermines public support for the social security system. If people see others cheating and getting away with it, they lose confidence in the system. That is one of the reasons for our determination to put a stop to benefit fraud and bear down on error in the system. The Bill is a further step towards doing just that.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the latest benefit fraud review measuring the level of fraud in income support and jobseeker's allowance shows that the level of confirmed fraud is higher this year than last year?

Mr. Darling: It shows that there has been the first ever significant fall in fraud in the payment of income support and JSA. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) was never able to say that during the previous Parliament in all his time as Secretary of State for Social Security. As I have made it clear to the House on many occasions, I do not say that we have beaten fraud and error in the system. We have not, but we have begun to turn the corner. The 6.4 per cent. reduction in fraud in JSA and income support is the first significant fall that we have ever seen in those two benefits in the social security system. That is a significant achievement, and we need to build on it as we move towards meeting our target of halving the amount of fraud and error in the system in the next five to six years.

Mr. Lilley: I have just checked the Secretary of State's claim. The Library confirms that the level of confirmed fraud has not fallen. It is only by including errors that the right hon. Gentleman is able to claim a decline. Will he now set the record straight and confirm that when he said "fraud", he was mistaken. He meant that "fraud plus errors" has gone down; the incidence of fraud alone has gone up.

Mr. Darling: When asked about these matters, I repeatedly use the term "fraud and error". *[Interruption.]* I do. The right hon. Gentleman will see, if he looks back at what I have said over the past few years about fraud and error, that I have given equal importance to stopping both of them. I mentioned, for example—the right hon. Gentleman will be interested in this as he was Secretary of State for Social Security for the whole of the last Parliament—that when we came into office, two out of every five income support cases were being paid without sufficient evidence to justify them. We have halved that figure, saving £1 billion. That figure was almost certainly all due to error in the system.

We have also seen reductions in fraud. The reduction of fraud and error in the system, particularly in JSA and income support, is statistically significant. It is the first time that it has ever happened. The right hon. Gentleman could never have announced such a reduction when he was Secretary of State for Social Security, during the whole of the previous Parliament.

Mr. Lilley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: I will give way later on.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I am happy to stay here all night, or however long modernisation allows us to stay these days.

Two years ago, we set ourselves the target of reducing fraud and error in JSA and income support by 10 per cent. All the evidence is that we are already on target to do that and that we will go beyond it in our drive to reduce fraud and error in the system—particularly fraud in income support and JSA.

Mr. Lilley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: I will give way to the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden when I have finished my point, if the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) does not mind.

I am happy to say again and again that we attach significant importance to the reduction of fraud and error. We are achieving it—something that the right hon. Gentleman could never say during his time as Secretary of State for Social Security.

Mr. Lilley: The Secretary of State has now admitted that he was wrong when he said that fraud had declined—

[Mr. Lilley]

it is fraud plus error. He then went on to say that the reduction was statistically significant. The Library research document says that the small fall in confirmed fraud and error is not statistically significant. Will the right hon. Gentleman withdraw that statement?

Mr. Darling: I certainly will not. The fall is statistically significant, and I attach considerable importance to it. I say again to the right hon. Gentleman that during his entire time as Secretary of State for Social Security, for the whole of the previous Parliament, he could never, ever point to a single success in reducing fraud and error in JSA, income support or, indeed, anything else. As he well knows, because I think that he sometimes had to struggle with his colleagues in the Department, it was not until 1995—halfway through his stewardship as Secretary of State—that he started to measure fraud in the system. I note that he acknowledges that. As we know, that was 15 years after the Tory Government had been elected.

Despite everything that the Tories said and despite all the right hon. Gentleman's conference speeches—the more ludicrous of which we remember—he did not even start to measure fraud in the system until 1995. It was not until 1997 that real, concrete measures were taken to cut fraud and error in the system. We have seen the first significant fall in fraud and error in the jobseeker's allowance and income support, which the right hon. Gentleman never achieved during his time as Secretary of State.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: Yes, I suppose so.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, even though he is in a particularly irascible mood today. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the regulations on loss of benefit covered in clause 11 on pages 15 and 16 will be subject to the negative procedure and will not, therefore, be able to be debated on the Floor of the House? If that is so, and given the importance of getting those regulations right, will the Secretary of State undertake to provide a draft of the regulations before the Bill completes its passage?

Mr. Darling: It is always open to the House to debate regulations. The arrangements for doing so are made through the usual channels, either upstairs or on the Floor of the House. I agree with the hon. Member for Buckingham that it is important to ensure that regulations, no matter what they are for, are correct. If he has concerns about that, the scope of the regulations can no doubt be debated at length during tonight's debate or in Committee.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: Is it on that point?

Mr. Webb: It is on the previous point.

Mr. Darling: I will certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Webb: The Secretary of State was talking about the Government's record on tackling fraud. I certainly accept that the previous Government did little until late in the day. However, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm the Audit Commission's finding that between the second and third years of his term in office the amount of housing benefit fraud detected by local authorities fell? Why did he allow that to happen?

Mr. Darling: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the business of measuring and detecting housing benefit fraud has been a concern to successive Governments. About two years ago, we changed the way in which we rewarded local authorities. The situation that we inherited from the Conservative Government was that local authorities were rewarded for the fraud that they found. As the National Audit Office identified, authorities tended almost to let fraud come into the system, then detected it and claimed the reward.

Two years ago, we changed the system so that the emphasis was put on preventing fraud from coming into the system in the first place. The approach was different—indeed, it is an approach that the NAO endorsed and it is far better. Of course, it is important to deal with fraud once it is detected, but the emphasis in the Government's strategy—it should be local authority strategy on housing benefit too—is to prevent fraud from coming into the system.

The problem that we inherited was one of wrong incentives—the incentive almost to allow fraud in. We have replaced it with measures that are designed to prevent it from getting into the system in the first place. The National Audit office has endorsed that approach and said so in the subsequent report to the one to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

We are beginning to see the results of the reforms that we have made. There is a clear choice: we either continue with the drive against fraud and error, or we return to the previous situation in the Department, with cuts in investment and staffing that helped fraud and error to enter the system in the first place. Indeed, in the past four years, we have put in place many reforms that were needed to tighten the benefit system across the board: tighter rules and greater conditionality in the system and tighter gateways, but all backed by investment to enable the job to be done.

That investment is critical. We have invested in front-line staff to check and keep claims right. That investment would be under threat if the Conservatives were returned to power because the £16 billion in cuts to which they remain committed and the policy of freezing civil service recruitment would in one year cost more than 5,000 front-line jobs in the Benefits Agency. If anyone is in any doubt, it is those front-line staff who make the difference when it comes to the amount of fraud and error in the system. They check the claims and the facts. Year after year when the Conservatives were in power, the staff were able to spend less and less time checking benefit claims due to staff cuts. As I said in a reply to the former Secretary of State, one reason why we have reduced the error rate in income support is that we have more staff on the front line and fewer posts in Whitehall, so we are able to check claims far more efficiently.

Secondly, we are investing in computers and information technology, which is also important. It is something to which the NAO has repeatedly drawn attention. We inherited a system in which some of the

computers on which staff were expected to work were more than 30 years old. Sometimes, our staff go home to find their children working on systems that are more efficient and up to date than some of those that the Conservatives left and expected them to work on. After years of underinvestment, following the spending review last year, we now have the money to replace all of the Department's ageing IT equipment so that our staff have the tools to do the job.

The Bill will enable us to make better use of that technology. Again, that is investment in staff and IT, which the Conservatives oppose. It would all be at risk if they were returned to power because they cannot say that they are going to spend £16 billion—or more—less than Labour, but at the same time pretend that they would maintain our levels of investment in the system. That investment is essential if the system is to be tighter and more robust against fraud and error.

We are also investing in tighter gateways to benefit. The new working age agency will introduce regular interviews for all claimants of working age, helping people to get into work. There will be new rights and responsibilities, but the whole time we will be checking that the right benefit is paid to the right person.

We are also investing to tackle organised fraud. The fight against such fraud is now controlled centrally, which did not happen before, and a new national intelligence unit will ensure that resources are far better targeted than they were.

No doubt tonight we will be told by the Conservatives that they want to set up another national organisation. They claim that by setting up a national benefits squad, they will somehow save £1 billion, just like that. There is no independent evidence to support the claim. If ever there was a fraudulent claim, that is it. I read in *The Independent* at Christmas, under the heading, "How I will cut public spending to provide money for lower taxes", an article by the shadow Chancellor, who wrote:

> "For instance, we're going to set up a single benefits investigation squad . . . Common sense measures like these will yield at least £1 billion in savings".

He says that by setting up one benefits squad he will save £1 billion. Presumably, if he set up two, he would save £2 billion.

I will be interested to find out in the debate if the present Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), can give us one concrete example of how by simply setting up a national investigation squad, the shadow Chancellor can save £1 billion just like that. The Conservatives did not do it in 18 years and I will be interested to hear how they think that they can claim all that money just like that. It is important to them because they have already spent the £1 billion. If they cannot find it, the consequences will be dire.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): *rose—*

Mr. Darling: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman from the Back Benches can tell us how the Conservatives will save all that money.

Mr. Butterfill: The right hon. Gentleman talks about unsubstantiated assertions. I remind him that in a letter to me of 28 November he said that the new IT systems would save more than £1 billion by 2005. That claim is unsubstantiated too. How does he substantiate that figure? I have no doubt that he will make some savings, but how he substantiates his claim I am not clear.

Mr. Darling: The point about IT is simple. The systems that we inherited from the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported are ageing and will not last much longer. It is not an option simply not to replace them. It is not good enough for an organisation such as the Department of Social Security, which pays out more than £100 billion a year, to rely on IT systems that are 20 or 30 years old. The system needs to be replaced. If we do not do so, there will certainly be more errors in the system and it will be more and more difficult to track fraud.

One of the advantages of the new equipment will be, for example, that if someone claims a benefit in one office and then tries to do so in another office, the information will immediately be cross-matched. The clerk will know that someone has done so. The present system does not allow that.

My argument is straightforward. Replacing the IT systems in the DSS is essential. The NAO has drawn attention to the need to do so for about 12 years. It qualified the accounts of the Benefits Agency for years under the Conservative Government and one reason was that the IT system for keeping track of the amount of money paid out was not up to scratch. We have the money to replace the system. If the Tories were elected again, their guarantee of £16 billion in cuts would mean that the money would not be there to replace the system.

Mr. Butterfill: I entirely agree that it is desirable—indeed essential—to install that equipment. That was not my point. I was merely saying that the right hon. Gentleman had not substantiated the figure that he gave me. I have no doubt that he will make savings, but he said that the shadow Chancellor had not substantiated his figures and I was saying that he makes similar claims without any basis for doing so.

Mr. Darling: I said that the Government will reach the target that they set for a 50 per cent. reduction in fraud and error in JSA and income support. That will be done through a variety of means: tighter gateways to the system, more investment in IT, and ensuring that we have the staff on the front line to check claims. The approach involves a variety of measures, all of which will bear down on fraud.

I repeat that we have, for the first time, seen a significant reduction in fraud and error in income support and the jobseeker's allowance. The Conservatives could never claim that during their time in office. Again, I repeat that they did not even begin to measure fraud and error in the system until 15 years after they were elected. That is an extraordinary state of affairs.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I shall certainly give way to my hon. Friends. As has been pointed out from the Opposition Front Bench, we have all night—or at least several hours—and I am happy to stay in the Chamber talking about fraud and error for the whole time.

[Mr. Darling]

I look forward to hearing from the hon. Member for Havant. He, too, will have plenty of time for his speech; if necessary, I shall persuade my colleagues to sit tight until he has explained how, simply by setting up a national benefits squad, the Tories will save £1 billion that they have already spent. That is their claim; that is their promise. They say that they will save £1 billion, yet they have already spent it—several times in fact. It will be interesting to hear how they intend to magic up £1 billion—just like that.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way; I have no intention of keeping him here well into the night. On more than one occasion, he has visited Warbreck house—the disability living allowance unit headquarters—in Blackpool, in my constituency. During his visits, did he see the computer pilot project that is under way? It is already paying dividends—to respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill). Decision-making DLA staff already find that the new computers in the pilot enable them to operate much more efficiently. Those staff are dealing with many more cases; they are looking forward to the installation in the autumn of more computers throughout the building, so that they can offer the efficient service to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Mr. Darling: I confirm that, as and when new IT is delivered throughout the Department, quality of service improves. Anyone who visited a Benefits Agency office—or indeed Warbreck house—was struck by the quantity of paperwork. Comparison with banks or other financial institutions, which are often paper free, will show just how far we have had to travel. It is a testament to the neglect of the Tories that, during their 18 years in office, they did nothing to replace the tools with which staff were meant to do their job.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I am extremely lucky locally, because officials in the local offices of the Benefits Agency treat claimants with commendable civility. What resources and training are to be given to local officials charged with the responsibility of recovering payments made in error? I hope that we shall move beyond the usual letter sent to claimants. Will my right hon. Friend look afresh at how such persons are treated when they have received overpayments due to errors made by local staff?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The quality of the letters sent out by the antique computer systems leaves much to be desired. Some of those letters were insensitive and inappropriate; for example, we are changing the letters sent to people who have recently been bereaved.

If the Department makes a mistake, it should put its hand up and admit it. Equally, where an individual has made a mistake or, in some cases, has been downright untruthful, that individual has to accept the consequences. I shall explain some of the measures that will help in such cases. Staff try to behave appropriately, according to the circumstances.

We are implementing a further measure that will make a difference in dealing with fraud. In two years, we shall increasingly pay benefits directly into bank accounts as the normal method of payment. That will save about £100 million a year on losses through order book and giro fraud. The Conservatives did nothing much about that during their time in office although they did come up with the benefit card—as the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden would no doubt have jumped up to tell me if I had not pointed it out. That was, of course, another Tory disaster. It did not work; it was behind time; there was a cost overrun and it had to be scrapped. Despite that, the Conservatives are against our plans to pay money directly into people's bank accounts; at least that is my understanding—it is not always easy to make out exactly where they stand. When one considers their strategy, one is struck by the fact that they do not have one credible policy that would work and deliver savings.

We are making progress. We have a strategy that is beginning to bear fruit, but we need to do more to meet our targets. The Bill is the next stage of our reforms—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I know that the Conservatives do not like to hear about their shortcomings—about all the things that they failed to do during their time in office. However, when people come to make a choice as to who is best equipped to keep social security spending under control, they will contrast the Conservative party, which allowed that spending to double over 18 years—despite the rhetoric and the conference speeches—with the Labour Government who have kept social security spending growth at its lowest since the second world war. At the same time, we can spend more on families, pensioners and children because we are not spending so much on waste and failure. We are spending on our priorities.

The Bill builds on some of the recommendations made by Lord Grabiner in the report that we commissioned in 1999. We have already implemented many of his recommendations; for example, we have extended nationwide the tighter procedure for the issue of national insurance numbers that we successfully piloted in an area of London. The tighter procedures in that pilot area resulted in more than 300 arrests and the refusal of more than 4,500 applications that might well have been granted if the procedures that we inherited had still been in force. Tightening up on the issuing of NI numbers—also something that the previous Conservative Government failed to do—is central to ensuring that we cut that fraud.

The Grabiner report recommended measures in two further areas that will need the new powers set out in the Bill. First, the Benefits Agency and local authorities need new powers to obtain information from third parties in cases of suspected fraud. Those measures are set out in clauses 1 and 2—I shall return to them shortly.

Secondly, we need to send a clear signal to the hard core of people who carry on cheating the system even when they have been caught. That will not be tolerated. Those who are convicted twice of fraud will lose their benefit—as is set out in clauses 7 to 13. Clause 15 introduces new penalties to crack down on those employers who collude with their employees to commit benefit fraud. Those penalties will offer an alternative to the sometimes more costly court proceedings.

We also need to combat transnational benefit fraud, whereby people fraudulently claim benefit in more than one country or use foreign identities to claim benefit in

this country. A more routine exchange of information will help to identify such crimes more quickly. Clause 5 will allow benefits agencies to supply information to other countries in cases where adequate safeguards exist.

Clause 16 will toughen the offence of failure to report a change of circumstances while claiming benefit. That is one of the biggest sources of fraud in the system.

The Bill has, of course, been scrutinised in another place. Today, I shall concentrate on three main aspects: the power to check the facts where fraud is suspected; the "two strikes and you're out" policy; and the penalties in relation to collusive employers.

First, I shall deal with the measures to provide access to independent information about a claimant's circumstances. The problem is that for far too long the system has had to deal with people who, when it came to the crunch, knew full well that the Department could not check what they had told it. That will change. If we are to succeed in rooting fraud out of the system, we need to be able to cross-check the information that people give us. It is in everybody's interest—individuals and businesses—to ensure that people will be found out when they cheat the system or do not tell the truth.

Almost half of the fraud in two key benefits—the JSA and income support—is due to people failing to tell the truth about their incomes, earnings or capital. The Benefits Agency must have the ability to check where it suspects fraud; and, where it is faced with someone who refuses to co-operate, it needs to require banks or other financial institutions to provide the facts necessary to enable it to discover the true position. The powers for the Benefits Agency and for councils to get information from specified organisations are set out in the Bill.

The use of these powers will be tightly controlled. There will be a limited number of authorised and named officers who can use these powers; I propose to authorise 175 initially, but that figure will rise to 300 officers at 14 principal units across the country.

Clause 3 introduces a statutory code of practice, which sets out for all to see the way in which the powers will be used. We shall consult on that code and it will be laid before Parliament. A draft of the code is available to Members in the Library. The powers will allow only authorised officers to obtain records relevant to a suspected fraud. These powers will also help with housing benefit fraud where a landlord or a tenant claims benefit for someone who is living somewhere else.

Mr. Bercow: In order to maximise the efficacy and the equity of the information-gathering process, what practical cognisance has the right hon. Gentleman taken of the Taxes Management Act 1970?

Mr. Darling: That Act can be of some help, but, in so far as our proposals are concerned, we are giving authorised officers, where they suspect fraud, the power to get information from credit reference agencies or banks to find out whether someone has a bank account and, where the circumstances justify it, what payments might have been made in respect of it.

The DSS and its respective agencies already have powers in specified circumstances to exchange information with, and to get information from, the Inland Revenue because increasingly, and for obvious reasons, the DSS deals with people who have contact with both the Revenue and the Department; but all the time these matters are regulated. They are specified, because it is important to balance giving the Department the additional powers that it needs with the rights of individuals generally, and individuals in particular, to ensure that their individual rights are not impinged on.

A person's right to privacy is very important indeed, but the Department is entitled to set that aside where it has reasonable grounds for suspecting fraud. There are safeguards. I want to ensure that the officers who are entitled to obtain this information are identified. They will be supervised, and there will be many checks to ensure that there is no abuse of the system, and that the information is not wrongly used. But the hon. Member for Buckingham is right to say that, increasingly, the DSS and its agencies and the Inland Revenue need to work together. The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 is one measure that allows them to do so; I am sorry that some of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues who served on the Committee considering that legislation opposed it so strongly.

Mr. Butterfill: I gather that some bodies have suggested that there could be problems with the Data Protection Act 1998. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he is now entirely satisfied that there will be no problem with that Act?

Mr. Darling: I certainly can. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have to sign a certificate under section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998, as is stated on the front of the Bill, but I can also tell the House that the Information Commissioner, who is responsible for these matters, recently wrote to me to say that her concerns have been addressed. I believe it is important to balance the rights of the individual with the rights of the public as a whole, to ensure that the system is not abused. I think that we have achieved that balance. There is the code of practice, which the hon. Gentleman may have had the opportunity to read. It is in the Library, and its authority is on the face of the Bill. That is very important.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Will the Secretary of State place in the Library a copy of the letter that he has received from the Data Protection Commissioner?

Mr. Darling: Yes. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I would not have referred to the letter had I not been confident of what it said, and that I am more than happy to send it to him. The Information Commissioner did have concerns when the Bill was at an early stage, and she wrote several times. I had a useful meeting with her, her staff met DSS staff and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, amendments were made to the Bill in the other place. My understanding is that, as the letter says, the commissioner is now satisfied that we have addressed her concerns, but I am more than happy to make the letter available to the hon. Gentleman and, as he has raised it, to place a copy in the Library.

I should like to talk briefly about the second strand that I referred to—that of removing benefit where people are convicted twice of benefit fraud. It is important that two things happen. First, more effort must be put into

[Mr. Darling]

changing people's attitudes to benefit fraud. Too often, we meet people who say that benefit fraud does not really matter.

Mr. Bercow: I do not think so.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman may not meet people like that, but I think that most of us do. I sometimes wonder who the hon. Gentleman does meet when he is outside the House. He and I would probably agree that we are probably very unlike each other. I certainly do come across people who say that benefit fraud is not really a problem—just as, some 20 or 30 years ago, people did not think that drinking and driving was really a crime. It was not uncommon, 20 or 30 years ago—although, I may say, I was quite young at the time—to find people who would think nothing of offering a drink to someone whom they knew would be driving afterwards. I believe that the same cultural change is necessary for benefit fraud.

I know that the Opposition have complained about the advertising campaign that is currently being run on television, but Governments need to focus on getting people to think about benefit fraud and its consequences, because every penny that is lost in benefit fraud could be better spent elsewhere.

It is necessary to go further and to make it clear to people that, if they abuse their responsibilities, they cannot expect to go back on benefit as though nothing had happened; so in the Bill we propose to implement the policy, first raised in Lord Grabiner's report, of "two strikes and you're out". If people are convicted of benefit fraud twice within three years, they will lose their benefit. That policy may be tough, but it is necessary to deal with persistent offenders.

People do have choices. They do not have to fiddle the system; the vast majority of people do not. As I have said before, there is no unconditional right to benefit. There are rights and there are responsibilities. I believe that this policy is justified and will build on policies that we have already implemented with regard to the new deal.

The hon. Member for Havant asked me about the Information Commissioner. I detected a suggestion that I might have said something that might not have represented the whole position. I am grateful to the Minister of State, who has given me the letter from the Information Commissioner. I shall quote part of it, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that he may have all of it.

The commissioner wrote to me on 20 March. She said:

"I have now had the opportunity to consider the government amendments which your officials kindly sent to"

one of her officials. She continued:

"I am pleased that they seem successfully to address the concerns which I expressed to you in the course of our meeting."

She went on to say that the official previously named

"has now written to"

one of our departmental officials

"to this effect."

The letter is fairly short and fairly straightforward, but I shall certainly send it to the hon. Gentleman. I look forward to receiving his acknowledgment of receipt, so that there is no doubt about it.

I shall say a brief word on collusive employers. My predecessor as Secretary of State shared my frustration that sometimes the court system has not been as efficient or as enthusiastic as we might like in dealing robustly with people who have been guilty of benefit fraud. The Bill therefore gives us powers to impose penalties for the less serious cases, where a penalty of between £1,000 and £5,000 can be imposed on employers who are guilty of collusion in relation to benefits. The use of these civil penalties will make it easier and far more efficient to send a clear message to people who are fiddling the system.

All the new powers that we have taken in the Bill are necessary because they add to the materials that we have at our disposal to continue to bear down on fraud in the system and to cut down on error.

We have changed the social security system to bring in more choices, more help and more support than ever before, but that is matched by a responsibility on individuals to help themselves and, crucially, to deal honestly with the system. The measures that we have introduced will build on what we have already achieved and will help to stop fraud in future, so we have made a start. We have set clear targets, which the Conservatives never did. We have imposed tighter gateways, which the Conservatives never did. We have seen the first significant fall in fraud and error. As always, I accept that there is a lot more to do, but we shall stop fraud and error only if we continue to invest in front-line staff and in information technology.

The Conservative party is pledged to cut more than £16 billion of public expenditure, so if it were returned to office, those front-line jobs would go, the investment in IT would be cut and, as a result, more fraud and more error would pour back into the system, just as happened during the 18 years when it was in power. The Bill will take our reforms a step further. It will ensure that staff have the powers that they need to check the information needed to stop fraud and to send a clear signal to those who persistently cheat the system that doing so is unacceptable.

Mr. Webb: As the Secretary of State usually leaves the Chamber before I make my speech, I want to raise an issue with him before he does so. Retirement pension is not included in the list of sanctionable benefits because, according to Baroness Hollis, retirement pensioners tend not to commit fraud, but war pensions are included. Is not that an insult to war pensioners?

Mr. Darling: No, it is not. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman wants us to include pensions, but the figures simply do not justify doing so. That is why I do not propose to include them. He is right on one point: I do not normally remain to hear what he has to say because of circumstances beyond my control, and I am sorry to tell him that tonight will be no exception. For reasons that I understand, earlier business in the House has meant that this debate started a lot later than I thought it would, and many people are awaiting my presence at some stage. However, if the hon. Gentleman is called to speak early enough—or even late enough—I dare say that I shall hear him speak, but I am sure that he will take it on the chin and not get too upset if I do not.

I have no doubt that many other hon. Members will wish to catch your eye this evening, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I want to conclude by making one important point.

There is a lot of talk and rhetoric about fraud and error in the social security system, but the difference between this Labour Government and the Conservative Opposition is that we have a strategy that is working; they do not have a strategy that works. They do not have a single credible proposal that would save a single pound in tackling benefit fraud. They have no strategy whatever. We are beginning to turn the corner. We are beginning to see the results. We are cutting fraud; they could not because they do not have the measures to do so. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.32 pm

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): The Bill has, of course, been thoroughly debated and heavily revised in another place in response to constructive suggestions from my right hon. Friends and others. I shall quote the final remark in the final day's debate in the other place. The Minister said:

"I am delighted that the Bill has gone through without Division, though with substantive change. I hope that it is treated in the same conciliatory and positive way in the other place."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 March 2001; Vol. 623, c. 340.]

I am afraid that, instead of the Secretary of State following the advice of his colleague, we had a taste of what the hustings might be like on a wet Wednesday in Edinburgh, Central. Instead of an attempt to explain in any detail exactly how the Government believe they can use the Bill to tackle welfare fraud effectively, we heard a rather feeble attempt at a warm-up speech for the election campaign.

Let me make it clear to the Secretary of State that we believe that the Bill is better than nothing, especially now that it has been revised and significantly improved in another place. We believe that it is a step in the right direction, so we shall not divide the House on Second Reading.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): A ringing endorsement.

Mr. Willetts: The Opposition certainly want social security fraud to be reduced, and, especially with the amendments that have been made to it, the Bill represents a useful step in that direction.

While we are in a mood of positive endorsements, perhaps I can make a personal comment about the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), as this may be our final debate on social security before the House rises to fight the election—although I know that oral questions will take place next week. The Minister of State is retiring from the House, so in case this is his last full outing in a debate in the Chamber, perhaps I can say that the Opposition have always appreciated the opportunity to debate with him. He has made a significant contribution to pensions policy. He arrived from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, so he was able to introduce genetically modified group personal pensions—stakeholder pensions—and we appreciated the way in which he drew on that experience in his work on pensions. Many Opposition Members think that the right hon. Gentleman was the best Chief Whip that Labour never had, and I wish him well as he retires from the House.

This modest and sensible Bill has been introduced after four years of not much activity among Ministers. Certainly, the level of activity has been pathetic compared with the arguments and observations made about the size of social security fraud. Back in July 1998, the original Government publication, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business" state that:

"a conservative estimate of fraud is £2 billion . . . the figure could be much higher, around £7 billion if all suspicions of fraud were well founded."

One of the ways in which Labour Ministers have tried to show that they are making progress in tackling fraud is by reducing the size of their estimate of fraud. We do not hear so much about £7 billion now, but they were happy to talk about £7 billion then. The Minister of State famously answered a parliamentary question by specifying that there could be total of £7 billion of "definite", "probably" and "possible" social security fraud.

I should be interested to know whether Ministers still believe that there is £7 billion of fraud. I should also be interested to know whether Ministers agree with the proposition in their own manifesto, on which the Secretary of State and his colleagues fought the last election, in which they said:

"We will start with a clampdown on Housing Benefit fraud, estimated to cost £2 billion a year".

I wonder whether they still believe the estimate that housing benefit fraud costs £2 billion a year, because such figures put their record on social security fraud into perspective. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) said so effectively, the only way in which the Government can claim any progress at all is by combining fraud and error.

I recognise that in a complicated social security system, error can slip into fraud; it is not always possible to make an easy distinction between the two. It is perfectly possible for someone initially to make a genuine mistake in filling in a claim form. By and large, if the mistake or error leads to an underpayment, people are more likely to go back to their benefit office and challenge it than if the error leads to an overpayment. Those who consciously accept an overpayment are on the slippery slope that leads to deliberate fraud. I recognise that links exist between fraud and error, so I hope that the Secretary of State will recognise, that one of the best ways to tackle fraud is by reducing the complexity of the social security system. Fraud and error breed in a system that is far too complicated to administer.

The Public Accounts Committee got it absolutely right in a report last year, when it stated that

"without simplification"—

of the rules on income support—

"10 per cent. of payments would always be wrong."

That represents a warning about the consequences of an overcomplicated social security system. Our criticism of the Government is that, far from making it simpler, they are perpetually making yet more complicated. That is why there is so much fraud and error. The Government can get at the root of the problem only through genuine simplification.

The Secretary of State claims the credit for setting up a system properly to measure fraud and error, but, of course, that system was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, a previous

[Mr. Willetts]

Secretary of State. The Government are ignoring the problem with tax credits, which represent another complicated new system that is wide open to fraud. We hear dismissive answers from Ministers, who deny that an easy way to measure fraud exists. At the moment, they refuse to offer any estimates whatever of fraud and error in tax credits, but we know that they are a significant problem.

The providers of child care are directly affected. They have brought to our attention the scandal of people claiming the tax credit for child care, providing invoices and estimates for child care that they have not used and pocketing the cash. That is a classic example of the way in which tax credits are exploited because they are wide open to fraud and abuse, yet Ministers have discontinued the estimation of fraud for in-work benefits that we introduced when we were in office in an attempt to deal with the problem of fraud in family credit, as it then was.

Mr. Butterfill: Does my hon. Friend agree that the move towards credits adversely affects the cash flow of many small businesses, without any apparent compensation for the difficulties that they face?

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is correct. We have many criticisms of tax credits and I know that it is sometimes with a sense of relief that Ministers in the Department of Social Security say that such credits are now a matter for the Treasury. However, the administration of tax credits is an increasing scandal in the tax and benefits system. In my surgery, I have to deal with more problems involving the working families tax credit—WFTC—than I do with problems involving the Child Support Agency.

The problems that people face with the WFTC, and the fraud and error involved, are significant. That is why I regret the fact that the provisions in the Bill explicitly exclude tax credits. It is a great pity that tax credits are not included within its scope.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend rightly said that the Bill was modest, and that is in stark contrast to the bloated rhetoric of the Secretary of State's speech, which was wholly out of proportion to the limited accomplishments that the right hon. Gentleman has to his credit. Would my hon. Friend care to say something about the recent plaudits that Wandsworth council has earned for its excellent and robust policy in prosecuting fraudsters? Will he also comment on the appalling incompetence of Labour councils in failing to bring fraudsters to book and on the two-fifths of local authorities that have no formal prosecution policy for fraud?

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is right. As I was listening to the Secretary of State, I recalled the definition of absurdity as using a great force to lift a light object. I am afraid that that is what we heard from the Secretary of State. I shall come to my hon. Friend's point about local government shortly, but the mixed record of local authorities in tackling welfare fraud is another scandal that the Bill does far too little to address.

The problem of tax credits was outlined very well by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) in a speech just under a year ago to a forum on fraud organised by the credit industry fraud avoidance system. I hope that he will correct me if I am wrong, but the press release that was issued on that occasion said:

> "The Inland Revenue have indicated to the Social Security Select Committee that the security arrangements are similar to those for the WFTC's predecessor Family Credit. The Benefit Review of fraud in Family Credit was cancelled following Frank Field's departure from office. There is particular concern over fraud involving nursery schools and collusion with employers over wages."

That is the account of the points that the right hon. Gentleman made last year, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. Given the evidence of fraud in tax credits, their deliberate and explicit omission from clause 7(8) of the current Bill is a serious matter that should be addressed.

There are other reasons why the Government have not been able to tackle fraud as effectively as we would have liked. It is not just that they have been a soft touch when it comes to tax credits. For example, I was struck by the evidence of the way in which the new deal has diverted people's efforts away from effectively tackling fraud. The 32nd report of the Public Accounts Committee, which was published last July, stated:

> "As regards Jobseeker's Allowance, Mr. Mathison noted that the main contributory factor"—

to the level of fraud and error—

> "had been the impact of the New Deal and various other Welfare to Work initiatives, involving the Employment Service. Experienced staff had been diverted on to these projects, leaving new and inexperienced people to deal with the administration of Jobseeker's Allowance."

That was Mr. Mathison's explanation of the unacceptable level of error and fraud in the system. The Government will not be able to get away with some of the claims that we have just heard from the Secretary of State, given that their own officials have said that the new deal has diverted people away from effectively and accurately delivering benefits to unemployed people.

What we have had from the Government—typically, of course—is a large number of press releases and a large amount of expensive advertising. We have counted 45 separate press releases during their period in office. They have averaged about one a month, and all have claimed that the Government are taking bold new initiatives to tackle fraud, whereas, in practice, they have done precious little about it.

The current advertising campaign has been received with widespread bafflement. I do not know how many millions of pounds the Government are paying for the press and television advertisements, but let us consider the effect of saying:

> "'It's only a few quid, who notices that?' Do you find this acceptable?"

It is extremely doubtful whether such remarks, together with the many quotes apparently justifying welfare fraud, are having any effect in putting people off committing welfare fraud.

Unlike the advertisements that were produced when my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was Secretary of State, these advertisements do not provide a telephone number that people can contact to shop a benefit cheat. They offer no means by which people can act. There is simply the slogan "Targeting Fraud", with no suggestion of the practical action that can be taken.

Mr. Webb: It is a post-modern advertisement.

Mr. Willetts: It will certainly soon be post-Labour.

We know from evaluation of trials in the north-west that that approach was ineffective, but Ministers continued to spend all that money on the advertisements. The Secretary of State placed the evaluation report in the Library in response to a question that I tabled, and I appreciate that. The report states:

"One negative impact that may be the result of the campaign was that respondents within the test area perceived benefit fraud as easier to commit."

It was hardly a brilliantly successful anti-fraud advertising campaign. In fact, rather ruefully, the report added:

"However, it is difficult to make people aware that benefit fraud is widespread without increasing their perception of how easy it is to commit at the same time"

The following page of the report continued:

"In terms of likelihood of reporting someone via the NBFH"—

that is the hotline—

"results in the test area do not really show much difference to the country as a whole—demonstrating once again how entrenched opinions are on this topic."

The evaluation showed that, in the north-west, one of the effects of the advertisements was to make people think that benefit fraud was easier to get away with. There was no evidence whatever of an increase in the number of people reporting fraudsters to the hotline. None the less, despite the evidence from the north-west that the pilots were not getting the message across, Ministers went ahead with spending millions of pounds on a national advertising campaign. That is why the Department of Social Security's advertising budget is spinning out of control.

We see another example of the way in which spin has gone ahead of substance when we investigate the "two strikes and you're out" policy. The policy gets headlines for the Secretary of State, but how many people will be penalised by it? I tabled a parliamentary question simply to establish how many people had been successfully prosecuted twice for welfare fraud. The fact is that not many people are prosecuted successfully once. The figure is about 10,000 a year. The Minister of State replied:

"Our research suggests that approximately 5 per cent. of prosecutions involve a person with a previous conviction for benefit fraud."

According to the Minister's figures, about 500 people are second-time offenders. That is 500 too many, and of course we must be tough on them, but it is rather surprising that Ministers make such play of that provision and give it such a high profile when, as the Minister of State went on to say, they are

"putting in place mechanisms to identify second and further convictions."—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 576W.]

The Government did not even have the evidence on the number of people who had twice been successfully prosecuted for welfare fraud before they decided on the policy. Their estimate that there are perhaps 500 such people does not justify all the hype and headlines.

What more could be done? One of several possibilities is to implement the Scampion report on organised benefit fraud. I very much regret the way in which the Secretary of State smuggled out that report last January, and he has still not implemented all its recommendations. It is not simply a matter of setting up a single national agency, although that is one of Scampion's proposals that we have endorsed but the Secretary of State has not implemented. The underlying point in the report is that the problem is not merely an absence of legal powers. Indeed, it is doubtful to what extent it is a legal problem at all. It is an organisational problem, and a point about Ministers' commitment to tackling fraud. Passing laws or changing legal powers is the easy bit. The difficult bit is changing the culture of an organisation so that there is genuinely effective work on fraud.

We were all shocked when, on 23 January 2000, after his departure from the Government, the former Minister for Welfare Reform, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said:

"My first big shock in Government was the realisation of the political reluctance to bear down on the welfare cheats."

Political will and organisational discipline are at least as important as legal powers.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will accept that the last time that he launched into this theme, in *The Times*, John Scampion was quoted as saying that he was quite happy with what we were doing and that it in no way undermined what he was doing. Can the hon. Gentleman tell me how setting up a national organised benefits squad would save £1 billion in itself, as the shadow Chancellor keeps claiming?

Mr. Willetts: That is one of the measures that we would take, which together would ensure that we saved £1 billion. Tackling organised benefit fraud, which is a significant part of the problem, through the measures identified in the Scampion report would make a significant contribution to that target, but that is not all that we would do.

Mr. Darling: How does the hon. Gentleman know that he would save £1 billion, given that the Conservative Government did not do so in 18 years? He must know that the shadow Chancellor has already spent the money over and over, so he must know that he has it.

Mr. Willetts: The Secretary of State and his colleagues have said that they estimate that there is £7 billion of welfare fraud. In the manifesto on which he fought the last election, he even said that there was £2 billion of housing benefit fraud alone. *[Interruption.]* It is no good the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), saying that there is £2 billion of fraud in total. Four years ago, she fought the election on the manifesto claim that there was £2 billion of housing benefit fraud alone, and I presume that she does not think that there is zero fraud everywhere else in the social security system.

If there is £7 billion of social security fraud, we believe that we can take measures that will, between them, ensure that an extra seventh of that sum—£1 billion—can be saved. One of the ways of doing that is to tackle organised welfare fraud by fully implementing the proposals in the Scampion report. That is not merely a question of legal powers, although as I said at the beginning of my speech, the Bill is a useful step forward in that respect. It is a question of tackling organisational matters and bringing together the disparate responsibilities in different parts of the Department.

Mr. Darling: I have never claimed that there is £7 billion of fraud in the system. Interestingly, when the

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right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who is here tonight, was Secretary of State for Social Security, it was suggested to him that there was £7 billion of benefit fraud, and he rightly rubbished the suggestion—as I do, because there is not.

The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) appears to be arguing that because there is fraud in the system, he would be able to save £1 billion just by setting up an organised benefits squad. He is flying by the seat of his pants. Given that the Tories did not manage to cut any fraud during their time in office, how can he say that he knows that he would save £1 billion, especially bearing in mind the fact that the money has already been spent? All he has is an IOU. What evidence does he have that suggests that he could possibly save £1 billion?

Mr. Willetts: I remind the Secretary of State of what I said a few moments ago, when I quoted from the Government report, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", which contains an estimate of social security fraud. It says that

"a conservative estimate of fraud is £2 billion a year; but the figure could be much higher, around £7 billion, if all suspicions of fraud were well founded."

It is no good the right hon. Gentleman now saying that he does not recognise or use that figure. He cannot deny that his Department's main document on social security fraud, published in July 1998, since he came into office, contains the figure.

Mr. Butterfill: It is perhaps worth quoting the Minister of State, who said in a written answer:

"Previous estimates have shown that £2 billion a year has definitely been lost through fraud. A further £3 billion may have been lost in cases where fraud is strongly suspected and a further £2 billion where there is some suspicion of fraud."—[*Official Report*, 20 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 323W.]

That seems to add up to £7 billion, so perhaps that is where the Government got the figure from.

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is correct. It is no good the Secretary of State now trying to escape from figures, which the Government have happily endorsed in the past, that add up to £7 billion.

In tackling £7 billion of welfare fraud, we would not rely entirely on Scampion's proposals, but tackling organised benefit fraud would make an important contribution to our £1 billion of savings. Local authorities are another area in which much more could be done, and are another example of the Secretary of State talking tough but failing to deliver.

For my sins, I receive a regular supply of the Secretary of State's press releases. One, dated 6 March 2000 says, "Darling Gets Tough with Councils failing to tackle Housing Benefit Fraud." In it, the right hon. Gentleman says:

"I want to make it abundantly clear that where investigations by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate reveal weakness I will expect authorities to act immediately to remedy them".

He continues:

"Where the BFI identify persistent service failings by councils I will use my powers to direct standards and timescales for improved performance."

What has the right hon. Gentleman done in the year since that announcement, in which he talked so tough?

The Secretary of State has received many reports from the benefit fraud inspectorate. Since January 2000, he has had seven reports that were favourable to councils, but he has had 40 critical reports, saying that councils are not effectively tackling welfare fraud. I have them here because we follow these matters carefully. On only one occasion—I think wretched Northampton was the victim—has he done as he threatened and used his powers to direct standards and impose time scales for improved performance. After all that huffing and puffing and 40 critical reports, only one case has led to a ministerial direction.

That is one reason why the figures for housing benefit and council tax benefit fraud are so bad. In the last year for which we have reliable figures, there were 160,000 cases of established fraud, 1,900 cases referred for prosecution and 800 successful prosecutions. That is a strike rate of 0.5 per cent., which is simply not good enough when we are trying to tackle fraud in local authorities. That is why we have said that when local authorities are clearly not up to the administration of housing benefit, that responsibility should go to the Benefits Agency. *[Interruption.]* The Under-Secretary asks how we would decide which local authorities were not up to the job. I am pleased she asks, because I would like to ask Ministers a question in return. They clearly do not trust some local authorities with the powers to secure private financial information of the sort for which they are providing in the Bill.

Proposed new section 110AA(5) allows the Government to determine that only some local authorities are able to exercise the powers. The Secretary of State decides whether a local authority can exercise the powers. The Under-Secretary has a view about the local authorities that she would trust with them. That is based, presumably, on information that she has about which local authorities are effectively and competently pursuing fraud and which she does not trust to use such information competently or to keep it confidential. We would act on similar information to decide which local authorities are capable of properly administering housing benefit. We would also take into account information from reports by the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office.

The clear implication buried in the Bill is that Ministers do not trust some local authorities to use the powers to tackle fraud. I suspect that they are right. The Government should use their powers in that way. We pursue that policy to its logical conclusion. If Ministers cannot trust a local authority with information that will be secured to tackle fraud, why are they sitting there and allowing that authority to administer housing benefit when the level of fraud is so high? On a selective basis and in those circumstances, we believe that the Benefits Agency should administer housing benefit.

The Government can do something about national insurance numbers, to which the Secretary of State briefly referred. Since they took office, more than 4 million national insurance numbers have been added to the Department of Social Security register and only 300,000 have been removed. Britain now has 81 million national insurance numbers for 60 million people. At first we were told that that was because of people who are entitled to contributory benefits from a deceased spouse. That might

explain a few million extra numbers, but it does not explain why there are 25 million more numbers than there are people in the United Kingdom.

The Secretary of State struck a different note today. He no longer complacently defended the 81 million national insurance numbers. Instead, he claimed that the Government would tackle the fraudulent national insurance numbers.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. There are two reasons why national insurance numbers rose dramatically in the past 10 years. First, in 1990–91, the Conservative Government understandably decided that married women who did not have national insurance numbers should get them, so they issued 3 million. Secondly, in 1992–93, they issued 13 million numbers for children. The hon. Gentleman should remember those policies because I think he was a Minister at the time. The fact that we have a much larger number of national insurance numbers than people of working age is substantially because 10 years ago the Tory Government issued an awful lot of them.

There are 47 million national insurance numbers for UK residents over the age of 16. That is, I think, an Office for National Statistics figure. About 12.5 million national insurance numbers are for children who are coming into the system. They are called child reference numbers. Each year, 700,000 national insurance numbers are added because a number is issued every time a child is born.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly recognises, some national insurance numbers have to be kept in existence. There are two reasons for that. First, the spouse of someone who dies might have rights that accrue from that person's contributions, so the number has to be retained. Secondly, people who come to this country to work get a national insurance number and might then leave or, in the case of expatriates, return. That is why there is an excess. I accept that we need regularly to cleanse the numbers, we are doing that. The figures show that we have removed rather more numbers than the Tories ever did.

Mr. Willetts: That was a lengthy intervention to tell us what we already know. We recognise that the previous Government correctly decided to make child benefit numbers proto-NI numbers. Indeed, every member of the population should have a child benefit number as a step towards receiving a national insurance number. As the Secretary of State is in intervening mood, does he think that all the 81 million national insurance numbers are valid, or have some people falsely obtained them?

Mr. Darling: I said that we are introducing tighter checks on the granting of national insurance numbers. When we tried out the new procedures in south London, there were 361 arrests and a number of deportations. Some 4,600 applications were refused which would otherwise have been accepted. Many measures are at the disposal of the Government to tackle fraud and system errors. The difference between this Government and the Government of whom the hon. Gentleman was a member is that we are implementing them and beginning to turn the corner in our fight against rising fraud and system error. National insurance numbers are no exception. The reason for my long intervention is that the hon. Gentleman was talking nonsense—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I appreciate that the issue is complicated, but the Secretary of State's interventions are verging on speeches.

Mr. Willetts: The Government are not implementing those measures; they are merely talking about it. That is why there are 45 press releases and a statistically insignificant change in the amount fraud. There is a great deal of talk, but not much action.

Mr. Butterfill: I checked the numbers with the House of Commons Library. There are 82 million national insurance numbers and 48 million people of employable age.

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is correct. It is important that we have effective data cleaning. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden initiated such a project when he was Secretary of State in 1995. It was a good example of how the problem should be tackled.

Let me move on from national insurance numbers— *[Interruption.]* I warn the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), that I will respond to his challenge and talk at even greater length about them. I do not believe that issuing 4,061,512 national insurance numbers between 1997 and 2000 was effective control of the problem. The figure is too large and suggests that the controls are not tight enough.

I am concerned about the effectiveness of the proposals. We must consider whether we can be comfortable that the powers to secure data from private sources will be safe not just from a challenge by the Data Protection Commissioner—I look forward to seeing her letter, which the Secretary of State has generously agreed to provide—but from a challenge under the Human Rights Act 1998. The other place debated that at length, but did not reach a conclusion.

When the assistant commissioner spoke at a conference of the British Bankers Association last week, he outlined the difficulties that the office of the Data Protection Commissioner has with the Bill. There is a widespread anxiety that the powers might not be secure if they are challenged under human rights legislation. It would be a frustrating but all too typical example of the way in which the Government behave if powers that are taken with a flurry to demonstrate their effectiveness in tackling welfare fraud result only in a challenge in the courts and cannot be used as originally intended. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State is offering me the commissioner's letter and I look forward to studying it.

We need an assurance not just that the Data Protection Commissioner is content with the Bill, but that the Secretary of State believes that he can stand by his judgment on the front of the Bill that its provisions are compatible with the European convention on human rights, which is incorporated in UK law. We still need further information on that point.

When the Minister of State replies to the debate, I would like to hear his estimate of the burden on business that will result from the enactment and implementation of the proposed legislation. Very few of those working in

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the financial services industry believe Ministers' estimates of the cost of compliance, which range from £2.3 million to £7 million. One bank alone believes that 38 additional staff will be needed to comply with the Bill's provisions. We know from Ministers that they are expecting 900,000 inquiries a year when the Bill is enacted. The idea that those inquiries can be dealt with by private sector banks and financial institutions at a maximum cost of £7 million is one that is difficult to believe. I hope that we shall hear more from the Minister of State about the real burdens on business.

I hope also that we shall hear more about the way in which the Department will be organised to discharge the powers that it will have when the Bill is enacted. I do not know whether what the Secretary of State said was new. I suspect it was a new and lower estimate of the number of officials in his Department who in the first instance would have powers as designated officers to pursue information, using the provisions set out in the Bill.

Another concern has focused on the number of people who will be so empowered and how well they will be trained. There is the problem of spoofing. Bogus inquiries will be made to banks by people claiming to be working for the Benefits Agency. The Secretary of State should know about that. We have had a great deal of spoofing by the Government over the past four years. There is a need also to have single and reliable points of contact.

It seems that we are reaching the stage where there will be only 14 area benefit offices, with relatively few staff. They will be expected to discharge their powers under the Bill. We shall listen with great interest to anything that the Minister of State can say about what that means for the organisation of the Benefits Agency.

We will not oppose the Bill on Second Reading. The measure has been heavily revised and improved in another place. It is a modest step in the right direction. We do not believe that it will deliver what the Secretary of State and his ministerial team claim for it. That will require energetic ministerial intervention and organisational change within the Department, and that will have to wait for another Government.

7.12 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) began his brief contribution to the debate by commenting that this evening may be the last occasion on which we shall hear my right hon. Friend the Minister of State speak from the Government Front Bench. The hon. Gentleman also began with comments about my right hon. Friend, and I hope to conclude my equally brief contribution with comments about him too.

I hope also that there are those who can make a distinction between this being perhaps the last speech that we shall hear in this place from my right hon. Friend, but not the last speech that he makes in Parliament. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Havant and others will contain themselves, I will suggest why Parliament would be strengthened if my right hon. Friend's speech this evening were not his last.

Much has been made about the extent of social security fraud. Most of us will conclude that it is too large and that it may be growing. The Government have introduced the Bill because they wish new powers to be more effective than those that Governments have had in the past to safeguard taxpayers' money. It is fair game to cite and to criticise the figures in "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business: Securing the Future", but I must declare an interest. For about three months, I was the Minister responsible for counter-fraud, and during that time the document was produced. Though the figures did not come down from Mount Sinai, they did go through No. 10. If there is a wish to query them, people should know that they have that stamp of approval.

In the spirit of give and take, I shall suggest four modest but important ways in which the Bill could be improved. As in the other place, I hope that the Government will be open to suggestions. The first involves working families tax credit. I cannot believe that the Secretary of State, who is as anxious as anyone to bear down on fraud, would willingly exclude WFTC from the Bill.

When we consider the Bill in Committee and on Report and table amendments to include working families tax credit, I hope that my right hon. Friend will invite those of his colleagues who have opposed WFTC being part of the Bill to defend their action, and not leave him to defend an omission that I am sure he was anxious not to agree initially.

There is resistance to serious consideration of possible fraud problems with the WFTC. It was not only when the ministerial team first met after the general election that I suggested that if the WFTC was to be part of our programme, we should undertake a benefit review of family credit. During my 13 or so weeks as a Minister, I asked for that review to take place. I am not surprised that those papers no longer exist. I have no doubt that most of them will disappear down a black hole, as did so many of the papers relating to other activities at that time.

From talking before the general election, let alone since, to counter-fraud officers who deal with the WFTC, it would be necessary to be simple beyond words to believe that there was not a major issue. As the Green Paper stated, when new benefits are being designed, we should try to design out the obvious ways in which fraud is being committed on current benefits. It stood to reason that we should have had a benefit review of the WFTC. We did not, but that is water under the bridge. None of us has the power to shift the bridge further downstream so that the water can pass under it again. However, we can ensure that the WFTC comes within the ambit of the Bill. That is my first suggestion.

My second suggestion is to strengthen the proposed penalties. I hope that we shall move to two strikes and out. That should be our policy, with no qualifications and no changes. However, we should not kid ourselves that that will deal with the more serious crimes against taxpayers in respect of social security fraud.

On reading the Bill, it is interesting to ascertain where the Government think that the main fraud is located. It is in that area that they are proposing penalties. There are the individuals who might suffer the two strokes and out, and employers. I know that my right hon. Friend has spoken to those in the credit industry who are concerned about countering fraud, and about the people who they see practising fraud against them and the taxpayer. They have an image of well-organised firms undertaking such activity, and some of them are prepared to use guns.

The thought that a two strikes and out policy, or an up to £5,000 fine for employers, could deter that group suggests to me that we will welcome an opportunity to consider penalties again and further to strengthen the armoury that taxpayers have to protect their hard-earned income.

That leads me to my third suggestion, which relates to national insurance numbers. There was horror in the Department when, as a Minister, I suggested that we should consider the probity, the record and the background of those who issue national insurance numbers. It said that staff would be up in arms. I have never taken that view; with identity cards, all those who have nothing to hide would have no worries about such changes.

We should encourage the Government now to make a move on looking at people's backgrounds to ensure that staff are who they say are when they apply for jobs, especially those who are in charge of issuing national insurance numbers. If one goes back to the gangs—which, after all, are attacking taxpayers' biggest budget and the image that the credit, banking, finance and insurance industries present about these people—it is inconceivable that those highly organised groups have not placed some of their people on the inside so that they know which of those excess national insurance numbers can be used safely for the creation not just of the odd identity, but mass identities. When we come to consider the Bill in Committee and on Report, I suggest that we strengthen the Government's hand on safeguarding national insurance numbers.

Mr. Webb: I wonder whether I can make a link between what the right hon. Gentleman has just said about infiltration of the Department of Social Security and the powers in the Bill to have a good nose around people's bank accounts. Does the conjunction of the two concern him?

Mr. Field: I hope that I will be here when the hon. Gentleman speaks. It is not that I have important meetings to go to, but I have a personal one to attend, so I may not hear his contribution. I am not quite sure of the connection that he is making.

There are civil liberty issues that relate to this issue and other aspects of the Bill, and it is proper for people to be concerned that the weight in our society is against civil liberties and in favour of protecting the majority. I do not share that view, but I respect the fact that others hold it. I do not think that we have got the balance right, and the Bill moves in an important direction to strengthen the hand of taxpayers collectively to look after their hard-earned income, as against the possible infringement of certain people's individual rights, although most of that group are undertaking activities that are not in the interests of decent taxpayers—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps I shall pick that point up later. Although there is a conflict, I come down firmly on the Government's side.

My final point is about what the Bill calls data sharing, although the industry calls it data raiding. Later in the Bill's proceedings, I hope that we can suggest that it becomes genuine data sharing. One useful amendment would be to give the Government power to join CIFAS, the credit industry fraud avoidance system. From a comment made by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, it appeared that there was a legal bar against the Government joining that organisation. Merging the Government's information on trying to counter benefit fraud with the information that the industry has on its way of trying to counter fraud would help us as consumers to pay lower premiums and, I am sure, pay huge dividends for taxpayers. That is only one move in what I hope will be a whole series of moves on data sharing that would shift the balance towards decent citizens, and against our comrades who so often put two fingers up to us and run amok locally and nationally.

Those are my suggested reforms, which, I hope, we can add to the Bill before we enter the election fray. I said at the beginning of my speech that I wanted to conclude by picking up the theme of the hon. Member for Havant in respect of my right hon. Friend the Minister of State. I have been in the House for 22 years, and my right hon. Friend was a Member of Parliament when I arrived. I first met him when I worked for the Low Pay Unit and, in its early days, came with another member of the unit—who is now my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond)—to speak to a group of Labour Back Benchers. I hope that by raising that I do not harm my hon. Friend's career in any way.

As an ordinary worker in the Low Pay Unit, my hon. Friend raised the question of indexing allowance. Two people in the room were taking copious notes; my right hon. Friend and my friend Audrey Wise who, until recently, was the Member for Preston. I was surprised because, not only did they take notes and table the relevant amendments but, when the then Government were on a knife edge, with almost no majority at all, they both stood their ground and made reforms for which many people continue to be grateful to them.

The first characteristic of my right hon. Friend of which I was aware was his bravery under fire, as they say. During the long years of opposition, I also learned that if he thought that something was right, he would say so in the Chamber. We have heard this evening that a lot of people out there need to be convinced that fraud is bad, but I have not met any of them. However, he and I faced quite a few Members in the Chamber who did not think that countering fraud was important. The fact that all three parties now have a united front on countering fraud owes not a little to the stance that he was prepared to take in opposition, when his own side was still wandering around the garden of Eden suggesting that it was not a problem at all.

The fact that we now have a much more determined fight against fraud and that the Government are adding to their powers in the Bill is one small testament to the effect that my right hon. Friend has had on debates in this place. As I said, I hope that this is not the last time that Parliament hears from him.

7.27 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): May I pick up where the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) left off and perhaps make the Minister of State feel even older? As a child living in Great Barr, just down the road from his Perry Barr constituency, I used to read the *Birmingham Evening Mail* every night and see his face there; I thought that when I grew up, I wanted to be just like him—*[Interruption.]* I am not sure that it ever came to that.

As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, Members on both sides of the House are united in the view that fraud is a serious issue that costs a considerable

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sum. However big the figures—£2 billion or £7 billion—they are hard to grasp. Whatever the amount, it is enormous and could be used better than by being spent on fraudulent benefit claims. Clearly, we all want more action on fraud. Later, I shall come on to the fact that I am not convinced that the Government are using their existing powers to tackle fraud effectively.

We have had a knockabout, but I want to look at the Bill itself. It is called the Social Security Fraud Bill, and it sounds as though it must be a good thing, because we are all against fraud. However, we must always ask whether its measures for tackling fraud are appropriate: do they go too far? I want to focus on that question.

I want to raise a number of concerns—especially the business about delving into people's bank accounts and credit reference agencies—that are raised by clause 1. When I have done so, I hope that the Minister will respond to them in his reply, unless he has a better engagement, but I am sure that he will be here until the bitter end.

First, I turn to the scale of intrusion. In the other place, Baroness Hollis gave an assurance that there would be no fishing trips, yet the regulatory impact assessment states that there will be 800,000 inquiries every year, many of them into bank accounts, credit reference agencies, utilities, telecommunications and so on. Some are unexceptionable. There is nothing wrong with asking a utility company whether any gas or electricity has been used at a house, and if it becomes apparent that no fuel has been used in the house, it is appropriate to wonder about paying someone housing benefit for occupancy of it.

However, hundreds of thousands of inquiries to banks and building societies are mentioned. There is a contrast between that number, which was not used by the Secretary of State—he hardly touched on the Bill until quite late in his speech—and the impression that the Government are trying to give that the process will be measured, carefully scrutinised and carried out under controlled circumstances. The two things seem to be at odds. It is hard to see how hundreds of thousands of inquiries into people's bank details are consistent with a carefully controlled examination of only the information that needs to be examined.

My first worry is that the scale of the exercise will make it difficult to control. In another place, the Government stressed that there would be safeguards, that there would not be fishing trips and that checks would be made, but the scale that is envisaged makes me wonder whether that is practical. I have my doubts.

The second concern is whether those activities will be subject to independent scrutiny. An analogy has been drawn with the tax commissioners in the case of the Inland Revenue, who have an independent status, whereas the activity envisaged by the Bill will be subject to what are called management checks. Much of the scrutiny to determine whether the powers are being used properly will be internal.

In years to come, I can imagine constituents complaining to us that the DSS has been getting copies of their bank statements and finding out about their personal details. People will be shocked that the Department can do that, particularly when they are proven to be entirely innocent, and we will feel that we should have made sure that there were more safeguards in place—independent safeguards, not just someone else in the Department saying, "Yes, it is all right."

I am aware that there is a code of practice, and I am grateful to the Department for making it available to us. I know that only part of the code of practice was available to another place when the Bill was considered there. The code of practice is helpful, but its contents do not form part of the Bill. It is referred to in the Bill, but breaching the code of practice is not, in itself, an offence. Critically, the code of practice can be amended without reference to the House—I believe that I am right in saying that. At a later stage, we may wish to explore the conditions under which it can be amended. If that is the safeguard—if the Minister's response to our concerns is, "There is a code of practice, which is publicly available"—we need to be reassured that it cannot be changed, thereby possibly undermining people's protection, without proper scrutiny in this place.

A further source of concern is the seniority of the staff involved in examining people's bank accounts. In other cases in which those powers exist, the prying into people's personal circumstances is done by more senior staff than envisaged by the Bill.

Mr. Butterfill: If someone applies to a building society for a mortgage, is it unreasonable for the building society to ask to check the person's status with his bank? Is that an intrusion into his privacy? Is there not an analogy with someone asking for state benefits and being asked whether a check can be carried out with his bank? Is that really such an erosion of people's private rights?

Mr. Webb: When one applies for a mortgage, the information that is requested is limited, specific and relevant. On the occasions when I have applied for a mortgage, I do not remember being asked for copies of my bank statements. I might have been asked to state what my salary was and I might have been asked to produce mortgage statements from other lenders, but not for all sorts of extraneous information. One of my concerns about the powers in the Bill is that the temptation to do a bit of fishing is considerable.

First, there will be the question about whether there is an account, and perhaps a question about the balance, then the investigating officer might think, "Maybe we should look a little further. We might find something else." That must be a huge temptation. There is no cost to the civil servant concerned. By pursuing the matter as far as possible, he might turn something up and get a pat on the head for finding something, even if that does not happen nine times out of 10.

Mr. Butterfill: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way again. Perhaps there is something wrong with the way in which disclosure is dealt with at present. He may not be aware that whenever he asks for any form of credit—for example, from a building society, or for a loan to buy a new car—he will sign a form that entitles the lender to make all sorts of inquiries about him, including his status with his bank.

Mr. Webb: There is a difference between my status with my bank, and copies of my bank statements for the past six months. The question is how far it is legitimate

for the state to go in pursuing suspected fraud. How strong does the suspicion need to be? It is the lack of scrutiny that worries me.

We will not oppose Second Reading—I shall not keep the House in suspense any longer—and we think that it is legitimate for the state, in tightly controlled circumstances, to check some of the information that it might need to corroborate, but we want to be sure that there is independent scrutiny, that the investigation is not carried out on such a massive scale that scrutiny is impossible and that the information requested is specific and limited, not just general fishing.

Until the Bill went through another place, there was a clause stating that the people who would be scrutinised would include those in a category more likely than others to commit fraud. The fact that the Government even thought of writing that in is extremely worrying. I do not know whether they had in mind people who looked a bit shifty or people with funny accents.

I am not sure what the criteria were to be, but the fact that the Government thought of including a clause that would allow them to examine the bank accounts and so on of people who seemed more likely than others or who were statistically more likely than others to commit fraud suggests the sweeping ambitions that the Government had. I am delighted that in another place the Government responded to criticism and reined in those ambitions, but I am concerned that the ambitions existed in the first place.

Mr. Willetts: The best that Ministers could come up with was the suggestion that the measure would attack window cleaners. Perhaps, with an election looming, they were so worried about losing the window cleaner vote that they abandoned the idea. However, that was the only explanation that the Government could come up with when challenged on the point that the hon. Gentleman rightly makes.

Mr. Webb: That suggests entirely new angles on laundering, I suspect.

We are anxious that the powers should be independently scrutinised by senior staff and should not be on such a large scale that they get out of hand. I spent a riveting time this afternoon reading the code of practice. It is not just civil service staff but subcontractors who will potentially have those powers, so the powers could be exercised at one more remove. That is a further source of concern to us.

I have already asked what assurance there was that the information requested would be the minimum that was needed. The incentives are all wrong. The incentive for the member of staff must be to ask for as much as possible, because in one case out of 10, 100 or 1,000, something extra will be detected. How much intrusion should be balanced against that? We are worried that there are not sufficient controls to prevent such fishing expeditions.

There are questions about who will bear the cost. Often, the actions of central Government incur costs for local government, and local government never gets reimbursed. Under the Bill, local authorities will have to supply information. Will that be just another burden on local authorities, or will the Government meet the cost?

Have the Government considered a possible side-effect of the Bill? As a result of the power of the state to gain access to people's bank accounts on a much larger scale than ever before, people may stop having bank accounts. Have the Government assessed the likelihood of that? Given that one of the Government's strategies is to create a universal bank and to get more people to have accounts, is there a danger that if people think that their financial affairs are not private and their transactions are not secure in a bank account, fewer will have bank accounts? I should be grateful for the Minister's response.

I mentioned earlier my concern that the Government are not using their existing powers to crack down on housing benefit fraud. In an intervention, I asked the Secretary of State what he thought of the fact that housing benefit fraud detected by local authorities had gone down between the second and third years of his Government. He said that the Government were trying to do more to stop fraud in the first place, but I was not convinced that that explained why local authorities were finding less fraud.

My reading of the situation is, first, that local authorities have not been supported enough in their anti-fraud work, and, secondly, that the Government have not used the powers that they have to make sure that local authorities are doing more. The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) mentioned, rightly, that the Government's existing powers have been used only once, against Northampton council. That local authority detects 1 per cent. of benefit expenditure in fraud. The most successful local authorities detect 5 or 6 per cent. of expenditure in fraud. If the worst performing authorities could be brought to the average of the best, the Government could save £400 million or £500 million. That seems a credible goal for a two or three-year period. The key question is why the Government have not used those powers more. The Secretary of State did not answer when the hon. Member for Havant asked about the matter, but I hope that the Minister of State will do so. Of course, there are huge variations in local authority anti-fraud activity. Detected fraud has fallen, but there is not much evidence to suggest that the Government are using existing powers before they ask the House for more.

I should like to refer to one further aspect of the Bill about which the Liberal Democrats are perhaps especially concerned—the effect of the benefit sanctions. I spoke about war pensions in a slightly hurried intervention on the Secretary of State. I wanted him to deal with the issue before he finished his speech. Bizarrely, a "Two strikes and you're out" approach is applied to fraud in respect of war pensions, but not to fraud on retirement pensions. When Baroness Hollis was asked why retirement pensions were not included in the Bill, she gave the reason that there was virtually no fraud in respect of such pensions.

Does the Minister of State believe that serious fraud exists in connection with war pensions? It would be helpful for an answer to be put on record. If no serious fraud is committed and it is accepted that Britain's war pensioners are decent, law-abiding people who should be getting the money, the inclusion of war pensions in the Bill is insulting. If he is considering tabling amendments, he should be aware that knocking war pensions out of the Bill could remove a potential source of offence at no cost to the Government. War pensions should not be included in the Bill.

What of the people who are sanctioned? Few of us will have any sympathy for such people, as they will have attempted twice to defraud the benefits system. However, we must consider the appropriate punishment for such

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people. For example, is it appropriate to punish their dependants, who are likely to be children? The Minister of State will say "We're not touching the child rates; only the personal allowances", but that still reduces the total amount that is coming into the household. Anybody who has tried to live on income support for any period will know that income will already be at a minimum. The Bill can take somebody who has committed two offences below income support levels, along with the rest of the household.

In another place, the Government were challenged by my noble Friend Earl Russell about research evidence in that respect. What research have they undertaken into the effect of the benefit sanctions on those who are sanctioned? What does the Bill do to such people and to their dependants? The short answer is that the Government do not have a clue. In fact, they do not care. Whenever they are asked such questions in the House, they say that people should not commit fraud anyway.

We must consider the appropriateness and proportionality of any punishment. As I have previously reminded the House, when people are convicted of murder, we still feed them, clothe them and put a roof over their head. The Bill requires people who have committed benefit fraud twice to live below the poverty line for a sustained period of punishment. How can it be appropriate that although somebody who has committed a severe crime is guaranteed the human rights of food, clothing and shelter, somebody who has done something far less serious can be denied those basic rights?

The Government talk a lot about rights and responsibilities. I do not want to take away from anyone the basic human rights of food, shelter and clothing, especially when he or she has committed a crime that is far less serious than those for which imprisonment is the usual punishment. There is a serious danger, however, that that is what the cumulative effect of the Government's benefits sanctions will mean. The 40 per cent. sanction mentioned in the Bill can be applied on top of another 40 per cent. sanction. That may happen in only a few cases, but such measures are getting out of control. The Liberal Democrats believe that the Government should not introduce any further benefits sanctions until they have commissioned proper research into the effects on those who are sanctioned.

We are concerned about the Bill, but we will not stand in its way, as we share the commitment to tackling fraud. However, the response to fraud must be proportionate, independently verified and properly controlled, and we have yet to be convinced that those conditions will be satisfied.

7.44 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I have been a little surprised by this evening's debate. There seems to be so much conciliation that Member's are acting as though there is no opposition outside the House to arguments about the need to deal with fraud, but that is not my experience. In a recent debate outside the House, I was alarmed to find that a large group of people believe that those who commit fraud have some excuse for doing so. Often, the defrauders themselves believe that they have an excuse. That is why it is worth taking a moment or two to reflect on the social effect of fraud within the system, and to consider why it should be dealt with by the Bill. If we failed to introduce such a measure, we would be failing to deal with the arguments that are advanced outside the House to try to justify benefit fraud.

One of the first obvious facts is that social security fraud is a misappropriation of public funds. Such an abuse must always be wrong, although people sometimes try the excuse that life is tough for those on benefit. However, such arguments do not recognise that life can be tough on all those who receive benefit, most of whom do not commit fraud. I accept that people sometimes make mistakes. Indeed, I often met such people in my previous career and in my work in the voluntary sector, but I know that not all those who commit fraud will be in that position.

Recently, I visited the ONE centre in my constituency with the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley). I was impressed by the way in which the centre deals with benefit and saw how its methods can prevent some of the mistakes that are made. I also saw how well information technology was used and how successfully staff related to their clients. I noticed that clients were very responsive to the information, help and support that was given by ONE. Such help can go some way towards dealing with so-called mistakes. If we get the information right in the first place, we might help the whole process. I am pleased to have seen at first hand the benefits that can be provided to all concerned.

However, such schemes do not deal with the offenders—I call them offenders—who are persistently ripping everybody off. I think that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) mentioned the advertising campaign that has been conducted. I have seen people such as those depicted in the advertising campaigns in my constituency. Indeed, I have received complaints about them and the effects of their actions. There is a far louder cry from those who deplore their behaviour than from those who support it, but I believe that we must nevertheless deal with the arguments of those who try excuse themselves or others from responsibility for such actions.

In the late 1970s, the early 1980s and towards the 1990s, when I was working in the Department, I often thought people on benefit had a very hard time. Jobs were hard to find and things were tough. When 3 million people were unemployed, benefit was inaccessible and circumstances were more difficult, one could feel a little sympathy for people who were guilty of social security fraud. Even at that time, however, I would have said, "Look, there are hundreds and thousands of others in the same town or region as you. They, too, may have lost their job in the steelworks, in mining or in their local factory, but they are not doing the same thing." Such actions are not excusable, even in such tough circumstances, but there might at least have been some compassion when times were hard.

In 1997, at the beginning of my time in the House, the unemployment rate was 4.9 per cent. It is now down to 2.5 per cent. It was low in 1997, but it is now very low indeed, and it is continuing to fall. What excuse can a

person in my constituency have for benefit fraud? There are more jobs, so why are such people finding it difficult to find work?

Mr. Butterfill: I am listening attentively to what the hon. Lady is saying, and I agree with a great deal of it. Does she accept that people who commit fraud against the benefit system can rip off not only their fellow citizens, but charities too? A number of charities rely on an almonry process, and many of them rely on eligibility for state benefits to decide whom they should help. I am a trustee of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, which does exactly that; it gives free veterinary care to people who are in receipt of state benefits. People who fraudulently claim benefit often fraudulently obtain the free veterinary care that we provide. Many other charities operate on the same basis, which means that benefit fraud can be a rip-off of the whole of society.

Kali Mountford: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is a domino effect when people start to commit fraud. My experience is that somebody will often start with a simple mistake, which is why the ONE project is so important. Many people make that one simple mistake, find that they get away with it and then move on to commit more serious breaches. The collusion with others to rip us off in such a manner is outrageous. In that respect, I should like to cite the "Kilroy" programme, although I hope that this is the first and last time I do so. Only a week ago, it featured a debate—which I saw—in which people defended such action on the grounds that they might want to buy Adidas shoes, for instance. They suggested that it was all right for them to act in that way, given the pressure to maintain a certain standard of living in today's society.

I would say to those people that we do not necessarily have a right to own goods of a particular brand. I think we all agree that there is a right to be decently clothed, fed and housed, but it seems that some of us have gone beyond that. It is regrettable that those to whom I refer were willing to act in such a way, and then to defend their actions.

I thought it worth pointing out tonight that fraud is wrong, and describing its effects, but I also want to say something about the employers who collude in such fraud. A measure of discontent has been expressed to me by employers who fear being involved in more red tape and bureaucracy, and having to deal with the Department more than they would wish to. I understand that—I have never encountered an employer who wanted to deal with any Department if he could avoid it—but I hear another view from employers in my area.

Let me cite two types of employer in particular, involved in industry and services respectively: those in construction and allied trades, and those working in private taxi hire companies. Both tell me that they know what is happening in another company further down the road, or in the next valley—the information is never specific enough to enable me to deal with the problem. I am told that certain people are picked up in the morning to be taken to work. Apparently, all the neighbours know about this—certainly those who are in the pub or the supermarket, or outside the post office.

The employers I have mentioned are upset about such people, because they are trying to operate their businesses on a level playing field. They are making national insurance contributions for their work force, and dealing properly with tax, health and safety regulations and all the other Government arrangements. They are working in a fair marketplace, in which they must price their services and goods appropriately. Meanwhile, unscrupulous employers are colluding in benefit fraud. As the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) said, there is a domino effect: not just charities but the whole economy could be ripped off by such behaviour.

That brings me to another part of the Bill that I consider important—that on "two strikes", and how we are to deal with persistent offenders. I think that more support is available now than there used to be: there are more opportunities in an economic context, and advice is more available in the system than I have known it to be in my 22 years of dealing with benefits. I do not consider that mistakes that can have that domino effect on behaviour are as excusable as they seem to have been in the past.

Where does this take us? People to whom a mistake may have been pointed out in the first instance may have to repay overpaid benefit; if it is found that a clerk in the benefits office, or elsewhere, did not spot the mistake, those people may not even be asked to repay the amount. On a future occasion, some other mistake may occur. Again, information may be given outside a public house, or in a post office or supermarket. Those are the places where people seem to be given advice on benefits. I urge such people not to take advice anywhere but in the office with which they are dealing.

I meet people who say, "I was told by Fred Bloggs that if I worked only a certain number of hours a week, or earned only a certain amount, I would not have to declare the amount. I made an honest mistake." I tell them that, under the system as it is now, that excuse is not credible. Those in regard to whom we might want to apply a "two strikes and out" arrangement will have had quite enough connection with the system as a whole to know that their behaviour is wrong. By that time, they must have received sufficient advice to be aware that their actions would result in certain consequences.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) asked whether the "two strikes" provision was over-harsh. I agree with him that the benefits system contains a number of sanctions, intended both to deter and to punish; but another form of punishment is imprisonment, which is also available in the system. Surely it is better for the family of an offender for the offender not to be removed but—if he or she is working and continuing to claim—to formalise the arrangement, and find a proper job.

In all our debates the hon. Gentleman has shown himself to be a compassionate man, and I have some sympathy with his view, but I am worried about the problem affecting families. In generations of families, reliance on the so-called alternative economy has become the norm. We must break that cycle, and if we impose no sanctions of any kind—or if the alternative sanction is imprisonment—I am not sure that we will do families any more good than we would by imposing the sanction of reduced benefit. I think that 13 weeks is the standard period involved in such sanctions. It has proved to be of some value for a number of years, and I think it appropriate.

[Kali Mountford]

Conservative Members, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), have expressed criticisms, suggesting that sanctions and controls could be taken further—into the area of organised crime. The Bill is not designed to deal with organised crime, but I welcome the work that has been done with regard to fraud overseas. When I worked in the benefits system, I dealt with reciprocal arrangements involving people coming here from overseas and clients going overseas, either for a holiday or, ostensibly, to look for work and to review their arrangements.

It is remarkably difficult to keep track of such people, and to know exactly what is happening. I have received reports of people setting up tents and caravans while ostensibly searching for work, having already found work that they are not declaring. I am pleased that the Bill contains provisions to deal with that. I have some sympathy with the idea of extending the provisions to international crime—the sort of fraud mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead—and to the same kind of crime in this country. I have heard of examples, and I think we have no excuse for not dealing with such matters now.

I welcome the Bill and the present spirit of conciliation throughout the House, although at times I felt we were almost on gladiatorial terms. I also thank the hon. Member for Havant, if I thank him for nothing else today, for reminding me that the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), will soon be leaving us. I can hardly believe that. I experienced a Freudian moment in which I did not want to remember it, and I was rather surprised to be reminded of it today.

I have not been in the House for long; I have been here for barely four years. In that time, however, I have had several opportunities to work with my right hon. Friend, and I admire him greatly. I do not want to make him blush any more than he has already, for he is a modest man and is probably sick of our going on about this, but having received the reminder, I do not want to miss the opportunity of telling him what a pleasure it has been to work with him, how much I have learned from him and what a remarkable parliamentarian I think he has been—not just in my four years here. Like the hon. Member for Northavon, I knew who was and was not worth watching when I was not here, and my right hon. Friend was always the man to watch.

8 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): There is a danger that this debate may develop into a eulogy to the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), but I would like to add my personal congratulations to him on his parliamentary career, because this may be the last opportunity that I shall have to do so in a debate. What he has done in his present Department has been quite outstanding.

More particularly, I remember the right hon. Gentleman in his role on housing, a period when he and I crossed swords on more than one occasion. The contribution that he has made to the development of housing policy—in particular, to the maturity with which the Labour party now approaches the issue of the private rented sector, and to the recognition of the contribution that it can make—has been extremely valuable. I should like to take this opportunity to thank him, and to congratulate him on behalf of us all on that element of his work.

It is always difficult to speak after the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and I am sorry that he is no longer in his place. He and I tend to agree on many of the issues on which we jointly speak: on pensions, for example, and other matters. It is particularly difficult for me to speak after him this evening, because he said just about everything that I wanted to say in my own speech. I should like to pick up some of the points that he made, particularly the emphasis that he placed on the pernicious influence of organised fraud on social security benefits.

According to the raw statistics on national insurance numbers, which were discussed earlier, there are some 82 million national insurance numbers, but only 48 million people of employable age. That leaves a difference of 34 million. It is difficult to believe that that difference could be entirely due to factors such as the national insurance numbers given to people under employment age for various reasons; the national insurance numbers that are continued in respect of deceased persons for certain reasons; and the national insurance numbers that are given to temporary foreign workers.

That last factor relates to a legitimate activity. In my constituency in Bournemouth, there are a large number of language schools. In the summer, a great many students come over to attend the schools, mainly from other parts of the EU. Many of them want to work part-time while they are here, as they are perfectly entitled to, as citizens of the European Union. They get a national insurance number, they retain it and it remains on the system. That is perfectly appropriate. However, it is difficult to believe that those rather limited examples, which may explain some of the difference, could amount to a difference of 34 million national insurance numbers. This is a serious problem, and it needs to be addressed.

The Bill goes some way towards addressing those issues and helping to reduce the clear element of fraud demonstrated by those numbers, and to that extent I welcome it. There has been some dispute about the level of fraud, but most people seem to agree that it is worth about £7 billion a year, although it is difficult to quantify exactly. These are huge numbers, and the burden that that fraud places on ordinary, decent, hard-working people is colossal. That is unfair on the many people who pay their taxes.

Many of my constituents are elderly, and a large proportion of them are retired. Many of them continue to pay tax, but in doing so they are often supporting people who are deliberately defrauding the system: the people about whom we are concerned. We are not so concerned about those who make innocent errors, or who find the system extremely complex. Most of us have had people come to our constituency surgeries and say, "I just didn't understand. It was all too complicated, and I made an error when I filled in the form. I didn't know I was supposed to let them know when certain events occurred and I failed to do it."

Many of my elderly constituents are confused about the system and they make innocent errors. They are not the people about whom we are concerned. Indeed, the Bill

proposes ways of mitigating the effect for those who make innocent errors, even more than once. We are, however, concerned about those who deliberately set out to defraud the system and their fellow citizens. Given the scale of the fraud, the effect that it has on everyone else, and the way in which it denies us the opportunity to spend public money on other things that we all consider desirable—health, education or whatever—there is an urgent need to tackle the problem.

I therefore welcome the additional powers in the Bill to obtain information. I also welcome the ability to use electronic access to data, although I shall say a little more about that later. There are some concerns about those additional powers, especially about how they will operate with those who will be providing a co-operative system with the Government.

We know from the responses of organisations such as the British Bankers Association and the Council of Mortgage Lenders and from the telecoms companies and others that they are worried that they will have to bear an irrecoverable financial cost as a result of the information that they provide. They also feel that it is a little unfair that they operate systems now at considerable expense, and that, by co-operating with the Government, they will get no benefit in return.

The suggestion by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead that we should participate in organisations such as the credit industry fraud avoidance system is a good one. That would make it much more palatable for those who are co-operating in this way. Let us make no mistake: extremely sophisticated systems are now available that can reduce fraud dramatically. The telecoms companies have now put in place very sophisticated computer-based systems that can detect up to 80 per cent. of fraud. It would be a great advantage to everyone if we could get close to even half that percentage in relation to social security fraud through the use of those systems. The Government will need to look carefully at the way in which the agencies are reimbursed for the costs that they will undoubtedly bear in co-operating.

Similarly, I welcome the ability to co-operate, albeit limited, with overseas authorities. There is no doubt that much of the organised fraud is transnational. Gangs of people are being brought into this country, and they are defrauding the system. Organised criminals are bringing in so-called asylum seekers, and exploiting them and the benefit system. I want those people dealt with."

I do not like the idea that people operate middleman agencies to place genuine—or possibly genuine—asylum seekers on behalf of one authority in another. In Bournemouth, a lot of people are placed in hotels and guest houses on behalf of London and Kent local authorities through a middleman agency based in Eastbourne. It takes a cut of the money that the Government and the taxpayer provide to support those people, but we did not institute such support payments for the unfortunate people who may be genuine asylum seekers in order for some middleman company to take a cut on the way. I hope that that is one of the first problems that we will start to eliminate by making the whole process illegal; and if the Government can amend the Bill to achieve it, they will do a service to the whole community.

Although I welcome the Bill, I have to say that it is too little, too late. The Secretary of State referred to the ancient computer systems that the Government inherited when they took over in 1997. There is no doubt that some were pretty old, but the problem is that systems age very quickly. Those that we bought for ourselves or our children only three or four years ago look terribly out of date today and no doubt the ones that we are buying this year will look even more out of date a year from now. The whole industry is moving at an incredible rate. We must therefore continually update systems with the best possible technology that we can afford—but I am not sure that the Government have done that.

Before Christmas, I visited my local Department of Social Security office, following which I wrote to the Secretary of State. I had the courtesy of a reply from his colleague, the Under-Secretary. It is worth pointing out the difficulties under which such offices labour and about which I wrote to the Secretary of State in November. The breakdown of the national computer system caused enormous difficulties and obviously contributed to making fraud easier.

Furthermore, inadequate information technology systems are in place. The Benefits Agency has the following: an income support system, a personal details system, a jobseeker's allowance system, a pensions system, an incapacity benefit system, a departmental central index and a repayment depository. With the exception of the personal details system, none is capable of interfacing with any other. I accept that that was the case when the Government came to office four years ago, but it is still the case today and four years is a long time, particularly in respect of updating IT systems. The Government have been slow to deal with a problem that was getting progressively worse.

The filing system that may be needed to combat fraud is even more worrying. To this day, the one in my local office is paper based. Furthermore, only a limited number of records are held in Bournemouth; the rest are sent off to remote storage in Devon. If people need access to the system to check records, papers have to be transported from Devon to Bournemouth.

How long would any private financial services company survive with systems and filing systems of such antiquity? We know the answer: it would not survive at all. As custodians of the public purse, the House and, in particular, the Government have a duty to ensure that the systems are such that they protect the financial interests of our citizens, but they do not do so at the moment.

The Under-Secretary's letter to me said that

"the Chancellor announced that £1.87 billion over the next three years"

would be spent

"in modernising the Social Security system, including the replacement of Information Technology systems."

So over the next three years, part of that £1.87 billion may be spent to update IT systems. She continued:

"The new IT will help reduce the cost of benefit fraud and error"—

we must not forget error—

"by over £1 billion a year by 2005/2006."

The money is unlikely to achieve any savings, nor will it be spent during this Government's first four years. It will not even be spent in their first six years, but we may be

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there by the seventh and we may realise some benefits by 2005 or 2006. There is a broad cross-party consensus here, but the Government have to bear some responsibility for the fact that it will be 2005 or 2006, on their own admission, before any improvement in IT systems helps us to prevent benefit fraud.

The problems of organised crime described by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead occur in my own constituency. In my letter to the Secretary of State, I pointed out that areas such as mine, which have an unusually large transient population, are particularly prone to such difficulties. Some people move to the holiday areas in winter, when accommodation is available, and then move on. Others are attracted there in summer by casual work in the tourism industry. There is a high turnover of people and that, of itself, allows for fraud and organised fraud.

Believe it or not, there are those who organise transient workers. In areas such as mine, where that tends to be a problem, we need to apply more resources. Such areas also contain large numbers of asylum seekers and there is no doubt in my mind that in many cases organised gangs bring people in and then "employ" them. We have seen examples of that reported in the national press—it is a pernicious activity, because they are organised into crime, prostitution or sweated labour that pays poor wages, yet the maximum benefit possible is claimed for them by people who can only be described as gangmasters.

For all those reasons, we must concentrate resources where such activity occurs, but the Bill will not achieve that. Although there is a national problem, there are particular local difficulties in certain towns and cities in the United Kingdom. We must achieve a determination to target resource where it is most likely to bear fruit, but there is no clear evidence that that is what the Government intend. I welcome the Bill and the degree to which it will contribute to solving the problem, but we must consider a lot of other measures for the elimination or substantial reduction of benefit fraud.

8.20 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): If I fail to pay a compliment to my right hon. Friend the Minister of State at this point in the debate, he and other hon. Members may believe that I am snubbing him. His most outstanding characteristic, which he has displayed over many years in the House, most recently in government, is his ability to keep his head connected to his heart. That has been immensely valuable to his constituents and to the country.

I shall make only a short contribution, but I want to convey the view that my constituents have expressed to me over the past four years. They say that they are fed up with having approximately £6 million a year stolen from them. If we accept the reasonable assessment of £4 billion of fraud annually, £6 million would constitute the share that they were paying. That is enough to give every child in my constituency an annual grant of £200, with plenty left over to support a range of other activities. The amount is therefore substantial, and my constituents feel strongly about it. Most of them play fair most of the time, and they earn their cash the hard way. They are fed up with the few who cheat.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) referred to an old argument, which sought to justify working on the side. In the mid-1980s, unemployment pushed 4 million at times, it was impossible in many parts of the country to find a job, benefits were inadequate and many people were forced to live below the poverty line. It could be argued that it was okay then for people to work a fiddle to feed their families and keep their heads above water.

In all honesty, I am pleased that I never had to make that choice. I would not have been at ease in choosing to work a fiddle for two reasons. First, I am old fashioned enough to believe that it is wrong to take something that does not belong to me. Secondly, I am perhaps enough of a politician to believe that if the system is wrong, we should try to change it rather than cheat it.

I have never supported the old argument that I outlined, but even if it were justifiable sometimes, it does not apply today. Unemployment is less than 1 million, and there are more job vacancies than people who are registered unemployed and claiming benefit. We have a new deal for young people, older workers, lone parents and disabled people. There is new investment in training and a range of other actions that are intended to make work pay. They include the working families tax credit, the minimum wage and the 10p starting rate of tax. The Government have made it possible to work, and they have made it pay to work. It is therefore right to deal with those who cheat the system.

In his report entitled "The Informal Economy", Lord Grabiner estimates that at any one time approximately 120,000 people work and claim benefit. In every case, somebody—a neighbour, a relative or colleague—knows about it. We must therefore change the culture. Earlier, Conservative Members commented on the advertising campaign, but together we must try to find methods of encouraging people to feel sufficiently confident to articulate what they know to be true: it is not acceptable to turn a blind eye, pretend not to know and try to justify such actions. It is equally unjustifiable to pay people to do foreigners and avoid paying VAT. That also constitutes unacceptable fraud.

Like other hon. Members, I hear a steady stream of tales from people in my constituency about those who are apparently too ill to work but happen to be fit enough to climb a ladder and paint the house. Such people are blatantly working and claiming at the same time. Lord Grabiner estimates that 40 per cent. of income support and jobseeker's allowance fraud arises from undeclared earnings. The Bill is important because it serves notice that such practices must become a thing of the past.

The Bill has another important purpose: restoring confidence in and respect for the welfare system, which most people want to support. However, they want the proceeds to be used honestly. The measure introduces new powers and there has been some consensus about exchanging information with banks and agencies in other countries, sharing information with those who administer housing benefit and council tax benefit, allowing electronic access and, of course, tackling unscrupulous employers.

Another crucial aspect of the Bill is that it will penalise those who are caught fiddling twice in three years. Clause 9 is important because it protects the dependants of those who are caught out; there is no reason for them to suffer. However, those who flout the rules should suffer.

There is much talk inside and outside the House about the cost of fraud to the taxpayer and the savings that can be made. The Government are taking action against fraud, and I take slight exception to the remarks of the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), who referred to the number of sanctions against benefit fraud. He said that the current average was 10,000 a year. However, he failed to include the 10,000 more people who receive cautions and penalties as an alternative to prosecution. Their fraudulent behaviour is also tackled. The figure is therefore 20,000 a year, not 10,000.

Like all social security measures, some of the provisions are complicated. I am sure that the Standing Committee will have an interesting time debating the Bill's detail. However, all hon. Members should support the Bill because it is a standard bearer for honesty, which we should all try to protect.

8.27 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I join other speakers in paying tribute to the Minister of State. He is one of the rare Members who leave behind them an eponymous provision; in this case, the Rooker-Wise-Lawson amendment, for which the right hon. Gentleman was famous. He has made his mark through a combination of pugnacity and conviction. He has been willing to stand up to his party when he believed that it was wrong, and he was one of the few in the Labour party who had the wisdom to perceive the virtue of selling council houses. However, he was unable to persuade his party of it. That left us a clear run, and I am therefore grateful to him for failing to convince his party, much as I am impressed by his foresight.

The Minister of State is also unusual because the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) used to say that he wanted to resemble him when he grew up. When he grows up, he may well resemble the right hon. Gentleman. I am not being rude to the hon. Member for Northavon, who has the great advantage of looking eternally young.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who is no longer in the Chamber. He always plays a distinguished part in debates on this subject, and had the courage to say things about the importance of tackling fraud and abuse that were unpopular with his party, and when it was not fashionable to do so.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) brought to this debate, as he brings to all debates, a combination of compassion and conviction. He has sufficient integrity to recognise that it is important to distinguish between those who deserve benefits and should receive them and those who are fraudulently abusing the system. Although the hon. Gentleman and I approach the problem with different practical remedies, we both want the money to go to the people who need it and have a right to it. We are conscious that every penny taken in fraud means a penny less to help those in need.

I am afraid that I cannot extend my general paean of praise to the Secretary of State for Social Security, whose speech I found, frankly, disappointing. It might have passed muster as a contribution from a first-time Labour candidate in a hopeless seat, reading out a misleading brief from Walworth road, but it did not really rise much above that standard.

I want to put the Bill in context. It is a small contribution to the important subject of tackling fraud—a major aspect of welfare reform that is centre stage in most developed countries, and rightly so. Social security is the biggest thing that modern Governments provide. In this country, spending on social security has, over 50 years, grown twice as fast, year in, year out, as national income. It has been taking a rising share of our national income and has been the main factor in driving up the burden of taxes and charges on those in employment.

The previous Government introduced a series of reforms that, for the first time, put social security spending as a share of national income on a downward path over the medium and longer term, giving scope to reduce taxes and increase expenditure on other matters. I fear that much of the momentum of those reforms has been lost under this Government. They have maintained some semblance of a downward movement in the share of national income going to social security only by redefining a lot of things previously counted as social security as negative taxation, in the shape of credits, or by taking them off the budget, as in the back to work programmes.

If we are to tackle the problem of growth in the social security budget, we must understand the source of the growth. It is not primarily because of increased generosity in the level of benefits over the years. Instead, it is due, very largely, to the increasing number of people claiming benefit and staying on benefit for an increasingly long time.

There are a variety of reasons why more people are claiming benefits, and claiming them for longer. Many of them are legitimate; some are the direct and intended result of Government policy. We are proud, as a party, to have extended the eligibility to disability benefits to a category of people previously not entitled to them. That inevitably brings them into the welfare system. I have always thought that if there is one group of people whom we should be proud and pleased to help through the social security system it is those who are, through disability, unable to share in the general prosperity of the marketplace.

We must recognise that one reason for the growing number of claimants is a growing culture of fraud and abuse. It has happened gradually, over the decades, almost without perception. It certainly was not the deliberate intention of any Government.

It seemed to me, having reached that stage in the analysis, that the previous Government could tackle the problem of fraud and abuse only by measuring it effectively. The Secretary of State repeatedly said, in a tone of disdain, that we did not even start to measure the level of fraud until 1995. That is like saying that the inventor of the jet engine in 1945 did not use jets before he had invented them. No one else had invented them either. It is like saying that the inventor of the wheel had not used the wheel before he had invented it.

I imagine that, like me, all my predecessors asked their officials how much fraud there was in the system and were told, "How can we possibly tell you that?" Fraud is a victimless crime—at least, it is a crime without an individual victim, so it is not reported. It is a crime that, by its very nature, is concealed. How can anyone know how much fraud is in the system? No Government in this or any other country, I was told, have ever been able to measure the level of fraud.

Indirect estimates have been made of the level of fraud. Similar estimates of the size of the black economy, for example, take into account the number of bank notes in

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circulation. No direct measure of fraud had ever been made, which I found extremely unsatisfactory. It just so happened that in one of my previous careers—when, as my mother put it, I had a proper job—I was involved in market research, so I was familiar with the idea of surveys. It also happened—again by chance—that I found a reference in a Dutch journal on social affairs to a blanket attack that had been made on all benefit claimants in one part of a small Dutch town. Everyone had simply been hauled in to be assessed for their entitlement to benefit because it was thought that fraud was so rife in the area. I cannot remember the results, but I thought that if we could take a statistically representative sample of claimants and investigate their conditions in great detail, we could establish the level of fraud.

Initially, there was great resistance to the idea, including from the then Labour Opposition, who thought it would involve summoning innocent people—sending in a friendly local benefit fraud investigator to treat them as though they were potential fraudsters to establish whether they were.

When we introduced the system, we were worried that it would produce a negative and hostile reaction. I am happy to say that it did not. When we set up the panels of 1,000 or more claimants on each benefit, established all the details that we held on them internally and then visited them, often unannounced, they were only too happy to help in the vast majority of cases. The innocent people were happy to help. If they inquired why they were being singled out and what was going on, they were told that it was part of a measure to establish the level of fraud and abuse. They were keen to help because they recognised that if other people were abusing the system, it was their money that was being taken—it was society's money that was being misused. There was virtually no resistance to the area benefit reviews, as they became known when we set them up.

The reviews were extremely helpful and enabled us to establish the aggregate amount of fraud by benefit, by type of fraud and by characteristics of the claimant. Above all, they gave us a benchmark of the level of fraud for each. Once we had set up the system, we could measure the success or failure of Government measures to reduce the growth of fraud and, we hope, to reverse it and bring about a decline in fraud.

This Government have by and large continued those reviews. Apparently, they stopped them for family credit on the assumption that there would be no fraud in the working families tax credit—a ludicrous assumption, since the equivalent tax credit in Canada abandoned because it was found to be so prone to fraud. The Canadians have reverted to the equivalent of family credit. In other areas, the Government have continued regular assessments of the level of fraud—they could scarcely do otherwise. The results have not been flattering.

In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State—hoping that he could bamboozle us—claimed that the level of fraud had gone down. In fact, the figures show that in the past two benefit reviews the level of confirmed fraud in income support and jobseeker's allowance has risen. He was able to claim a fall only by including errors. He is the first person who has pleaded errors to excuse fraud, or the failure to reduce it.

Undeterred, the right hon. Gentleman then claimed—he is nothing if not brazen—that the fall in fraud and errors was significant. However, the House of Commons Library has produced a report in which it explicitly says that the fall is not significant. The Public Accounts Committee considered the matter and noted that even if the rate is—as the Government claim—edging down, it is not doing so to a significant extent.

The Secretary of State was mistaken on that front, too. It is sad that he is not man enough to admit his error and acknowledge to the House that benefits surveys confirm that fraud has risen. Any fall in fraud and errors combined is not statistically significant. Indeed, although the estimated total of fraud and error for income support and jobseeker's allowance is £993 million, the Government say that the figure is really somewhere between £892 million and £1.096 billion. That is a wide range, so to suggest that a fall of about 6 per cent. is statistically significant is not to use that term as it is normally understood.

If the Government had failed only in that respect, it would be serious enough, they have also missed their targets for identifying and detecting fraud during most of their years in office—indeed, in every year. I think they may have met their recent targets—probably by making them less stringent. They have also abolished, or abandoned, several measures that we introduced to raise the profile and change the culture of abuse.

The Government abandoned the spotlight on fraud campaign, whereby all the agencies in an area combined, in a highly publicised way, to identify and attack fraud to bring home to everyone that we were serious about tackling it. That has gone by the board.

The Secretary of State has downplayed the beat-a-cheat hotline on which people could report evidence of fraud to the Department. As my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) pointed out, the DSS no longer even includes the hotline number on the ill-designed advertisements that supposedly highlight its willingness to tackle fraud. Indeed, it was not until I tabled questions on the rate of response to the hotline that the Government were prodded into reviving some publicity for it, to try to increase the rate.

Overall, the Government show clearly that they are soft on fraud, which is why fraud is rising again. However, because they are above all a Government of spin doctors, they know that they must convince the electorate that they are serious about these measures. That is why they have introduced the Bill just ahead of the election. Some symbolism is required to demonstrate their concern to stop social security fraud. That is also why they are spending a great deal of taxpayers' money on a rather ineffectual—even by their own measures—advertising campaign; it is being mounted for electoral rather than operational purposes. Indeed, I am surprised that it got past the Cabinet Secretary—the head of the civil service—who polices such matters and who would, I am sure, have had words with us if we had proposed heavy expenditure on such dubious advertising just before an election. However, perhaps he knows that an election will not be called, so that is all right.

By contrast, when we were in power, we systematically set about making changes to try to get on top of the problem of fraud. I appointed a senior official who—for the first time—had sole and exclusive responsibility for

tackling fraud in the Benefits Agency. A specific Minister in the Department also had such responsibility. I set up, by law, an inspectorate with powers to advise local authorities and Departments on best practice in tackling fraud. We laid out a coherent strategy—from one end of the benefit pipeline to the other—to secure the process of delivering benefit against fraud.

We were conscious that it would take a long time to redesign the whole process to make it more secure, but we began that programme. We raised the profile by introducing programmes such as beat-a-cheat and the spotlight programme, by setting targets and, of course, by planning the introduction of the benefit card, to which I shall return.

I want to focus now on the measures in the Bill. In some ways it follows on from the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997, which I introduced, but there is a difference between that measure and this. My Act covered information that was already in the hands of different parts of the Government. It removed unintended barriers to the use of that information and to cross-checking it between, for example, the tax authorities and benefit authorities. It did not require individuals or companies to make available any additional information over and above that which they were already required to provide to different Government Departments.

The 1997 Act placed no extra burden on business and did not involve any extra intrusions into people's privacy. I did not go that far because I was apprehensive about going any further. I did not rule it out, but I wanted to see first whether the measures that I had introduced were effective, and whether the gains from them were of a magnitude and nature to suggest that we might extend the powers to allow us to obtain information from the private sector as well. I did not go that far initially because I am always reluctant, unless it cannot possibly be avoided, to impose extra burdens on business and individuals or to intrude further into the privacy of individuals and give the state more knowledge about them than it already has.

I shall ask the Secretary of State, who I am glad to see in his place, some questions about his Bill. In calculating the burden that the Bill will place on the private sector, he estimates that the costs could be up to £7 million. That is in some ways quite a modest sum, but I want to know a little more about how the figure was calculated. I understand from the hon. Member for Northavon that it assumed that 800,000 inquiries would be made, and the report says that savings totalling about £180 million will arise from it. That assumes that each inquiry costs about £9 to make and yields £225 of benefit savings. I am open to rectification if my arithmetic is wrong—without a calculator, arithmetic is not my strongest suit. I am okay with algebra, but I sometimes make mistakes in arithmetic.

Is the Secretary of State saying that 800,000 investigations will be made, each of which will find, on average, £225 of fraud? If so, the measure is expected to be extremely fruitful and I should like to know the basis for that expectation and calculation. Is it based at all on any analysis of how the 1997 Act has worked?

I should like to know whether any attempt was made to establish how effective the 1997 Act has been. It seemed sensible, and the whole House agreed that it was reasonable to enable the authorities to cross-check, for example, whether people were declaring income for the purposes of income tax but telling the Benefits Agency that they had no income, or whether they were declaring VAT while they were claiming that they were unemployed rather than, in some cases, actually in business and making a VAT claim. Now that we have had three or four years' experience, we should really know how effective the Act has been. Have the inquiries made under it led to savings of the suggested magnitude? I hope that the Government have considered that matter, rather than simply rushing off, plucking a number out of thin air and saying that it represents the savings that will be made under the Bill.

Under the Bill, will it be possible to carry out trawls? Will it be possible to cross-check a category of claimants' information against the information from one of the external sources to which the Government gain access, or will that happen case by case, individual by individual? Do the Government think that, each year, there will be inquiries about 800,000 people, about whom they can make individual inquiries to the banks or credit card agencies, and so on, to establish the reality?

The main use that we expected to make of the 1997 Act was precisely in data matching and in cross-checking categories of claimants who produce information on their income tax and VAT returns and on their social security benefit claims, and in finding out how the figures reconciled. It seems that the Government have said in the other place that they would be very limited in their use of any power to trawl, but I may have misinterpreted what has been said, and I should be happy to give way now. If no Minister wants to intervene, I hope that when they have found out what they promised to do about that, they will inform the House in the winding-up speech.

Without trawls—by which I mean the cross-matching of data—the measures that the Government propose will probably be of only limited use. I very much doubt whether they will achieve the savings that the Government claim in the documents associated with the Bill. The Government certainly seem far more willing to intrude into the private financial affairs of individuals and to make use of such information in the public sector domain than they ever were about the information that they possessed on the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), when information about his financial affairs fell into the hands of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. There seems to be a disparity between the way in which they treat their own kind and the way in which they intend to treat benefit claimants, the vast majority of whom are as innocent as the day is long and are entitled to the benefits that they receive, but who, none the less, may be subject to investigation under the Bill.

How can the Bill be reconciled with the Human Rights Act 1998? I am not a great supporter of that Act. This place should establish the balance between different rights. All rights have to be balanced against one another, but it should not be left to judges to interpret, largely subjectively, a document that is, inevitably, somewhat arbitrary, and the implications of which may not have been foreseen.

Liberty, which has lobbied us, refers to a Swedish case that casts doubt on whether the Bill will be fully

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

compatible with the Human Rights Act. It states that in the judgment in the case of MS *v.* Sweden, made in August 1997,

"the Court held that there was an interference with the applicant's rights under article 8 where details of her medical records were passed by a state-run medical centre to a government department investigating her claim for a workplace injury."

That seems rather similar to what is proposed under the Bill.

I understand that the Court may have subsequently concluded that it was permissible to invade people's human rights in that way because of the criminal and civil sanctions incurred if any of the safeguards on the use of that data were breached. I am not certain that that would necessarily be the case in any parallel use of the powers in the Bill; nor can we be certain that the courts will not interpret such matters more onerously as time goes by. The very nature of the human rights legislation means that it is left to the judges to develop and create their own law according to the philosophies that pervade the courts at any moment. Therefore, we might find that the Bill falls foul of the Human Rights Act. If it does, we can respond as we think fit and say that the Government have been hoist by their own petard.

Another element in the Bill deserves comment. The "two strikes and you're out" proposal seems to be a severe punishment for someone guilty of a modest element of abuse of the system. He might be entitled to social security benefit, but he might have failed to report the very small sums that he has earned on the side. If he loses his benefit, he will suffer greatly. However, the more serious fraudster—*[Interruption.]* This is not a debating point; I am talking about people who might face great hardship because the only resource that they can rely on is hardship benefit.

If a serious, professional fraudster, who robs the system of large sums of money by claiming a benefit to which he is not entitled even though he has a job and income of his own, loses his benefit, he will ask, "So what?" He will not lose substantially; it is not a serious punishment for him. The punishment sounds tough and draconian, but it falls harshly only on the least serious offenders.

Will the Minister tell me whether my interpretation is correct? The punishment will not have a serious impact on the professional, multiple claimant fraudster, but it will bear heavily on the small guy, who twice in three years, fails to mention that he did a "bob-a-job" for someone around the corner. I may be wrong because the sanction may apply only to those with a criminal conviction and who have been taken to court for such an offence. In that case, the provision will be limited, because the vast majority of people who are guilty of social security fraud are not taken to court.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): My right hon. Friend is making an important point. One of the "frauds" that I often hear about in my surgery occurs when someone carries out a short piece of work that, if declared, would remove him from benefit for six months. That seems to invite the type of fraud that my right hon. Friend has mentioned.

Mr. Lilley: Let me make it absolutely clear that my hon. Friend and I would not suggest that even small frauds can be excused or exonerated. They are wrong and we should use strong measures to ensure that they are eliminated. We should try to change the culture and take steps to prevent and detect such frauds. Those who defraud the system in that way must pay either through an administrative or criminal process, but the punishment should reflect the severity of the offence and should not be designed to attract good headlines or be imposed simply at the behest of spin doctors rather than those who know how best to run the system.

Several other issues have been raised in the debate. One is the old faithful of national insurance numbers. I have some sympathy for Ministers when they are faced with the apparently alarming disparity between the 82 million national insurance numbers that have been issued and the 48 million people of working age and the 56 million in the total population. At first sight, it implies that there are 26 million criminals or, at least, 26 million identities claimed by criminals. However, the very size of the discrepancy indicates that that is not the case; it means that the causes must be major. As I recall, one cause is the fact that we keep people on the computer system after they have died because their widows and other surviving relatives may be entitled to benefits. There are also millions of people who have worked in this country for a time and then gone abroad, and their numbers remain on the computer.

If there were a small discrepancy between the number issued and the number of people at work, that would be much more worrying because it might be attributable to the crime that we fear may be prevalent. Obviously, there is an element of national insurance number fraud and cases of people creating false identities. I began a process of tightening up the national insurance system to make fraud more difficult, and I am pretty sure that the Government have continued the process with the officials who have worked throughout that time. I hope that fraud is becoming more and more difficult. By no stretch of the imagination can we suppose that there are 26 million false numbers created by criminals.

I understand why people raise the issue, and I hope that Ministers will publish the reconciliation between the number of people in the population and the number of national insurance numbers. The Secretary of State gave the wrong explanation for that discrepancy. It is not because of the extension of national insurance numbers to women and children because they are part of the population, although that seems to have escaped him. It is because of other factors, principally those that I mentioned.

There is misunderstanding also about organised fraud. It is a serious problem, which often involves large sums, and it is important that we tackle it. We now have specialist units homing in on it. However, it is important to recognise, as I am sure my right hon. and hon. Friends will, that it does not account for the major part of benefit fraud, which is committed on a small scale by individuals who are working and claiming, living together and claiming separately, not declaring assets or committing order book and giro fraud and theft.

That brings me to the benefit payment card. The Secretary of State said that it was a great disaster that the Government had inherited, but in fact it was a disaster that they seemed to allow to develop over a couple of years. The then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who as the Minister responsible for the Post Office was

responsible for reporting to the Trade and Industry Committee on the matter, repeatedly told the Committee that the development of the benefit payment card was going well and would be completed on time, if not entirely within budget.

The process clearly did get behind during that period, which was probably because of bad management and lack of ministerial involvement. The Government were more interested in giving complacent reports to the Committees—the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) got rapped over the knuckles for trying to pull the wool over its eyes—than in jumping up and down on officials to establish what was going on and to make sure that the project was brought to a successful conclusion. The Secretaries of State for Social Security and for Trade and Industry had both been Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and the Treasury had never liked the project, so they closed it down summarily. We have lost it, at least for as long as the Government remain in power.

That is sad not only because the benefit payment card would have been an effective way of restricting fraud, by eliminating theft and the use of the order book and giro system, but because a related part of the system was the customer automatic payment programme, which set up an individual account for each claimant, so that all the benefits that they might receive could be dealt with together. That was going well. It was more or less on time and on budget. However, it seems to have lapsed. If that is not the case, I would be happy for Ministers to set me right. The programme had a great deal of potential and was an intrinsic part of creating a secure benefits system from start to finish for the process of allocating benefits.

The Bill at best makes a small contribution to a major problem. When I was in Slovakia, I went to see the little Tatra mountains. The tourist literature said, "Come to the little Tatra mountains, the biggest small mountains in the world." The Bill is the biggest small contribution that the Government can make to the elimination of fraud. However, any contribution is welcome, especially from such a source. I shall not oppose it, but I hope that after the general election my hon. Friend the Member for Havant will be in charge of the Department. He will give renewed momentum to the battle against fraud and to the reform of the welfare system, as he is singularly well equipped to do.

9.6 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who spoke with such knowledge and ability. It is a great shame for the country that he was not able to carry on beyond 1997 the good work that he started in the previous Government. It is clear from his contribution that we would have got on top of the problems with his common-sense approach.

I understand that the debate is a farewell show for the Minister of State. I, too, pay tribute to him. We spent many long productive hours discussing local authority legislation. Above all, he will be remembered for bluntly telling the Prime Minister and the Labour party that they were wrong about the dome. He had the courage of his convictions, saying that he would never visit it because it should have been in Birmingham.

Since the Government came to power, we have fast become a nation of rip-off merchants. The Bill is another attempt to tweak the system by dealing with trivial matters, but fraud is rife. We heard today that the foot and mouth outbreak is thought to have started because of the illegal import of meat. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) recently spoke in the House about the fact that the illegal importation of immigrants and asylum seekers has reached epidemic proportions. We know that the illegal import of tobacco, alcohol, fuel and drugs is higher than ever.

The Bill addresses the problem of £7 billion of social security fraud. It is important to tackle that, but why have the Government allowed fraud to develop elsewhere? I have spoken before about tobacco fraud. Once people get into the business of being able to defraud the taxpayer, they also feel free to defraud the social security system. They become fraudsters. It is amazing that in the Government's first year, the yield from tobacco tax was about £8.4 billion. This year, it is £7.4 billion despite the fact that smoking has increased and the tax on cigarettes has risen by a third.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I have allowed the hon. Gentleman to speak for a few minutes on such matters, but he must now confine his remarks to the Bill.

Mr. Chope: I am trying to illustrate my argument by referring to other issues with which the Government have or have not dealt. Social security fraud is a substantial problem, but the Government's policies are making it worse. They are encouraging many people to become fraudsters because it is a way to make sufficient money.

Mr. Rowe: My hon. Friend has some justification for his line of argument. I live in Kent, and it is well known that vans cross the channel two or three times a day. They are driven by people who have nothing else to do. I have no doubt that many of those people are claiming benefit because the activity in which they are engaged is one that they cannot conceivably declare to the authorities. They therefore have to pretend that they are unemployed.

Mr. Chope: My hon. Friend is right, and I am grateful to him for making that point. The issues of tobacco fraud and the smuggling of immigrants, alcohol and fuel are inextricably linked with the lawlessness that the Government have encouraged through their taxation policies.

The Government say that they will be able to make savings by reducing social security fraud, but the evidence suggests that the savings will be nothing like those that could be made if the Government had a more realistic policy on tobacco fraud. It is estimated that that fraud is costing £3 billion a year. In a written question that was answered today, I asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer what targets he has set for the reduction of smuggling of tobacco, alcohol and fuel—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have reminded the hon. Gentleman once—this is the second time—that he must confine his remarks to social security fraud. He has given the example of tobacco fraud. He must now restrict his comments to social security fraud.

Mr. Chope: I shall do that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Chope]

The Government talk about joined-up government. We are debating the Bill on Second Reading. It is not a Third Reading debate and we are not considering the Bill on Report. We are discussing the Government's priorities, and the Government are putting enormous emphasis on the Bill. They are putting too much emphasis on it while neglecting other issues.

I shall finish the point that I was making. In answer to my question to the Chancellor about the targets that he had set—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have already asked the hon. Gentleman to restrict his comments to the content of the Bill. We are, indeed, considering it on Second Reading, but it is about social security fraud.

Mr. Chope: I accept that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden touched on infringements of civil liberties. The Bill contains amazing and draconian powers to deal with supposed social security fraudsters. I fear that the Bill, as with so much other Government legislation, will have unintended consequences. I suspect that many more people will rely on cash transactions, avoiding anything going through the bank so that they cannot be the subject of a record that social security investigators can require to be produced.

The House will be pleased to know that we are law-abiding in Christchurch, but that does not mean that there are not instances of social security and other fraud. However, those instances pale into insignificance when compared with the number of cases of maladministration. I should like the Government to put much more emphasis on ensuring that their administrative procedures for social security are in order before seeking more powers to require the private sector to provide information. If the Government had concentrated on improving the administration of their existing benefits system, they would have won much more support than the present Bill will guarantee them.

I have a doctor in my constituency who retired and applied for a pension. When it was not paid, he complained and has now been told that his application was never received, although he has had correspondence suggesting that it must have been. That is just one example; I raised that matter in the House before Christmas, and still have not received a satisfactory response. There are many instances in which, we know, people have not yet been paid the money to which they are entitled under the Government's measures on winter fuel payments. The administration of such matters is just not working.

Conservative ideas about having one simple system are the answer to the problem, and I welcome the proposal to set up a single benefits investigation squad. One national body would have responsibility for investigating all forms of welfare fraud, and would be administered by the Benefits Agency. When the Conservative Government take over, I hope that they will put a lot more emphasis on improving the quality of administration. The social security system should protect the innocent and look after those who have fallen on hard times through no fault of their own. Too often, those people fall foul of the system and too much emphasis is put on dealing with those—possibly a large number—who are guilty of fraud, which, given the amount of money taken from the taxpayer, is trivial, compared with the real villains, who are making millions of pounds from systematic housing benefit and social security fraud.

The powers in the Bill do not give the impression that they will be well targeted. If there are going to be 900,000 inquiries in a year, that suggests a scatter-gun approach. If we concentrated those extra draconian powers on identifying the top 1,000 fraudsters, we might get somewhere. I fear that the Government have got their priorities wrong. Considering that they have been advised to get a grip on national insurance numbers, I was surprised to learn of evidence that they do not seem to have done so yet. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden made the point that there is a long-standing discrepancy between the number of national insurance numbers and the number of people living and working in this country. However, that does not mean that there should not be a system whereby all new national insurance numbers issued coincide with the number of people coming into the workplace. There is plenty of evidence that people can pick up extra national insurance numbers and identities without too many problems.

When the Minister of State makes his winding-up speech, I hope that he will tell us why a national identity card is not the answer. If everybody had such a card, there would be no need for multiple identities and it would be much easier to deal with fraud systematically. The Bill sounds tough and draconian, but I fear that it will deal only with the fringes. It will probably result in some people who are caught up in the lower levels of fraud being brought before the courts and suffering benefit penalties, but I fear that it will not deal with the substantial issue. That is why, although I will not oppose it, I find it rather a disappointing measure.

9.19 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): When one hears the sums involved in social security fraud—£7 billion has been mentioned—and realises how many people may need some form of financial assistance, one could easily get the impression that just about half the households in the country are involved in benefit fraud. It is a massive problem, as everyone acknowledges.

Ever since I can remember, people in my circle would say that if one takes care of the pennies, the pounds will take care of themselves. When the Minister sums up, will he tell us what he is doing to encourage people at local level who know that fraud is going on to participate in bringing the problem under control? I want him to take note of two anecdotes from my constituency.

A member of the Conservative party who happened to work in the local pharmacy knew of a number of young women who came in regularly to claim prescriptions for which they did not have to pay, because they were on social security benefits. That young woman lives in the neighbourhood and brought to my attention the number of households in the neighbourhood that were apparently headed by single individuals. When we checked on the electoral roll at election time, we found that to be true.

There were streets where perhaps three quarters of the households were headed by single women. However, when we went canvassing in the evening, the door was

invariably opened by a young man, who had obviously come home at the end of his day's work. Usually, because it was a hot summer, he was dressed in nothing much above the waist. He was relaxed and obviously in a family situation. When we asked a young man whose work van was outside the house whether he was the householder—knowing, of course, that he was not—or whether he was on the electoral roll, he said, "No, I'm the baby-sitter" or some other such flippant remark. What could we do about that? He had no intention of being on the electoral roll.

The combination of information from that young woman who worked in the local pharmacy and of our canvassing returns gave us a comprehensive view of what was going on in those neighbourhoods. The young woman, who thought that it was her public duty, with a little encouragement, to produce quite a lot of evidence to back up her story, submitted it first through one of those telephone lines, and subsequently in writing to the Department, to be investigated. She got—I have seen the letter—the standard reply thanking her and so on.

All that took place just after the last general election. She is still waiting for something to be done. There she was, a responsible citizen doing what she thought was the right thing to do. Now she is demoralised and thinks that the whole thing is a joke, and that it is not worth while sticking her head above the parapet. After all, if those people knew that she had made such comments to the Department, her life could be made very difficult for her. It is difficult to do what she did and, effectively, shop people. The small savings that we could make would have a profound effect on the morale of the people in such neighbourhoods who are working for a living and are often getting along on not very much money, yet they see those situations being allowed to continue.

I shall give the Minister another example. A nurse came to see me about a situation that she had discovered from a patient who was in hospital for some minor injury. He had confided to her that he had been on holiday in Cyprus and had gone paragliding. The nurse had reason to know that the man was on social security benefits, and she came to me to ask what she should do about the matter. I said that she should report it, which she did. Again, we are waiting for the follow-up. I can quote chapter and verse.

As it happened, the very same man came to my surgery on two crutches. He staggered through the door, which his wife opened for him, and sat down and told me a sad story about the curtailment of his benefits. I asked him in all innocence why that was happening. It was clear that he remained on some form of benefit, but he told me that some dreadful nurse—he knew who she was and would get her one day—had reported him to the authorities. He had been on holiday in Cyprus—of course, his son had paid for the holiday, as he could not afford it—and had happened to admit to the nurse that his son had taken him paragliding as a birthday treat. His injuries and health problems were apparently so serious that he had previously been on full benefits, which included one of those wonderful yellow car stickers that allow one to park here, there and everywhere without having to pay fines or even fees.

Hon. Members are told many similar anecdotes in their surgeries and we encourage people to take action on them, but I would love to know from the Minister of State how such matters are followed up. Many people in the same neighbourhoods buy things from catalogue houses, but do not always pay their bills. The private sector employs an army of people to go round, sort such people out and collect the money. I am not sure of their status, but I suppose that they are the equivalent of bailiffs or official debt collectors. I suggest that such a system might be a better way not only of administering benefits, but of checking whether they are abused.

Indeed, the insurance industry uses such a system. If one makes an insurance claim, the company does not merely hand over the money; it sends somebody round to inspect what the claim is about and to double check—this is especially important for injuries claims—that the person in question is not merely faking his or her misfortune. We read in the newspapers occasionally about people who have been photographed when they are engaged in activities that run contrary to the claims that they are making.

In my constituency, a case arose in which a man who was claiming invalidity benefits turned out to be running his wife's carpet cleaning business on the side. His work—he was, incidentally, a policeman—involved moving very large carpet cleaning machines. He was caught because he had made insurance claims, but had been monitored. Somebody had obtained the correct information by double checking.

I realise that an awful lot of people would need to be employed to double check on all benefit claims. However, in a neighbourhood where such activities occur on a grand scale, a little checking and inspection would make a huge impression on the morale of people who are trying to do their best to assist the community at large in preventing benefit fraud. As the Bill proceeds through the House, I hope that the Government will tell us how they will make use of the checking system. It is all very well setting up a new department within the Department and appointing a tsar who will invent more schemes, but I put it to the Minister that he will achieve a great deal more at ground level if he takes more note of what citizens are doing to assist in dealing with benefit fraud.

Of course, benefit fraud is universal. The Conservative Government had to deal with it when we were in power, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) made a tremendous effort to do something about it. It is not an easy problem, but we could make serious in-roads if only we could persuade the Government to insist that the Department follows up discrepancies when honest citizens make complaints through the normal channels, as they are requested to do. If they do so, the Minister will also have to tell us what will happen to such people when they are not on benefits and find that they must manage, like other people, by finding jobs and going out to work. They currently have no incentive to do that. Of course, there is also the problem of how to pin down people who are living openly with working partners—their partners might also be misrepresenting their position—and claiming falsely. The Minister must tackle those problems if he wants to improve people's morale in relation to benefit fraud.

9.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I want to approach the subject from a slightly different angle. What emerges primarily from my experience in my surgeries and elsewhere is that there are too many disincentives to honesty. I consider that to be as big an issue as that of incentives to dishonesty.

[Mr. Andrew Rowe]

Let us consider the individual who is desperate to get back to work, who may well be over 50, and who is finding it extraordinarily difficult to secure employment. He is on benefit, he has a wife and—perhaps—children to support. He—it is usually a man—is then given the opportunity to try his hand at some employment for two or three weeks. He has been applying for work for months, and has never even been granted an interview; now he has the chance of doing a little work. He then finds that if he declares that he has done the work, he will be denied benefit for several months.

That is bad news. How can it encourage such people to find their way back into work? How can it encourage them to play the system fairly? This is, I think, an enormously important question.

Things are too difficult for people who are trying to set up in business for themselves. The Secretary of State had the goodness to respond with alacrity to information about a case that I encountered, and I am grateful to him for that. I was, however, outraged when a couple who came to my most recent surgery told me what had happened to them. They had been together for 11 years, and had their six-week-old baby with them. The man was trying to set up in business for himself, and was therefore not available for work in the strict sense of the term. He was putting together the equipment that he needed, with assistance from his brother-in-law and other members of his family, and was trying to find premises.

As we all know, the early stages of setting up in business are hugely taxing. The wife was not allowed to go back to work: she was a fitness instructor, her baby had been born only six weeks earlier, and according to the rules of her profession she was not even entitled to take tests to establish whether she was fit to return to work for eight weeks. The Secretary of State now tells me that she was misdirected. The fact remains, however, that the couple were told that they were not entitled to benefit because the man was not available for work. Moreover, one of the kind women at the Benefits Agency told his wife, "You would be a lot better off, dear, if you shed him." What a thing for a woman to say to her partner of 11 years, the father of her firstborn child. I think that such disincentives to truthfulness and honesty lead to much of the fraud about which we are so anxious.

There is another problem, in regard to which I have great sympathy with the Government. In areas such as mine, where unemployment is fairly low, finding appropriate staff is enormously difficult. I realise that the Minister has heard all this so often that he is not the slightest bit interested in what I am saying, but I will continue none the less.

It is often difficult to find staff who are capable of doing the job, given the salaries that social security departments can offer. One consequence of that is that someone who writes three letters in three weeks may find that a different member of staff replies to each one. That leaves the person concerned with no confidence that his case is understood, or that there is any continuity in the arrangements.

Thanks to the reforms of the Child Support Agency, we encounter far fewer CSA-related cases in our constituency surgeries. One case we frequently encounter, however, is that of the spouse who, while claiming to have no income, is living the life of Riley, while the—usually—abandoned wife is unable to persuade the CSA either to investigate the situation or to do anything about it. Although it is clear that a man who is running two cars and living in a comfortable house on a substantial income is perfectly capable of maintaining his child, the CSA will not investigate. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) that it is the refusal to follow up manifest cases of blatant dishonesty that demoralises the honest citizen who is trying to make the system work.

9.35 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I would like to begin by commending the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) and for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), because this is possibly the last time they will contribute in the Chamber. They have, as ever, made characteristic speeches, as they have been notable for doing all through their parliamentary lives. They have taken up subjects tonight that are characteristic of all the causes that they have espoused over the years. I thank them very much for their contributions and wish them well.

Having wished two of my colleagues well, it would be churlish of me not to try to make the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), blush, as almost every other hon. Member has done, by thanking him for his contributions over the years. We shall probably have the pleasure of Question Time on Monday, so this may not be his last outing. Indeed, we may well go into Committee on Tuesday—

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Absolutely.

Mrs. Lait: I am glad to hear that we are not dissolving Parliament on Monday, and I look forward to the Standing Committee. Over the past few years, the right hon. Gentleman and I have jousted with each other often enough, and I certainly appreciate his tremendous contribution to the House.

We started this debate—on a Bill that no one has said they will not support—with a half-hour speech by the Secretary of State, which was characterised by my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) as a speech that the right hon. Gentleman would be likely to deliver on a wet Wednesday night during the election campaign in Edinburgh, Central. Edinburgh, Central is a constituency with which I am familiar, because my husband fought the two 1974 elections there against the present Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), in the latter's first campaigns before he did his chicken run to Livingston.

I have some sympathy with the tone of the Secretary of State's speech, but it was not terribly constructive, especially as the Bill has come from the House of Lords amended by my noble Friends Lords Higgins and Astor in a way that has made it a much better Bill. It was unfortunate that the Secretary of State chose to attack our contribution to eliminating fraud, and I was delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) not only set the record straight on that, but did so in such a way as to blow apart the Secretary of State's attack on our record on fraud.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Havant said, we shall abstain in the vote on the Bill. I hope that, when we come to write the legislation in the new Parliament, it will be more understandable than this Bill. Lord Brightman sent up the writing of the Bill on Third Reading and said that he hoped that the Government would listen to his requests for easier reading. Anyone who has tried to read the Bill will have had great difficulty in so doing. That apart, some questions remain that we wish to have answered, and many hon. Members have picked up on them.

I shall begin by talking about the code of practice. I was under the impression, as was the Vote Office, that the only code of practice in existence was the draft one produced in the Lords. I was not aware that the amalgamated one referring to local authorities and the Department of Social Security was available in the Library. Furthermore, it is most interesting that the Data Protection Commissioner, who was particularly concerned when she first read the Bill, has written about her many points of disagreement with it. I shall not go through them all—some were dealt with by amendments tabled in the other place—but the Secretary of State's assertion that she has written what appears to be a one-sentence letter saying that all her concerns have been met worries me greatly, because those points were matters of principle. I should be most grateful if he told us, either tonight or before the Bill is considered in Committee, precisely what exchanges took place between the commissioner, Ministers and officials to make her happy with the measure. I accept that she is happy with it; I just want to know why.

Time and again, the right to privacy has been raised. It is of great concern because information—perhaps inadvertently; perhaps not—could be made much more widely available than one would wish. I hope that we receive in Committee an acknowledgement of the worries of organisations such as the British Bankers Association about the information that will be available. Like many other bodies, it wants reassurance not only that the authorised officers will be properly trained, but that there will be a system whereby the list of authorised officers, which will be made available to private organisations such as the banks, will be kept up to date.

We heard some interesting figures from the Secretary of State. In the other place, Baroness Hollis said that she expected 500 DSS staff and 1,000 local authority staff to be authorised officers. The Secretary of State said that the figure for the DSS or the Benefits Agency is going down to 300, and one would like to assume that the figure for local authorities will be only 600. An enormous number of people will be involved; and allowing for even a normal turnover, it will be difficult to keep the list up to date. It is possible that the private organisations—

Mr. Rowe: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Lait: I am very sorry. I would dearly love to give my hon. Friend the opportunity to intervene, but I am trying to get through my speech quite quickly.

How will the list of authorised officers be kept up to date, and how will the private bodies be notified of changes?

There is also concern about management responsibility for authorised officers. My noble Friend Lord Astor said that, as far as he is concerned, an executive officer is equivalent to a second lieutenant. Having been in the civil service, I understand exactly what he means. When private sector organisations are dealing with civil servants, they must know that they are working with people who have sufficient management authority to deal properly with the information.

A number of my hon. Friends, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) and for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), referred to the cost of the Bill to the private sector. The mere fact that there is a difference of about £5 million between the estimates in the regulatory impact assessment allows people to ask serious questions.

We hope to make further improvements in Committee and I have raised a number of issues about which we are concerned. We want the Bill to be passed, as it represents a further step towards tightening up the defences against fraud and eliminating fraud from the system.

9.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I shall do my best in the time available to answer as many questions as possible. I am deeply humbled by many hon. Members' comments. I can guarantee that the speech will not be my last from the Dispatch Box, although perhaps it could be. *[Interruption.]* If the Bill is given a Second Reading, I shall move the programme motion, the terms of which are a little more restricted.

I am deeply grateful for hon. Members' remarks, which I reciprocate to others who will not return after the next election. Every day in the House in the past 27 years has been like the first, but all good things come to an end. I hate the word "retirement", and I am not going to prune roses, but I have no plans, though no one believes me.

Some unfortunate phrases have been used about Department staff, although I appreciate that they were not intended maliciously. However, the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) mentioned the seniority and probity of staff who issue national insurance numbers; investigating officers were also mentioned. In the past few years, the number of people who are qualified and eligible to issue national insurance numbers has decreased from approximately 1,500 to about 500. The officers who will be authorised under the Bill are the same officers who, day in, day out, visit businesses, contact companies, and ask managers about their employees. In the past 20 months since I have been at the Department, I have not received a single complaint from private sector companies about the way in which they were approached by executive officers.

The Bill will authorise officers by name. We will begin with 175 officers, although I ask not to be tied down to a specific figure. We do not envisage more than 300 such officers. They will be qualified under the professionalism in security—PINS—training programme. When visiting benefits agencies and listening to our fraud staff, I have picked up the point that nowadays Inland Revenue and national health service trust advertisements for investigatory officers state: "PINS training preferred". They prefer the Department of Social Security system. However, the ultimate accolade is that the private sector is now advertising for PINS trained staff. Last summer, a big bank, which was formerly a building society, stated in its advertisement for fraud and investigation audit officers for its headquarters that PINS training was preferred. It was basically trawling for former DSS employees.

[Mr. Jeff Rooker]

Those officers will be the authorised officers under the Bill. If they are good enough to be recruited by the private sector and currently good enough to make inquiries and undertake normal investigations of the private sector, they are good enough to carry out the duties for which the Bill provides.

The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) said that the Bill was thoroughly debated in another place. I would never say that the other place conducted line-by-line scrutiny in the same way as the House of Commons, but, in conventional terms, the Bill was given a good going-over and we made several modifications to it there.

We never intended any individual fishing expeditions to be conducted under the Bill. A paragraph of a subsection included a sentence that contained the words, "likely" or "connected to". We used the example of window cleaners. That was a little unfortunate for window cleaners, but we could have used other examples. We could have referred to families of known fraudsters as a discrete group. We took out the original reference because it implied an element of fishing—we do not intend any fishing for named individuals to occur. That is clear in the Bill. I am referring not to the code of practice, but to the Bill. No inquiries can even be made

"unless it appears to that officer that there are reasonable grounds for believing that the identified person to whom it relates is . . . a person who has committed, is committing or intends to commit a benefit offence; or . . . a person who . . . is a member of the family of a person falling within paragraph (a) above."

That family member, such as a spouse, is the only person who could affect a housing benefit claim. It could not be a brother, sister or grandparent who lived there but had nothing to do with the benefit claim. They would not be caught under the legislation. There is no intention to go on any fishing expeditions. The only area in which that statement would be qualified is in the bulk transfer of information from the utility companies. However, we will not go fishing when it comes to individuals.

We will seek the bulk transfer of information from the utility companies—gas, electricity and water—only when specific properties have abnormally high or low usage. They will not give us the names of any individuals. It will be up to us in the Department of Social Security to data-match that information against our benefit claimants. That is the purpose of the bulk transfer of information—it will not be used for tracing individuals. People must have good grounds for requesting it.

We will not simply trawl the banks. First, officers must believe that something is wrong on the application form or that someone has lied. Alternatively, there could be an allegation. The hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) shopped a whole street—probably because she is not standing for re-election. That case, which was a clear case of fraud, as the hon. Lady said, has come to my attention since I came to the Department in July 1999. However, we can never report back to the hon. Lady's constituent who sent us specific names and addresses, all of which we examined. We are never in a position to report back to a third party—it is simply not possible. We cannot even report back to the Member concerned.

People sometimes believe that the problem is being ignored. I have looked at these cases; I have gone around the country and discussed them. I can assure the House that, to the best of my knowledge, we check the allegations and set up inquiries. We also do more risk analysis than in the past so that we do not waste resources in checking areas where we think that the allegation cannot be justified. We know that there is a high risk with some groups of benefit claimants, and risk analysis enables us to make the best use of our resources.

We will not trawl the banks. If we think that someone is lying to us when he says that he has no bank account, no money and no capital, we will not send out a billet-doux to all the banks asking whether they have any information on that person. That is not our intention. We have never said that we would do that, and we have made it quite clear that we will not. We will not even approach the banks to start with.

If we suspect that someone has an undisclosed bank account, we may first approach a credit reference agency, which we should be able to do electronically. That will tell us who has searched that person's credit files recently as well as giving information on existing credit agreements and credit cards. We would know, because searchers leave footprints on the computers. I have seen it myself when visiting banks and insurance companies. We may see that a bank has searched the file and we may then approach the bank to see whether the person had an account at the bank. In other words, we need a reason to approach a specific bank. If not, we can approach a lender or a credit card company to find out what they know about the person. They might have the details of the person's bank account that he had provided when applying for the credit facility, or they may know how he makes repayments. If those avenues are not fruitful, we might approach a utility company to find out how the person pays his bills, because it might be by direct debit. If all those avenues fail to lead to details of a bank account, we will accept that and rely on other evidence. That is an example of how we might go through the system. We will not take a scattergun approach to the banking system.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned NINOs—national insurance numbers. I think that the issue is worth a debate; it is worth more publication. I am grateful to the former Secretary of State for Social Security, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), for taking a more responsive, moderate view as he waded through his history of successes at the Department of Social Security as evidence to support Ministers, and his belief that we manage the NINO numbering system.

That system is not static. It is not simply a list of numbers on a computer. It is an actively managed system. Staff manage the numbers going on to the system, the activity associated with them and those coming off.

Everyone is appalled by the figures, but they are due to the nature of the population. We were asked about the 4 million numbers added since 1997. We estimate that 2.8 million are children, 800,000 are foreign nationals and about 120,000 are asylum seekers, which adds up to about 3.7 million. We do not know about British nationals who have come back from abroad.

There is a problem. At the moment, we pay pensions to 1 million pensioners abroad. That is not counting people who are working abroad. There are millions of people who have been in this country and left. Millions of ordinary United Kingdom residents have gone abroad. There may be millions more who have come here to do three weeks of fruit picking in Scotland or in parts of East

Anglia where the gangmasters work. They collect a NINO and then they never return to this country, but the NINO remains on the system.

About 12.5 million people on the NINO system are deceased, but we need to keep the records. It is true that we cleanse the system. I do not have the figures to hand, although they are in my folder somewhere, but I think that last year we cleansed more NINO numbers from the system than were cleared in the last 10 years of the previous Administration. We are actively searching and managing the NINO system. It is not always the easiest matter to explain.

Children are on the system these days, for obvious reasons. The child's national insurance number is automatically generated when he or she is 16 because it was locked in when the first claim for child benefit was made. It is an important part of the process.

There are other aspects of NINO management. For the simple reason that children are being born but dead people are not taken off the system, there will be an inexorable increase in the numbers. Everyone will realise what will happen in another 20 years, given that we have reached 80-odd million numbers since 1948. There are huge numbers on the system, so we have to flag them. Suspect numbers—those where we think that there is an abuse—are flagged. If they are used, an inquiry is automatically triggered.

The credit industry fraud avoidance system has been mentioned. I regret that we are not, and cannot be, members of CIFAS, as that would help with reciprocity in the transfer of information. I point out to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) that the Bill is part of the price that the country must pay for not having an identity card system. We are virtually unique in western Europe in not having such a system. Other countries do not need this sort of legislation.

In so far as we can be, we are satisfied that the Bill complies with the European convention on human rights. We have the best legal advice and the best legal brains in Whitehall. They do not always get it right, but in this case we have put them through the mill since last summer. I must tell the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) that we have no outstanding inquiries from the Information Commissioner—formerly the Data Protection Commissioner. To that extent, I hope that we can satisfy hon. Members. The Bill will cause a degree of intrusion, but only for people we think have lied to us about a benefit claim.

Finally, I want to reassure the House that there will have to be good, reasonable and legally tested grounds for making claims about people's bank accounts. There will be no fishing expeditions. All the officers will be trained and qualified under the professionalism in security training system. They will be ordinary executive officers, who are dealing with industry day in and day out in a highly professional manner. I think that we will have 13 or 14 sites throughout the country from which the inquiries will be made. It will not be a case of all the fraud investigators being in the Benefits Agency; they will be a select and elite corps. I think that we can trust in them. They will be properly trained to do an effective job.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Social Security Fraud Bill *[Lords]*
(Programme)

9.59 pm

Mr. Rooker: I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Social Security Fraud Bill *[Lords]*:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 12th April 2001.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

I have not moved a programme motion before, so I was briefed to the gunwales; we have a brilliant civil service—it is excellent. I was sent several speeches made on previous motions and I wrote back with a little billet-doux pointing out that, by the way, I am a Member of Parliament and I attend the House even when it is not DSS time. I have listened to at least five programme motion debates—the full 45 minutes—although, looking around the Chamber, it seems that the usual suspects are not present. However, I know almost all the points that they would make.

I take the matter seriously. I shall not tell the House that we shall consider no amendments—I shall not say that. I shall not tell the House that we want to rush the measure through. Although the Bill has been debated in the other place, I thought that the original dates proposed for its proceedings here were a bit unreasonable, so—considering the dates on which Easter falls—I took the view that Maundy Thursday—*[Interruption.]* Maundy Thursday is on 12 April, so presumably the House is sitting; if it is not we shall make arrangements for it to do so. Maundy Thursday counts as a non-qualifying day in the election timetable—as we all know. It is one of those non-days, but it could still be a sitting day in this place.

So, on the reasonable assumption that we shall begin the Committee stage next Tuesday at 10.30 am—I am looking forward to that—we can probably knock the Bill off in eight sittings. We shall be able to deal with many

[Mr. Rooker]

of the detailed points made today; I am not denigrating them by suggesting that they were Committee points. We can hold useful debates during the period allocated.

Given the scale of the Bill, the number of sittings is justified. Many hon. Members say that it is a small Bill; some have said that we are taking draconian powers. We certainly accept that the Bill has been given a fair wind. On behalf of my colleagues and those people who have worked on the measure, I am extremely grateful for the general good will in response to it. We have to make it work. That is true. It is an extra weapon in the armoury for the fight against social security fraud. It certainly deserves full scrutiny by the House—this is where I dig myself in—if, of course, the House allows that. I ask the House to support the motion.

10.2 pm

Mrs. Lait: Like the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), I, too, have listened to many programme motion debates. It is unfortunate for him that this will be his first and last—or perhaps penultimate—such appearance.

The Opposition are thoroughly against the whole system of programme motions. In many cases, the inability of the House to consider legislation thoroughly because of this new system will create a constitutional problem that will be extremely difficult to deal with; that will come home to roost and the country will be the poorer for it.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, the Bill is broadly welcomed on both sides of the House, but it might not go far enough; we want to consider many issues, as was clear from many of the Second Reading speeches. However, the motion highlights the absurdity inherent in the new system.

Like me, the Minister sat through the proceedings on the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000; the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), sat through the proceedings on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 as well as the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act; the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) sat through the proceedings on both of those Acts; and although the hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) will, unfortunately, not be joining us this time, he was also in attendance during the proceedings on those Acts and played a useful role. The cast of characters for the Bill's Standing Committee will, I suspect, be similar to that for all those Acts—

Mr. Willetts: The old lags.

Mrs. Lait: Indeed. I should have thought that the old lags would realise that we have always worked well together in deciding the end dates for Committees and in ensuring that we stick to our agreements. The Minister will remember the help that we gave when there was a bit of an upset during the passage of the Bill that became the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, so I find it sad and absurd that we have to have a programme motion on this Bill.

The motion provides for four days in Committee—eight sittings. We shall either fill those sittings without difficulty or not sit at all. The apparent generosity of the motion leads me to three different conclusions about what the Government have decided. They may be planning to table a lot of Government amendments, which will take a long time to debate. They may intend to encourage their Back Benchers to contribute in a way that we have not seen in the past. Or, may I suggest a cynical calculation on the election date and that we shall not even go into Committee? That, I am afraid, is the only conclusion that I can draw from the mere fact that a programme motion has to be tabled on a Bill of this nature, which is largely uncontroversial, when we have in the past always agreed happily to end dates and other issues regarding the management of a Bill.

We will, as we promised, table amendments to satisfy ourselves that these issues have been thought through. The Minister says that the Information Commissioner has no concerns. I accept that the commissioner has no concerns, but I should like to know why she now has none, when originally she had many.

The Opposition find it absurd and sad that a Bill like this, which was amended satisfactorily in the House of Lords, should be subjected to a programme motion, as is the usual draconian behaviour of the Government. It is completely unacceptable.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Does my hon. Friend think that there is now a grave danger that it would take longer to see the Bill through because there is a guillotine; and has she noticed that, ever since the Government tried to modernise, we have gone home later in the evening than we used to before modernisation? Does not that show that the Government are totally incompetent even at reforming the House of Commons?

Mrs. Lait: What else could I do but agree with my right hon. Friend? I do not think that any Bill in whose scrutiny I take part lasts any longer then it needs to, because I do not believe in extending debate any longer than necessary, but I think it is very sad that when we have established a good working relationship, this draconian measure should be imposed on us. In the long run, that Government will come to recognise as much as we do the damage that they have done to the constitution.

10.7 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) seems to be assuming that the House will be dissolved shortly. Of course, I do not make any such assumption. It could be not 12 days but 12 months before there is a Dissolution, so I shall not make the assumption apparently made by the hon. Lady and other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), that we have heard the swan song of the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker). I hope that we have not. If we have, though, perhaps I may take the opportunity to pay tribute to the contribution that he has made to the House in many capacities.

I had the pleasure of shadowing the right hon. Gentleman when he was with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and I have the greatest respect for his parliamentary talents. I thought that he introduced the programme motion with consummate modesty and characteristic glee because it looked as though it would

not be necessary, so there may be something in the timetable to which the hon. Member for Beckenham referred.

I will not make the assumption that this programme motion is purely academic. Its detail does not present a great problem for us, whether or not the timetable is as supposed. However, on the principle of the way in which these programme motions are still coming before the House, I share the views of many other Members present that these motions are total nonsense, even when they are acceptable in their detail.

I shall let the House into a secret. Tomorrow afternoon I shall attend the meeting of the Committee of Selection, at which we shall decide which Members of the House are to sit on this Committee. Some would think that other people should take that decision, but it will be taken by that Committee.

I can tell the House that more hon. Members will be appointed to the Standing Committee than have attended most of the debate on Second Reading, because I was here and saw it. In the middle of that debate, nine Members were present, and because I was one of them and I will certainly not appoint myself to the Committee, only eight could be eligible to serve on it. It goes without saying that the hon. Members who spoke this afternoon were not necessarily those who will take part in the Committee.

It also goes without saying that the hon. Members who must surely take ownership of the way in which the Committee undertakes its business and those who will decide how best to consider the detail, to which many references were made in the debate on Second Reading, are the members of that Committee. Therefore, for the programme motion to be tabled even before those Members have been appointed to the Committee is obviously absurd.

I can also tell the House, without revealing any great secret between the usual channels or breaking Select Committee confidences, that the Modernisation Committee will consider programme motions tomorrow. I think that that is probably widely known. Given the speech made by the hon. Member for Beckenham from the Conservative Front Bench, I hope that her colleagues on that Committee will support sensible moves to get the proposal back on track.

I hope that the hon. Lady, who said that the motion was draconian, will recall that the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who I regret is not in his usual place, made the original suggestion that such programme motions should be introduced. He is the godfather of programme motions. The fact that the godchild has gone somewhat astray in recent months should not blind those on the Conservative Front Bench to the fact that, in the original idea, there was a very good principle at stake. It was simply that the Government of the day, assuming that they could command a majority in the House, had a right to expect Committees to deal with legislation in good time and to set the end date.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Says who?

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman was not a Member of the previous Parliament, so he has no experience of Conservative Governments, but I can assure him that they made exactly the same assumption. They assumed that, if they had a majority in the House, they had a right to expect that their Bills would reach the statute book. That is parliamentary democracy. However, it has become increasingly obvious that the management of the individual issues of importance are properly discussed with the Opposition parties.

The Opposition parties have a perfect right to decide what are the principal concerns that they believe should be addressed in the debate and by Division. It is also true that Back Benchers on both sides have a right to expect that that scrutiny will take place in a managed and sensible way. That was the original principle of programme motions, as suggested by the right hon. Member for East Devon in his previous capacity of Chairman of the Select Committee on Procedure. I hope that we shall make some progress. We could be here for another 12 months. I do not say that that is likely, but it is possible, and we certainly cannot continue with programme motions in their current form.

The Minister, in winding up the debate on Second Reading and in moving the programme motion, said that there is widespread support in the House, throughout all parties, for the objectives in the Bill, but he also said, very fairly, that much of its detail will require careful consideration to get right. The problem that we face is clearly gigantic. In that context and, I hope, with the support of the House, this programme motion may not be objectionable, but I still believe that it is completely ludicrous in principle that we should decide how a Committee should conduct its business even before it is appointed. I hope very much that, before many days are out, we shall improve the procedure.

10.14 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I listened carefully to what the Minister had to say before deciding whether to speak in the debate, but something that he said made it important for me to do so. If I heard him correctly, he said that eight sittings ought to be enough "to knock off" the Bill. The assumption that we are here only to knock things off for the Minister's convenience and that what we might think, say or do really does not matter shows almost breathtaking arrogance and a contempt for democracy. With that slip of the tongue, the right hon. Gentleman showed that, although this is the first time that he has introduced a programme motion, he instinctively understands the nature of the beast. When he reflects in the morning on the attitude that he has taken, I hope that he will feel ashamed of himself.

When the Minister said that the civil servants had briefed him, he explained to the House that he did not need a briefing because he was a Member of Parliament. If he were a real parliamentarian who believed in the House and all that it stands for, and if he were a democrat who believed in the democracy that this country enjoys, he would have kept out of this debate on the programme motion. He should not be proud of the fact that it is the first time that he has introduced such a motion; had he been a real parliamentarian, he would have retired from the House never having moved one. He would have said to himself, "This is an affront to Parliament and the way in which we run our democracy."

The right hon. Gentleman faces a problem even though he boasted to us that he had heard it all before. He said that he had been told what to expect. Unfortunately, however good his civil servants are, they did not brief him

[Mr. David Wilshire]

about what I might say. They will not have found a speech from me on a programme motion. There is a always a surprise in store—even at the end of the right hon. Gentleman's parliamentary career.

The Minister may have thought that he would get off lightly tonight. He looked around and said something about the usual suspects. It should not be a case of the usual suspects; all 659 Members of the House should be affronted by programme motions. Everyone who believes in democracy should be one of the usual suspects.

Mr. Redwood: Is my hon. Friend surprised that Ministers show such contempt for the House by introducing programme motions, given that they are led by a Prime Minister who hardly ever votes in the House and who has the worst voting record by a long way of any Prime Minister that any of us can remember? Does not such complete contempt for the parliamentary and democratic process come from the top?

Mr. Wilshire: My right hon. Friend is correct. I am sure that the Minister has read the briefings that he has been given and he will have seen that many Members consider the Prime Minister's treatment of us and of parliamentary democracy to be a disgrace. The Minister will have read that, and I hope that he has taken that point to heart. I suspect that, if he were being frank, he would say that he agreed, because in many respects he is a genuine parliamentarian who believes in this place—or, at least, he did until he took the Queen's shilling and came here to spout out such undemocratic nonsense.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are debating the programme motion? Will he confine his remarks to that?

Mr. Wilshire: Yes, of course I will, Madam Deputy Speaker. By way of introduction, I was responding to the Minister's comments. I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman was talking about the motion or about other things, but I accept what you say and I shall move on.

The Minister said that, as far as he could see, the Committee might want to sit on Maundy Thursday. I do not think that it will, but it is possible that the Prime Minister might put the country and not his party interest first and deal with the things that matter. Even if he did that, we would probably still not be here on Maundy Thursday, given the way in which the House has organised its business in the past. It would be helpful, therefore, if the Minister could tell us what he proposes to do replace the sitting that could take place on 12 April—or does he expect members of the Committee to attend even though the House is in recess? We should know.

I accept that, in some respects, in providing eight sittings for a Bill such as this, the motion is not as mean and nasty as some previous programme motions have been. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) said, one has to ask why. If the Bill can be knocked off quickly because it has been considered in the other place and is relatively non-controversial, why do we need eight sittings?

Why do we need a programme motion? What has happened to the principle that if one wants to be generous and reasonable, in the first instance one discusses the matter through the usual channels to see whether common sense will prevail? As I understand it, common sense would have prevailed in this case and there would have been no need for a programme motion. However, we have now got to the stage where the Government could not care less whether there is any common sense to be had from Conservative Members. They just go in with their boots on without even bothering to find out whether there could be agreement. That tells us a great deal about their approach to the House.

We must ask ourselves why, if the Bill is not controversial, we have been given eight sittings. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said that it did not matter, and the Government could have given us 800 sittings because after next week we will not be here to worry about it. That is probably the explanation, but I guess that the Minister knows no more than we do because the Prime Minister runs these matters in a dictatorial fashion and probably will not consult him. Nevertheless, it is possible that we will be here after next week—a Government who cared about the nation might see their term through.

Let us assume for the moment that we will be here after next week. I wonder whether my hon. Friend is absolutely right and the Government have something up their sleeves. If we cannot work out why eight sittings are necessary, perhaps the Government are concealing something from us and at the very last minute they will table a large number of amendments. When I was listening to my hon. Friend's explanation, it crossed my mind that several Labour Back Benchers may have worked out which of their Front-Bench colleagues will shortly lose their seats and want to use the Committee to make a bid for an Opposition spokesman's job. That might explain why the Minister of State moved the programme motion—it is a chance for him to strut the stage and to point out that, in opposition, he could do a useful job.

Another possibility that occurred to me is that by setting a limit, even a generous one of eight sittings, the Government are saying that they will look only for as much fraud as they can fit into a convenient time before they treat Parliament as a rubber stamp. It does not matter how many good suggestions are made, how many reasonable amendments are tabled or how many people think up new ways of bringing even more fraudsters to book if those factors cannot be tackled in the number of sittings suggested by the Minister. They could not care less about fraud if it does not fit.

The Minister explained why having eight sittings was a particularly good idea, but he did not even mention Report. If I understand the Order Paper correctly, it suggests that the Report stage will be brought to an end at 9 o'clock on the day on which it starts. Presumably, if we do not have the general election that the Labour party seems to want for its own selfish ends—*[Laughter.]* The laughter tells us a great deal. Labour Members will be laughing on the other side of their face after they have called an election—I will tell you that for free, Madam Deputy Speaker.

If we get to the Report stage, it is likely to be in mid-April, although it is difficult to say because we have not been given a date. We will have a maximum of five hours for it, but if my guess about the date is correct, the shambolic way in which the Government have failed to tackle foot and mouth disease means that we will have

another interminable statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food or perhaps the Prime Minister will grace us with his presence because, by then, he will have lost confidence in all his Ministers and will have to do everything himself.

Let us assume that we have another statement on the day on which the Report stage is taken. I noticed this afternoon that we were still wending our weary way through statements after 5 o'clock. That means that it does not matter how many amendments or new clauses are tabled on Report, because by the time the Minister has opened the debate and waffled on for ages, about an hour will have gone by, which will leave Back Benchers about an hour in which to say something before the winding-up speeches. That would be an undemocratic Report stage. It is pointless for hon. Members to give any thought to it if it can run for just three hours and Front-Bench spokesmen want to take time over it.

This is the Minister's first outing in a programme motion debate and he should be ashamed. It is a pity that he has not been given the opportunity to leave the House without getting his hands mucky in an undemocratic and unreasonable process. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said, the right hon. Gentleman could have gone home earlier had it not been for his Government colleagues.

Programme motions are part of the great modernisation process to allow hon. Members to go home earlier, because if they stayed too long they might have to take this place seriously. The Government have bungled that process. Not only does the Minister have to come here and dirty his hands, but he has to suffer the Government's incompetence. Instead of modern.sing, they make matters worse. I am sorry for the Minister, who could have left Parliament at the election without joining in an undemocratic procedure and adding his four pennyworth to this incompetent Government, whom we shall shortly remove.

10.26 pm

Mr. Lilley: Like the Minister of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire), this is my maiden speech in a programme motion debate. I am puzzled about why a motion has been tabled to end the Committee stage by Maundy Thursday. If the Prime Minister intends to have an election, there is no reason to table such an insulting idea. He could at least pretend that that is not the case by giving us ample time to consider the Bill. However, instead of letting us have holy week off and completing our deliberations after Easter, he has decided to insult us. Perhaps he is not going ahead with the election but has still decided that the Committee must finish by Maundy Thursday without saying why.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Is not the Government's difficulty compounded by the fact that yesterday's timetable motion on the Adoption and Children Bill gave an exit date of 12 June?

Mr. Lilley: Indeed. The Government compound absurdity with absurdity. Why must the Committee conclude by Maundy Thursday? Will that give us time to get the answers to the unanswered questions that my hon. Friends and I raised in detail? In an otherwise admirable summing up, the Minister, in what is possibly his swansong in a Second Reading debate, did not answer my question about whether a study has been conducted of the savings that were made from the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997, which I introduced. That was the precursor to this Bill and gave data-matching powers for data within government. Only when we have that information can we decide whether the detailed measures in the Bill are likely to bring about similar savings.

The Bill might not be worth the candle and we might have to re-tailor the provisions to make the savings that the Government have suggested. They assume that there will be 800,000 inquiries. It is estimated that each will cost about £9 and will result in benefit savings of an average of £225. The Committee will want those figures explained, and the Government need time in which to work that out.

Mr. Redwood: Given my right hon. Friend's great experience of trying to combat social security fraud, does he think it likely that many amendments will be needed to the Bill from the Government, to try to make the measure work practically in all the detail that he is describing? Until we know how many amendments will be tabled, is it feasible to know how long it might take to discuss them?

Mr. Lilley: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and one that undermines the concept of programme motions. Unless and until we know the sort of changes that will be needed in the course of considering a Bill, we cannot allocate time.

We know that the Bill required changes even in the other place, a less contentious place than this place. It was changed quite significantly as it passed through the House of Lords, and it is likely to be changed even more in Committee—if we are given time to make changes, and if we are given time for the Government to answer the questions that we raise, which they have not answered today.

I raised the crucial issue of why fraud is increasing under the Government, despite their claim, in opening the debate, that it is falling. Why did they not subsequently apologise for misleading the House? We know that they try to justify the statement by saying that if errors are allowed as well as fraud, there is a slight fall in fraud. That is not a significant fall, although they were telling us that it was. They have not explained why they made that claim, even though it was not valid.

In Committee, we shall want to consider whether the Bill's provisions will bear down on fraud or on what the Government call errors. That might take some time.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): From the right hon. Gentleman's experience and from his knowledge of the Bill, will there be time to consider not only fraudulent claims by those seeking benefit, but the actions of those within the Department, who are mostly honest people? I am thinking of one of my constituents who was recently convicted and fined for £250,000-worth of fraud from the inside?

Mr. Lilley: I do not think that we shall have time to consider that activity or to amend the Bill to cover it. If the hon. Gentleman has evidence that that is serious

[Mr. Lilley]

and important fraud—and the numbers to which he refers suggest that it is—we should be able to amend the Bill to take account of it.

I was raising the distinction that the Government draw between fraud and error. They say that if errors are thrown in, they are succeeding in their task. I have not noticed that.

Mr. Chope: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we should be able to reach consideration of clause 16 in Committee? It might then be possible to introduce a presumption of fraud where someone forgets to declare £200,000 of income?

Mr. Lilley: I can guess what my hon. Friend is referring to. Usually, the sort of error that we are discussing does not include forgetting £200,000 of one's income. The average benefit claimant does not forget that, but I gather that it is quite normal on the Government Benches to forget that sort of amount. We should know whether that will be classified as error or fraud, and we will want to consider that at length.

When on that subject, we shall want to consider whether to amend the Bill to give power to the Government or social security officers to obtain information that has been uncovered by DTI inquiries. If they can obtain information from banks and credit card owners, why cannot they get information about people who have been examined in the course of DTI inquiries, especially if there is provision, as there is on the statute book—despite what the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry says—for releasing such information to a designated body that is fulfilling a public function?

It would be possible to take such matters into account in Committee if only there were time. I suspect that the Government want to rush through consideration in Committee because they do not want that sort of embarrassing discussion shortly before a general election. That is why they are trying to curtail discussion by means of a draconian programme motion. They want consideration to be completed by Maundy Thursday. They do not want to allow us the sort of discussion that we shall need to give the Bill the inquisition that it deserves.

10.34 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I would like to make a few remarks on the programme motion. Following the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire), I should like to ask why there is a need for the motion at all? Did the Government try to come to an informal agreement through the usual channels?

We shall spend three quarters of an hour debating the motion, plus the vote, making one hour. The Programming Sub-Committee will perhaps take an hour or two; there will be another half-hour debate on the programme in Committee and a vote, making three quarters of an hour. That may take the time up to three and three quarter hours. This motion makes provision for a programme motion to be introduced on Report and Third Reading, making another three quarters of an hour, together with a vote, bringing the total to an hour. So a total of four and three quarter hours could be spent on debating the timetable for the Bill to get through the House and the other place, which is the equivalent of a half-day debate in the House.

Before introducing the programme motion in the House, it would have been much more sensible of the Government to try to see whether a voluntary agreement could be reached. Had the Government introduced sensible proposals, I am certain that a voluntary programme could have been entered into; more than four hours could have been usefully devoted to debating the Bill at greater length or debate could have been foreshortened. I am not sure why, under paragraph 3 of the motion, the Government want to complete the Committee stage of the Bill by Maundy Thursday. Unless a general election on 3 May is a racing certainty, it seems that the Government will run out of legislation to introduce. What on earth will we do if the election is delayed until October? Will there be another Queen's Speech? What will happen? We will be scratching around for motions to debate in the House.

The Government are wasting our time because it is practically a racing certainty that we will have an election. However, assuming that we do not, we must deal with the Bill's timetable. I have dealt with one or two timetables before, and there are a couple of things that could be usefully incorporated in future. Why, for example, does the final sitting of the Committee have to be brought to a conclusion at 9 o'clock on a Tuesday or 6 o'clock on a Thursday? I have some Committee experience and, very often, the Committee suddenly gets into a panic towards the end of its consideration of the Bill and an awful lot is discussed on the last day. Given my experience of serving on Committees with timetables, it would make eminent good sense—if one has to have a timetable—to conclude proceedings at midnight. That is not unreasonable.

The worst thing in the timetable motion is paragraph 7, which makes provision for a timetable for messages from the Lords, and states:

"the question . . . shall be put forthwith."

If ever there was an abrogation of the democratic tradition of debate in the House, that is it. Whatever amendments the Lords make to the Bill, whatever messages they send to us, we shall have no time whatever to debate them. That is totally undemocratic.

Mr. Redwood: Does that not imply that the reform and modernisation of the other place has backfired on the Government, like the rest of their modernisation? Does it not imply that, in advance, the Government are not prepared to trust their Lordships to come up with decent amendments and wish to vote them down forthwith, whatever they say? Does that not show that the Labour peers who were put in to pack the other place cannot even be bothered to turn up to do the job properly?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: As usual, my right hon. Friend's logic is impeccable. He is right: the Government are so incompetent that they cannot organise the other place properly to get the answer that they want. Not satisfied with having a proper democratic debate in the other place, they are determined to use undemocratic means to reverse anything from the other place that they do not like. If that is democracy, the Government will go down in history as one of the most undemocratic ever seen in this country.

Mr. Hogg: The proposal is not only discourteous to the other place, but to the House, as it excludes the possibility of discussing messages from the other place. The House has a right to discuss those messages.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My right hon. and learned Friend makes my point for me. Of course the House, which is the bastion of democracy and the oldest democracy in the world, is being denied by this undemocratic Government the chance to debate any changes arising from the other place that the Government do not like. The way in which the Government are behaving is unbelievable. Some time, the British people will wake up and realise that the rights that they have had for centuries, vested in the Members of Parliament whom they send as their representatives in Parliament, have been taken away as a result of those very representatives not looking after their rights.

Once the people cotton on to that, as they undoubtedly will, they will say that the representatives who did not look after their rights should be kicked out and replaced by others who can.

Mr. Rooker *rose—*

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I happily give way to the Minister.

Mr. Rooker: Has the hon. Gentleman finished speaking?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: No. I thought that the Minister wanted to intervene. He looks more and more annoyed at what I am saying. That means that I must be hitting the target 100 per cent. true—the bull's eye. He knows that what I am saying is absolutely correct.

I see that time is getting on. In view of what has been said tonight, it is right that the Minister should have a chance to reply. I have a great deal of respect for him personally. Whatever he has done at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and in his present job, he has done with integrity. I hope that he will reply, as he knows that the democratic rights of Parliament are being taken away by the timetable motion that he is proposing.

10.43 pm

Mr. Rooker: I do not think that Parliament's rights are being taken away. I remind the hon. Gentleman that in the other place, the Government have 29 per cent. of the votes. The Bill has been through the other place, and there was not a single Division during its passage. The argument that there could be issues of substance coming back from the other place beggars belief.

I did not have a chance to reply to one of the issues raised by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). He obviously feels upset about the matter, but the Library brief is wrong. The baseline that we use is September 1998. The Library has taken 1999, so the figures used are not comparable. I have put that on the record, as it answers one of the questions that was raised. I shall answer the rest in Committee in due course.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I am grateful to the Minister. Does he agree that if the Government put eight Committee sittings aside for, say, a 13-clause Bill, they consider eight sittings enough? If new clauses are introduced, should not more sittings be allowed?

Mr. Rooker: That is always an argument. However, it would be arrogant of me to present a programme motion to the House and say that the Government have no plans for any amendments, or that the Government have huge plans for amendments. That would be wrong. We have just passed the Second Reading. We are planning a Committee stage and if that starts on Tuesday, the Government amendments would obviously be published before that. In the normal course of events—

Mr. Redwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No. The Bill could be knocked off in eight sittings of mature, adult consideration of the issues in it, as we have debated them today, if that consideration is not sullied by time-wasting speeches such as we have heard.

Question put:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 269, Noes 149.

Division No. 166] **[10.43 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*

Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shipley, Ms Debra
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Liz
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric

Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, Rt Hon James
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Social Security Fraud Bill [*Lords*]:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 12th April 2001.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

SOCIAL SECURITY FRAUD BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a), (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Social Security Fraud Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State for or in connection with the carrying out of his functions under that Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to that Act in the sums which are payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together motions 8 to 11.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

SUPREME COURT OF ENGLAND AND WALES

That the draft General Commissioners of Income Tax (Costs) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 12th March, be approved.

JUSTICES OF THE PEACE

That the draft Justices and Justices' Clerks (Costs) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 12th March, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Financial Promotion) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 16th March, be approved.

PARTNERSHIPS

That the Limited Liability Partnerships (Fees) (No. 2) Regulations 2001 (S.I., 2001, No. 969) dated 14th March 2001, a copy of which was laid before this House on 14th March, be approved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Authorities (Alternative Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 15th March, be approved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 28 March, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together motions 13 and 14.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 78), on the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (HC 335), which was laid before this House on 15th March, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Authorities (Conduct of Referendums) (England) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 13th March, be approved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITION

Religious Broadcasting Licences

11 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): This petition is from a number of my constituents in Torridge and West Devon and others. There are, I believe, some 1,365 signatories to it. The petition requests that provision be made to remove discrimination against religious bodies in obtaining properly regulated broadcasting licences.

The prayer in the petition states:

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your honourable House will urge the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to bring forward proposals to amend the legislation to remove discrimination against the ownership of broadcasting licences by religious bodies, and to require the Independent Television Commission and the Radio Authority to amend their Rules and Codes of Guidance to remove provisions which discriminate, in wording or in practice, against religious bodies.

To lie upon the Table.

Walsgrave Hospital

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

11.2 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry, North-West): On the occasion of this Adjournment debate, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the lack of confidence in the chief executive of Walsgrave hospital, which serves the whole of Coventry, including, of course, my own constituency.

A most unhappy situation, lasting some 19 months, led to my initiating the debate. The staff unions are opposing the consultants and the chief executive himself thinks that the current unrest could lead to problems arising over the new private finance initiative hospital for Coventry. I am led to believe from articles in today's edition of the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* that the surgeons are split on the matter.

I have to tell my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health, who will reply to the debate, that one senior surgeon even thinks that there could be political manoeuvrings against the professional class of surgeons by her Department, but I am anxious to assure her that I do not share that view; nor is it widely shared by the surgeons at Walsgrave.

It is not my intention to apportion any blame for the unhappy situation with which we in Coventry are confronted. I believe that the management has a lot to answer for and I also believe that management, with one simple step that I shall deal with shortly, could put an end to this great unhappiness and great lack of certainty. The purpose of raising the matter on the Adjournment is to urge that the situation be brought to a close, to outline the simple step that could bring it to a speedy resolution and to say frankly that, after 19 months, it has gone on for far too long.

The problems of today started back in September 1999 with a whistleblowing incident. Members of the House will be aware of the whistleblowing legislation that was introduced by the Government in 1998. In 1999, three surgeons at Coventry blew the whistle on surgeons in the colorectal department because of the peri-operative mortality rate. One of the whistleblowers was Mr. Alban Barros D'Sa, who remains suspended. The immediate reaction to the whistleblowing was to suspend one of the whistleblowers; 18 months later, he remains suspended. His position should be resolved to bring order to the current disorder.

The whistleblowing incident has reached a satisfactory conclusion for one of the surgeons on whom the whistle was blown. The professional advisory panel that reported to the hospital in December 1999, only three months after the incident, made three recommendations. All have been acted upon. The surgeon has been moved from colorectal work, and a new specialist will be recruited for the work. The third recommendation was that a performance audit of the department's work in the previous four years should be undertaken. A performance audit of only two years was carried out, but I ask my hon. Friend to consider one aspect of it.

One of the reasons for blowing the whistle was the peri-operative mortality rate of operations conducted by one of the surgeons in the colorectal department. I choose not to name him tonight because I believe that he is competent in other areas, but that he should not undertake colorectal work. While he had a peri-operative mortality rate of 20 per cent. over two years, the specialist had a rate of only 5 per cent. or 6 per cent. The national target is 5 per cent.

The statistics for reviewing performance are calculated on P values. Why do the figures show no significant difference between those surgeons' work? If we are generally applying P values, and drawing comparative conclusions, how can we claim that there is no difference in performance that poses a problem for patients when, in a two-year period, one surgeon has a 20 per cent. peri-operative mortality rate and another has one of only 5 per cent.? The various statistics that we use, and the way in which we use them, currently lead us to that conclusion.

I revert to the position of Mr. Barros D'Sa. He was a whistleblower who was subsequently suspended on four counts. All were considered, and except for a part of one of them, he was found not to be at fault. It is important to stress that Mr. D'Sa's professional competence has not been questioned. No one claims that he is anything other than a good surgeon. When we are so desperately short of cancer surgeons and others—colorectal work is associated with cancer problems—how can a surgeon of acknowledged competence and with an undisputed professional reputation be left idle for 18 months?

Six months ago, part II of the report of an independent panel of three surgeons was produced. They were led by a noted local Queen's counsel, Jeffrey Burke. They reported that Mr. D'Sa was at fault for oppressing a junior. It is not for me to argue Mr. D'Sa's defence, which is not the purpose of the debate, but he says in his defence that he was quizzing the junior doctor rather aggressively about peri-operative mortality and failures of the operations conducted by the surgeons on whom he blew the whistle. I mention that simply in passing.

The substantive recommendation of the independent panel was that Mr. D'Sa should be reinstated. It referred to his hitherto unblemished record. The management of the hospital could easily have accepted the part II recommendation, and reinstated Mr. D'Sa with a warning. The panel believed that he should receive a written warning. The matter would thus have been brought to a speedy conclusion six months ago.

Instead of doing that, the management issued what it called a document of mitigation. As the judge it came up against was to rule, it was not so much a document of mitigation as of aggravation. In it, the management saw fit to include, as the major reason for not reinstating Mr. D'Sa, a letter that he had written to his Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), and copied to me as the Member of Parliament for North-West Coventry. Since we regard all matters to do with the cathedral, the police and the hospital as constituency issues, I felt it right that we should question the management's procedure in using a private and confidential letter that Mr. D'Sa wrote to his Member of Parliament as a reason for not reinstating him.

As you are aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we took the issue to Mr. Speaker. It would be fair to say that we had to recognise that Members' correspondence does not enjoy privilege or, indeed, qualified privilege. What we say in this House enjoys total privilege and there is no way in which I would abuse that. I understand that a

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correspondence that I have with my hon. Friend the Minister or other Ministers enjoys qualified privilege. However, Mr. D'Sa's letter, which was private and confidential and naturally critical of the management, was included in the management's so-called document of mitigation and submitted to those concerned as a reason for not reinstating him.

Despite all our opposition to the management proceeding in this manner, the chief executive was determined to do so. The case went to court, as we knew it would, and an injunction was taken out by the lawyers representing Mr. D'Sa. I hate to say it, but the management was humiliatingly defeated at the injunction hearing. Not only was it expressly forbidden to rely on or use the letter addressed to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South and copied to me: it was refused the right to rely on any surrounding information other than what was, quite rightly, in part II of the independent report prepared on the issue.

One would have thought that that would be the end of it. Enough money had been spent, enough time wasted and enough management attention dissipated—all to no good end, except for the immense legal costs. Has that contributed one iota to patient care or to concern for those who need it most in the hospital? Of course not. This has been a great and costly diversion of resources.

The management, which had taken the case to court, was condemned to pay all the costs, including those of the surgeons. One would have thought that was the end of it and that we could now proceed with the normal implementation of the independent recommendation in part II of the report. However, that was not acceptable. I am informed that the management is still pursuing the case and seeking leave to appeal against the ruling of the court. That will mean more costs, more delays and further harm. The vote of no confidence that the surgeons have determined to hold on the conduct of the case concerning Mr. D'Sa will proceed, and the Electoral Reform Society is being brought in to supervise it.

There will be growing concern in the constituency among patients and prospective patients that the hospital is in disarray. That is in no one's interests, and in no way do I want to contribute to that uncertainty by bringing this matter to my hon. Friend's attention. On the contrary, I believe that it is necessary to highlight the one simple action that can be taken that will put an end to the matter once and for all. It will remove uncertainty, restore confidence and re-establish between surgeons and management the co-operation that is so vital to the good functioning of any organisation. It is very simple. The management should be prepared to follow the recommendations of part II of the report, which was prepared by independent experts in the field who were appointed to do the job, and to proceed with the reinstatement of Mr. D'Sa.

That is why I brought the matter to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister. I do not expect her to be able immediately to respond to my concerns about the way in which the statistics for judging the competence of surgeons are used. I hope that she will look into that matter and get back to me. However, I hope that she will be able to use her good offices to intervene, or to say that she is sufficiently aware of the situation and that it has gone on long enough, at too much cost and with too much dissatisfaction in the hospital; I hope too that she will ensure that the part II recommendations are introduced.

11.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) on securing time to debate a topic that is clearly of considerable concern to him, as well as to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth), in whose constituency the Walsgrave hospital lies, but who, by convention, cannot raise any matters that relate to the hospital in the House. I am glad to see that my hon. Friends are in the Chamber for the debate.

For my hon. Friends' benefit, I wish to start with a few general observations about the Walsgrave hospital. Some newspaper headlines have given the impression that the hospital is in total crisis. The Walsgrave Hospitals national health service trust changed its status to that of a university teaching hospital at the end of October last year, when it became the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust. The trust is made up of Walsgrave hospital, Coventry and Warwickshire hospital and the Hospital of St. Cross in Rugby.

Against the backdrop of a challenging agenda, including changes to the configuration of services, the trust has achieved success in a number of areas. The cardiac services directorate has gained national recognition for mitral valve repairs and receives referrals from throughout the country. A new renal dialysis satellite unit has recently been opened at the Hospital of St. Cross in Rugby. I recently visited the hospital and saw the new unit. The trust's renal transplant department is in the upper quartile nationally for graft acceptance. The radiology department has recently taken delivery of a new £1.2 million mobile magnetic resonance imaging scanner, to be moved regularly between the South Warwickshire General Hospitals NHS trust, the George Eliot Hospital NHS trust and the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust.

Work has recently started in the radiotherapy and oncology department to provide state of the art linear accelerator facilities, involving an investment of about £6 million. In partnership with the local community trust, a walk-in centre has been established, offering a seamless service to patients.

The trust is also taking the lead as the English national pilot site for colorectal cancer screening. With a catchment population of around 1 million, the uptake to date is well in excess of the target set for the pilot.

These are just some of the successes that the trust can demonstrate, in addition to which it reports a reduction in the number of nursing vacancies, and a 30 per cent. increase in the number of consultants. Of course, last year the trust achieved accreditation as a university teaching hospital.

The first issue of substance in tonight's debate was the suspension of a medical consultant at the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust. Where concerns are raised about professional misconduct it is

right that, as an employer, the national health service is able to investigate concerns expressed about the competence or behaviour of that employee.

Although that course of action should be a very rare event, occasionally it is necessary to suspend an employee. It is important to stress that, although it is not always perceived as such, in legal terms suspension is a neutral act and must not be used as a disciplinary sanction. Suspension is intended to protect the interests of patients, other staff and the employee or to assist the investigative process.

As my hon Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West will be aware, issues around staff management are a matter for the employing national health service body—in this case, the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust. That includes matters relating to the suspension of staff from their duties. Clearly, it would not be appropriate for me to intervene or comment on the individual case highlighted by my hon. Friend in the House tonight, as I understand that the case is still subject to legal proceedings. However, I note the points raised by my hon. Friend and will ensure that they are drawn to the attention of the regional director of the NHS executive regional office.

My hon. Friend will be interested to learn that we are revising guidance on the handling of suspensions. In future, there should be less need to suspend employees, because medical staff with developing problems can refer themselves—or be referred by their employers—to the National Clinical Assessment Authority—the NCAA. Through a swift and accurate identification of problems and solutions, the NCAA is intended to ensure that fewer suspensions will be necessary.

The NCAA will issue guidance to NHS organisations late in 2001 to help them to identify suitable cases for referral, and to advise them on how to make such referrals. As part of its remit, the NCAA will also consider any outstanding cases that are still awaiting resolution.

In future, NHS employers must ensure that suspension is used only after all other alternatives have been considered—for example, a period of supervised retraining pending outcome of formal investigation; voluntary restriction; or referral to the NCAA with voluntary restrictions. When an employee is suspended, employers must ensure that it is for the minimum necessary period of time.

My hon. Friend draws attention to the importance of taking seriously concerns raised about the performance of individual staff members. We expect a climate of openness and dialogue in the NHS, and a culture and environment that encourage staff to feel able to raise concerns about health care matters sensibly and responsibly, without fear of victimisation.

Wherever possible, concerns raised by staff should be dealt with locally, in accordance with local policies and procedures. However, in some cases, individuals have considered the local response provided to them to be inadequate; as a consequence they have sought to raise their concerns with the NHS executive.

Officials are liaising with the regional offices to develop a protocol for handling cases raised with the NHS executive. That is likely to include identifying a first point of contact in each region. Public Concern at Work—a leading authority in that sphere—has offered to provide staff working in the Department and the NHS executive with training on how to respond to individuals who contact the NHS executive to raise concerns. Of course, I realise that the case raised by my hon. Friend is still subject to legal proceedings, but I shall ensure that the regional office is aware of his concerns. I hope that some of the issues that he highlights are less likely to occur in future because of the measures that we are putting in place.

Before I address my hon. Friend's concerns on the standard of colorectal services at the trust, it is important to raise a matter covered in the local press today. I read a leading article stating that

"Surgery in the hospital is in turmoil."

I must confess to the House that, in preparing for the debate, I have seen nothing that would lead me to such a sweeping conclusion. We need to be very careful when using language that causes great concern to the local population about the standard of service provided by their local NHS hospital. I believe that it could do a great disservice to the hard-working staff at the trust to read lead stories making such general accusations.

On the standard of colorectal services at the trust, I am advised that my hon Friends have already had sight of the outcome of the detailed investigations conducted by both the trust and the regional director of public health following the concerns that were raised. I have read the report; the regional director agreed that there were issues that needed to be addressed at the trust. I understand that the regional director of public health made recommendations relating to future staffing levels for the service, and to the appropriate grading for staff involved in provision of colorectal surgery at the trust. I am informed that the trust is acting on those recommendations, and that a fully qualified colorectal surgeon has been appointed and is expected to start employment with the trust next week. I have asked the regional office to continue to monitor the establishment of that service at the trust in the short to medium term. I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West about the basis of some of the statistical analysis. I think it would be best for me to write to him after the debate with precise details of how the analysis is determined.

My hon. Friend also expresses concerns about the trust's senior management team, noting that there had been a vote of no confidence by a very small number of surgeons at the trust. I am aware that, on 26 February, my hon. Friend and some of his colleagues met Nigel Crisp, the chief executive of the NHS so that he might have an opportunity to take account of their concerns about the management of the trust. I understand that, following that meeting, Nigel Crisp spoke to the regional director of the NHS executive and asked him to ensure that concerns raised by my hon. Friends were being addressed.

I am also of course aware of the issue that was raised as a point of order in the House on 17 January, relating to the use of a letter. Mr. Speaker has responded and it would be inappropriate in that context for me to add anything further.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that it was disgraceful for the management to seek to use a letter written in confidence to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) and copied to myself, as a reason for not reinstating and

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putting in hand the part II recommendations? Would she not as a parliamentarian, let alone a Minister, deprecate that form of behaviour?

Ms Stuart: As a parliamentarian I also accept the Speaker's ruling. The Speaker has responded to the issue and I am content with that.

I recognise that my hon. Friend has some very real concerns about the matters that he has raised today, and of course it is important that they are addressed. It must be recognised that the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust has been faced with a challenging agenda over the past few years. It has made great progress in many areas. The trust has had to implement some major developments regarding the reconfiguration of services. The trust's management has driven forward the development agenda while maintaining good quality services to the population that the trust serves.

At the start of my speech, I provided my hon. Friends with examples of some of the successes and improvements made by the trust, but every institution is capable of even further improvement and I am sure that that will happen in this case, too.

Even though there have been service changes, it is incumbent on the trust chief executive and chair to ensure that the services provided at the trust meet the needs of patients and ensure their safety. As I outlined earlier, the colorectal service at the trust has been investigated by the regional director of public health. Following his investigations, the trust has acted on his recommendations with regard to future management of the service, and a new fully qualified colorectal surgeon is expected to start work at the trust next week.

Mr. Robinson: That point has been covered. Will my hon. Friend say why, in her opinion, the management will not accept the findings of part II as a simple resolution of our problems so that we can get back to the good progress that we all recognise that the trust has been making?

Ms Stuart: The management and the management style of each trust is a local issue. The difficulty is that, as I understand it, there are still legal proceedings in this case. It would be inappropriate and foolish of a Minister to try to second-guess anyone else's reasons but, more important, it would help no one at this stage not to allow a due process to continue. We have made it clear that both the chief executive of the NHS and the regional office are well aware of the situation, but ultimately issues regarding employees are the responsibility of the local employing trust, which must take the decision. Our role is to ensure that proper processes are followed.

Mr. Robinson: It is on that point that we find it most difficult to accept what my hon. Friend is saying. The simple fact is that this process will cause great costs to the hospital—tens of thousands of pounds of further useless legal costs are being incurred, all to no good purpose, because the legal problems, of which I am as well aware as my hon. Friend is, will continue only as long as the trust is intent on a legal resolution. The trust has a recommendation, which it could and should implement. The further this matter goes on, the more difficult the position that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South and I are put in, because our letter, a confidential House of Commons document, is being used—or an attempt is being made to use it—by the trust management to further its legal case, in which it has already been humiliatingly denied.

Ms Stuart: I think that my hon. Friend is trying to tempt me into pre-empting either a decision of the court or a management decision by an NHS trust. Surely it must be up to local trusts, as the employer, to have the final decision on the most appropriate way to proceed, and I would not wish to pre-empt the reasons for their decision.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment in detail, but I suggest to my hon. Friend that if he is still dissatisfied with the answers provided today, he should request a meeting with the Minister responsible for the midlands region, the Minister for Public Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), so that his concerns can be looked at in more detail. I am sure that he will meet my colleagues to discuss his concerns if he thinks that is necessary.

On employment matters relating to an individual consultant where legal proceedings are still on-going, it would be inappropriate for a Minister to do anything other than to say that it is a local matter for the trust and that we will ensure that the due process is being followed.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 28 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Violent Crime

1. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What his policies are for reducing the level of violence in Northern Ireland. [154338]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Dr. John Reid): The Government continue to support the efforts of the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to reduce violence in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Hughes: Against a background that is generally encouraging for the future of a peaceful Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State confirm that the reduction of violence among young people will be a priority for him and his colleagues as well as the Chief Constable? I am talking not about paramilitary violence but about burglaries, violence against the person and sexual offences, which show an upward trend. Will he consider favourably organisations such as Regenerate? It has the advantage of providing for former paramilitaries to work with young people to teach them the evil of their ways. Such role models are a way forward for Northern Ireland and may set the crime figures on a downward trend.

Dr. Reid: Yes; like all hon. Members I condemn and abhor crime, especially crimes that inflict damage on human beings. I take the hon. Gentleman's point. We shall continue to bear down on paramilitary and non-paramilitary violent crime and to support the Chief Constable as much as we can.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): Does the Secretary of State agree that the people of Northern Ireland wake up to a daily diet of extreme violence, the manner of which is changing from the baseball bat to the gun again? Those crimes may be permitted or committed by paramilitaries, but will he undertake to set up a special team in each locality in Northern Ireland to deal with drugs rackets and protection rackets for which organised crime or paramilitaries are responsible?

Dr. Reid: Yes. We should make it clear that the perpetrators of violence have no legitimacy, mandate or support. They are abhorred by the vast majority of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland.

We take seriously paramilitaries' wider crimes, which include racketeering, profiteering and sometimes drugs. We have therefore established a taskforce on organised crime, which the Minister of State oversees. We shall continue to do all in our power to tackle gangsterism and mafia-like activity from the paramilitaries.

Mr. Cecil Walker (Belfast, North): Is the Secretary of State aware of the current unacceptable violence in north Belfast? It reflects a lack of policing on the ground. Does he realise that some of the Patten recommendations have had an adverse effect on police morale, which has resulted in a high incidence of stress-related absenteeism? What are the Government's intentions for redressing the imbalance?

Dr. Reid: I am aware of the activities in north Belfast. That is why the Royal Ulster Constabulary, supplemented by the Army, has put in extra effort with some success.

It is a time of tremendous change for the RUC, and there is a great deal of stress on those who serve in the police service in Northern Ireland. The Chief Constable and the change management team are making every effort to ensure that that stress is alleviated.

The new Police Service of Northern Ireland benefits the whole community, not only the nationalists. I hope that it will be acceptable to the whole community, and that the whole community will participate in it. It will be one of the key points that underpins a peace process that will ultimately reduce violence inside and outside the paramilitary groups.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I acknowledge what my right hon. Friend has said. Has he estimated how many people are alive today in Northern Ireland and in Britain because of the Good Friday agreement? We should not forget that. If decommissioning immunity is extended beyond May, does he intend June to be the target date for some genuine decommissioning, which we all want to happen?

Dr. Reid: Given the tragic losses for more than 3,600 families in the recent decades of the troubles, the peace process has been enormously beneficial despite our difficulties and challenges. The order that I tabled yesterday is technically necessary to ensure that immunity from prosecution for those involved in decommissioning weapons continues after 19 May, when it would otherwise expire. That does not affect the target date of June this year, which we and the Irish Government set last May for achieving the remaining steps necessary to secure full implementation of the Good Friday agreement.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I am sure that the Minister will want to congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Walker), who was telling us recently in our newspapers that there was no point in coming here

because it was a waste of time. It is nice to know that, at the end of this Parliament, he has made his maiden speech. *[Interruption.]* When one throws a stone among dogs, the one that is hit the hardest barks the loudest.

Will the Minister tell us what his attitude is to the fact that the Irish Republican Army members of staff list has been issued? Is he not alarmed that three Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Martin McGuinness, Gerard Adams and Patrick Doherty, are mentioned as members of the inner council of the IRA? Mr. Adams has declared that he is talking with Downing street every day. Does not the Minister realise how people who are sorrowing, and will always sorrow, for their loved ones feel about the Government being prepared to hold negotiations with such people? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise on this side of the House.

Dr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There was a wee bit of noise on that side of the House as well.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Walker) on the continued support that he has given to the peace process, which has been a boon to many families in Northern Ireland. Secondly, I think that the point raised by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) was based on a newspaper report on an apparently leaked document based on an intelligence source. I think that that is what he was referring to. As I never respond to newspaper reports, leaked documents or intelligence sources, I am sure that he will understand why I shall not respond to him on that point.

I shall say only that if we are to achieve a transition from the terrible tragedies of the past 30—indeed, many more—years and the loss of life involved, a lot of political decisions will have to be taken, and a lot of discussions will have to be entered into. They will be not only complex and challenging, but painful for everyone involved. The prize and the reward for the people of Northern Ireland is great enough for all of us to swallow our prejudices and try to recognise the views and histories of the side across from us. It is ultimately the people of Northern Ireland as a whole who will benefit from that.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that confidence in the new police service will be a prime concern in the coming years. Will he, therefore, make a statement that, once Mrs. O'Loan has finished her inquiries into the Hamill affair, he will set up a public inquiry to look into all the circumstances surrounding that tragic death and its aftermath?

Dr. Reid: Two inquiries are already going on into that case, and prosecutions might arise from either or both of them. Once those inquiries, and any prosecutions, have finished, and if there is still widespread concern, we have not ruled out any course of action.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Are the Secretary of State's commendable efforts to reduce violence likely to be helped by giving an amnesty to prisoners on the run? Does he agree that, because the Maze escapees have been allowed to walk away free, they have been given the opportunity to benefit from their escape, which is quite wrong in a lawful society?

Dr. Reid: With respect, I must correct the right hon. Gentleman: there is not an amnesty; those people are on licence. Secondly, this is not news; it has been known for some considerable time. Thirdly, it is part of an overall peace process. If he is asking me whether this is a constituent element of a process that will result in the diminution of violence and a better, fairer, more decent, prosperous and secure Northern Ireland, my answer is yes.

Mr. MacKay: Inevitably, most people will consider that to be an amnesty. The Secretary of State is aware that the Prime Minister promised the people of Northern Ireland a parallel process, which we strongly supported, that meant that terrorist prisoners would be released with all illegally held arms and explosives being decommissioned at the same time. The simple truth is that not one gun nor one ounce of Semtex has been handed in, but more than 400 terrorist prisoners are back on the streets. That is a serious breach of the Belfast agreement. Does he agree that it needs rectifying quickly?

Dr. Reid: If the right hon. Gentleman is asking whether we want early decommissioning as part of the peace process, the answer is yes. We made our view known last year: we want to achieve substantial progress on all elements of the Good Friday agreement by June. We continue to press for that because we believe that moving forward with a new political institution in Northern Ireland in which all sides participate and forming a new police service in Northern Ireland will lead to normalisation and demilitarisation from the point of view of the British Government; of course, an additional element of that is decommissioning. We continue to press on it.

Organised Crime

2. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): If he will make a statement on measures being taken to combat organised crime in Northern Ireland. [154340]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Last Friday, I launched the first-ever publicly available assessment of the threat to Northern Ireland from organised crime and the strategy for countering that threat. The threat assessment is the work of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the strategy is the work of the Northern Ireland organised crime taskforce, which was established in September last year.

Mr. McCabe: Particularly in view of our present difficulties, does my right hon. Friend regard the organised smuggling of sheep and cattle as a serious criminal activity? What plans has he to deal with it?

Mr. Ingram: Yes, I share that view. The foot and mouth outbreak is primarily a matter for the devolved Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, the organised crime taskforce takes livestock smuggling seriously and work is already under way to tackle that harmful threat. The recently launched threat assessment identifies at least two organised crime groups involved in

illegal movement across the land border with the Republic of Ireland, not to mention a number of individuals who are also involved. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that the RUC and other law enforcement agencies, the devolved Administration and the Government are determined to take that on with full vigour.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I am sure that the Minister has seen the welcome condemnation by the Irish agriculture Minister of the code of silence that has existed among the smugglers of South Armagh and Louth—the people who brought foot and mouth to Ireland. Although the measures that the Minister announced last Friday are welcome, does he agree that if we are to get on top of organised crime—in respect of which the smuggling of animals, fuel, tobacco and drugs is the most significant manifestation—we need to find ways to mobilise all society to change the culture of those areas so that people there realise that they cannot continue in the state of lawlessness that has marked them over the past few decades?

Mr. Ingram: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good and valid point. Part of the reason for the law enforcement agencies being unable to achieve more success is that there is so much fear and intimidation in Northern Ireland. That makes it difficult to bring people to justice. Part of the strategy that we have launched, which he fully supports, is to try to create greater public awareness of the extent of the problem and the way in which it corrodes, eating into the very heart of the society of Northern Ireland. That relates to another issue that he raised—the cross-jurisdictional effect. Crime knows no borders and no boundaries. Together, the Governments will look for ways in which we can further tackle the threat.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I congratulate the Minister on his latest initiative to crack down on the 400 paramilitary and non-paramilitary individuals who are involved in organised crime, but does he remember the comments of Danny Morrison, the IRA propagandist, who said:

"It is hard to maintain the revolution when people have a colour TV in the living room and a car in the drive."?

The Northern Ireland economy has been robust over the past few years and unemployment, on 1997 levels, is down by more than 40 per cent. What initiative does my right hon. Friend have to keep promoting that fall, getting young people into jobs and taking them away from the lure of the paramilitary organisations?

Mr. Ingram: As the House knows, my hon. Friend served for a time as a Northern Ireland Minister, and followed me as Minister responsible for the economy. We can take some satisfaction from the way in which that economy is succeeding on the back of policies implemented by the present Government. The best message that could be sent from the House would be sent by the return of a Labour Government, by the continuation of policies that have been successful, and by that United Kingdom Government's working with the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland to increase prosperity there. That can better be achieved when we eliminate organised crime from Northern Ireland society, and bring lasting peace to Northern Ireland.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. May I appeal for quiet on both sides of the House? The noise that is being made is unfair to hon. Members who are listening to Northern Ireland questions.

Real IRA

3. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement on his Department's assessment of the relationship between the Real and the Provisional IRA. [154341]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Real IRA has its roots within the Provisional IRA, and evolved as a consequence of a breakaway of disaffected PIRA members over their organisation's support for the political/peace process. We believe that the Real IRA and the Provisional IRA are entirely separate organisations.

Mr. Robertson: Does the Minister not think that the use of Semtex by the Real IRA might suggest at least some collusion between that organisation and at least some members of the Provisional IRA?

Mr. Ingram: No, I do not, and there is no evidence that that is the case. What I do accept is that the Real IRA and the PIRA are linked by a common cause; they are also linked by a callous disregard for human life and the human rights of their fellow citizens.

The IRA and PIRA want to achieve a united Ireland, but Sinn Fein and the IRA have signalled that they are engaged in a transition from conflict to the democratic process. They differ from the RIRA in that regard. There is no evidence to suggest that the Real IRA is acting as a surrogate organisation for the IRA.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): What information has the Minister requested or received from the Irish Government about a recent attempt by the Provisional IRA, using guns smuggled from Florida, to murder an alleged member of the Real IRA? It is argued that he stole IRA weapons. Does that event cause the Minister concern, and what impact does he expect it to have on the peace process?

Mr. Ingram: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is only too well aware of the increasingly close co-operation that exists between the two Governments in tackling the real threat and menace posed by the Real IRA. It is manifest in the co-operation between the Garda Siochana and the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the other law enforcement agencies. That is the best way in which we can tackle the situation. The message that should be sent by the House—I know that it would be sent by the hon. Gentleman—is that anyone with information about the conduct of those

carrying out such acts, whatever the organisation to which they belong, should come forward to give evidence and help bring such people to justice.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Given that the Real IRA has rejected the peace process and will not engage with the de Chastelain commission, should not the United States Government designate it as a proscribed organisation? What action has the Minister taken to bring that about?

Mr. Ingram: The Government are determined to explore every option available to disrupt the activities of members of the Real IRA who continue to use violence. For that reason, the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have made joint representations to the United States authorities for the Real IRA to be designated under US law. We have submitted information in support of that request.

The decision to designate the Real IRA under anti-terrorist legislation is ultimately a matter for the US authorities, but they have been made aware of the two Governments' strong views.

Police

4. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): What recent representations he has received regarding recruitment to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. [154342]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Dr. John Reid): Recruiting to the Police Service of Northern Ireland began on 23 February. The level of interest has greatly exceeded expectations. About 20,000 inquiries have now been made, and by 26 March nearly 3,800 applications had been received. The closing date for applications is this Friday.

Mr. Ruffley: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. He will be aware that, in the past three years, the RUC's reserve and regular strength has decreased from 12,700 to 11,500. Will he detail the active steps that he will be taking to reverse that depressing trend?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman did not mention the target of about 7,500 that was outlined in the Patten commission report and that has some relevance to his question. We are taking various measures to remedy the situation, not the least of which is our current recruitment. Not only have we had an overwhelming response to that, but it has been targeted on a 50-50 basis, so that both sides of the community and both traditions will be involved. We hope to have a police service that is more acceptable to the whole community. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am in constant touch with the Chief Constable to ensure that the operational capability of the RUC and of the future police service will not be diminished beneath the necessary levels.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Does my right hon. Friend know how many of those applications have come from women applicants, and does he have any idea of whether the number of women recruited into the police service is going up or reversing? Does he agree that the more women there are in senior positions, the more it will help to recruit women into the police service?

Dr. Reid: I am afraid that I cannot as yet tell my hon. Friend the breakdown of the figures on grounds either of sex or of religion. That will come at a later stage. However, not only do we of course welcome equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland, but we have incorporated—probably to a greater degree than anywhere else in the United Kingdom or, indeed, in Europe—the principle of equality of opportunity.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Has the Social Democratic and Labour Party provided the Minister with an explanation of its apparent continuing unwillingness to give wholehearted support to the initiative to encourage more Catholics to apply to the police service? Does the Minister know why it has not yet nominated its representatives to the Policing Board?

Dr. Reid: There have been many constructive discussions with the SDLP over many months. *[Interruption.]* When possible, the Government have moved to meet the SDLP's concerns, and I believe that the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 is better for that—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber.

Dr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We hope very much that the SDLP will support recruitment—especially because of the figures that I have cited of no fewer than 20,000 inquiries and, so far, of about 3,800 applications to the new Police Service of Northern Ireland. I very much hope that, following the talks at Hillsborough led by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the SDLP will see that the gap between us has narrowed and find its way to joining the new Policing Board.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Does the Secretary of State agree that we owe a tremendous debt to the RUC reserves? Does he also agree that, in giving that service, they have had the least security of tenure and least regard, but have made a huge sacrifice for society in Northern Ireland? Will he assure me that members of the RUC reserves who wish to join the new Police Service of Northern Ireland will be given every opportunity and encouragement to apply so that we can make use of their experience and dedication?

Dr. Reid: I can assure my hon. Friend that they, with everyone else, will be welcome to join the new police service. I also have no hesitation in according to the RUC the accolade of the whole House for the sacrifices that it has made over very many years in fighting terrorism. Indeed, that was recognised by the award that was given to the RUC. I hope that the widows of RUC officers who died fighting terrorism before 1982 will feel that their sacrifice has been recognised in some small way by the grant that we made recently. That grant was made

available after representations from, among others, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the leader of the Ulster Unionist party.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Does the Secretary of State share our dismay that, despite the Patten reforms—some of which have caused great pain to the RUC—nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, the Irish Government and the Catholic Church still refuse to recommend that young Roman Catholic men and women join the police?

Dr. Reid: The police service that we are creating in Northern Ireland is not merely a negotiating concession to the nationalist side. We are creating a service that will be accountable to, and respected by, the whole community, all of whom will participate in it. That will be of enormous benefit to the whole of Northern Ireland.

Given the number of applications and inquiries that have been made with regard to the new police service, I hope that parties on the nationalist side will take the opportunity to join the Policing Board. I believe that the gap is narrowing among members of the SDLP, and I welcome the positive statements recently made by the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon).

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [154368] **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 28 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Wilkinson: Does the Prime Minister remember the manifesto for London, which his party issued at the last general election and which bore his signature? In it, he said that his policies would make London a showcase for Britain. Can he imagine the untold misery that millions of commuters in the capital will suffer on the underground tomorrow, thanks to the failure of his policies? Is not it a fact that the unions, the Commissioner of Transport for London and the Mayor of London—whose job the Prime Minister created—all lack any confidence in the system? Does he agree with the commissioner that, if safety is to be ensured, the commissioner should have the right to decide the priorities in the capital spending programme—or will it all be left to the judges?

The Prime Minister: First, a few facts. There is an extra £1 billion in investment under this Government, over and above the plans of the previous Government who were supported by the hon. Gentleman. Secondly, the public-private partnership will guarantee a substantial uplift in investment in the London underground. That money will come not only from the public sector, but from the private sector, and it will be way over and above any investment made by the Conservative Government.

Thirdly, with regard to plans for the tube, I remind the hon. Gentleman that until the Conservative party decided to change its position a few days ago, he and everyone else in his party supported the total privatisation of the London underground. That really would be a disaster for the underground.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman is wrong in what he said about safety. Safety will remain in the public sector under the PPP.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): Given that the Government and the Opposition parties accept that the most democratic electoral system for local government, Assembly and European elections in Northern Ireland is the proportional representation system, does not the Prime Minister think that that system should be introduced for elections to this House?

The Prime Minister: The circumstances of Northern Ireland are very particular, and do not necessarily have implications for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): In the past 48 hours of the foot and mouth crisis, it has become clear that the Government are contemplating what we all, on both sides of the House, previously regarded as unthinkable: a policy of widespread vaccination. The Opposition share the distress of many in the countryside that the crisis has reached this point, but we welcome the fact that contingency plans are being drawn up—in fact, we called for such plans—as a last resort. Will the Prime Minister clarify exactly what kind of vaccination policy is being considered? Is it the vaccination of a limited number of animals, which will then be slaughtered, or the vaccination of a far greater number? What are the implications of that for export resumption?

The Prime Minister: It is correct, as I said to the right hon. Gentleman a few days ago, that we must consider the option of vaccination. It is being considered for particular areas where the disease has spread to many parts. Obviously, in other areas, the disease has been far more easily controlled and the number of cases is fewer. I think it best not to announce the precise details until we have discussed the matter with representatives of the National Farmers Union. Obviously, it is a contingency that we have to look at. I understand the huge resistance in parts of the farming community, because of the difficulties for the farming industry itself. Vaccination is no easy solution—that has to be said clearly. However, it is necessary to consider it because it has clearly emerged during the past few days, as more and more evidence has come through of the number of sheep movements prior to the detection and reporting of the disease—I think that I told the House a couple of weeks ago that there might have been as many as 2,000 sheep movements before the disease was detected, but now it is clear that that was an understatement—that probably about 1.35 million sheep were exported or moved during the month of February. Therefore, if the disease was incubating then, it has been far more widespread than hitherto thought. That is why in certain areas, where the disease is particularly strong,

we have to consider the option of vaccination, but we shall discuss that very carefully with people in the farming community before we announce the details.

Mr. Hague: Clearly, the Government have been forced to consider a vaccination policy because the disease continues to spread at an alarming rate. I put it to the Prime Minister that there continues to be a serious lack of resources on the front line in particular areas. In a situation where every hour counts, many farmers report that it takes many hours to get through to MAFF on the telephone even to report a case of foot and mouth. The need for more vets remains, even though many more have been recruited.

This morning, I received a letter from a Ministry vet of 40 years experience who retired at Christmas. He said:

"Yesterday . . . I heard three times on radio and television that more vets are required . . . Last Friday . . . I phoned the MAFF offices at Exeter and Bristol . . . and offered my services. I was thanked for the offer of help . . . I have heard nothing since."

Will the Prime Minister ensure that the whole government machine gets its act together to make the most of those resources?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I do not know about the particular case the right hon. Gentleman mentions. When I was in Worcester yesterday, I met retired vets who had been brought back into service. There are now about seven times the usual number of vets in the state veterinary service. We continue to recruit them from whatever source we possibly can.

On the situation on the ground, of course it is extremely difficult—especially in areas such as Cumbria or Devon, where they have to deal with a large number of outbreaks. A huge logistical effort is required. Sometimes, the perception is of an outbreak on a farm with perhaps a few hundred cattle or sheep, and that that is easy to deal with—but some of those farms have several thousand livestock spread over a large distance. It is incredibly difficult for the people to deal with that. However, every resource they ask for we put in, as far as we possibly can. The key matter is to ensure that the report to slaughter time of 24 hours is maintained in every part of the country. In Cumbria, that is proving extremely difficult, but in most parts of the country that is now up and running.

Mr. Hague: Clearly, the vets and soldiers involved in tackling this crisis are doing a tremendous job and are working extremely hard. However, in every way one looks at it at present, the crisis is getting worse. Yesterday, we had a record number of outbreaks, and three of the outbreaks in recent days have been in new areas—*[Interruption.]* We had 47 outbreaks, so if it is not a record, it is very near to a record. Three of the outbreaks in recent days have been in entirely new areas, including a further outbreak today. The backlog of infected animals awaiting slaughter has doubled in the past week to more than 250,000 and the number of carcases has reached 118,000. When does the Prime Minister think that this disease will truly be under control?

The Prime Minister: Let me first correct some of the information that the right hon. Gentleman has given. There is an enormous effort on the ground. The Army logistics team is doing a superb job, the vets are working every hour that they possibly can, and slaughtermen and contractors are being hired at a huge rate.

In respect of the daily figures, we have to be cautious because they are revised day after day as fresh information comes in from different parts of the country. However, I can say that in the last week almost 200,000 animals have been slaughtered. That is getting on for double the figure for the week before. About 130,000 carcases have been disposed of in the last week, which is getting on for three times the figure for the week before. This information is being upgraded the entire time.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me how we could be sure when the disease would end. The answer is that we cannot be sure at the present time, for the very reason that I gave a moment or two ago. If thousands of sheep movements did indeed take place before the disease was detected, it is important to realise that there will be certain parts of the country—Cumbria, very obviously—where it is extremely difficult to tackle the disease by the means originally contemplated. That is precisely why we have to look at issues like vaccination.

However, in other areas of the country—about six or seven of them—there have been one or two outbreaks, and, thankfully, there have not been any more cases in the last week or two. Northern Ireland is an example of that, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is now applying for disease-free status for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland had a case early on, but that has not been followed by another case. Therefore, there are areas of the country where, at the present time—and I stress "present time"—we are managing to keep the disease under control and eradicate it. However, in some of these areas, especially in Cumbria but not limited to Cumbria, that is very difficult, for the reasons that I have given.

Mr. Hague: We are entitled to ask when the right hon. Gentleman thinks that the disease will be under control—*[Interruption.]* We are entitled to ask, because the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said three weeks ago that it was under control, but the chief scientist said that it was not under control—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not expect the right hon. Gentleman to have to shout.

Mr. Hague: There is a major crisis in this country, which some Labour Members wish to ignore. We are entitled to ask when the disease will be under control, because the Minister said that it was under control, the chief scientist said that it was not under control, and the Prime Minister said that it was on track to being under control. We are entitled to ask when the right hon. Gentleman thinks that it will be brought under control—that is terminology that the Government use.

The Minister in charge of the rural taskforce said yesterday that this is an enormous crisis, in some ways unprecedented, and he is right. The Prime Minister rightly said yesterday that he would be straining every sinew to tackle the crisis, and we welcome that. "Every sinew" must mean every appropriate military resource, every available vet, and every ounce of the Prime Minister's

energy and attention. Does he agree that he will have to continue to strain every sinew until the disease is brought fully under control?

The Prime Minister: Of course we must do everything that we can to ensure that the disease is brought under control and eradicated, but I think that the right hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that anyone is ignoring the seriousness of the problem. We all recognise how serious it is, which is precisely why we are taking the measures that we are.

Having recently visited Devon, Cumbria and Worcestershire, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the people to whom I spoke realise that every resource that they require from the centre is being provided. However, the situation is difficult, particularly in those areas where the disease has taken hold.

I would also point out to the right hon. Gentleman that we have already slaughtered more livestock in this outbreak than we did in the entirety of the 1967 outbreak, which continued for over eight months. Of course, the big difference between then and now is that there were far fewer movements of livestock then than there are now.

I agree that we have to make every possible effort to control and eradicate the disease. I hope that everyone in this House understands that. All that I am saying to the right hon. Gentleman is that, at the present time at least, we are able to look at some success in certain areas because the cases have not been repeated. However, in some areas there have been so many movements of sheep that the situation is difficult, and there is no point in pretending otherwise.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many of those farmers who are in the fortunate position of still being able to sell their livestock at market are facing reductions in prices—in some cases, for lambs, of up to £11 and perhaps even more? Will he take this opportunity first, to encourage the British public to continue to buy British meat and support our British farmers, and secondly, to ask our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to review whether our farmers and consumers are getting the best deal from the retailers, who do not appear to be passing on those reductions to the consumers?

The Prime Minister: On the last point about prices, I know that that concern is often expressed, and we have discussed it with the retailers and the farming industry. On the first point, it is worth stressing that in addition to the £600 million agrimonetary compensation that we are paying out, there is an additional £150 million agrimonetary compensation and more than £150 million compensation for the animals slaughtered.

In addition, the animal welfare scheme has now been substantially upgraded by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and we are making every effort to ensure that the proper processes are in place so that people can claim under the animal welfare scheme. Again, even with the best will in world, those farmers who have lost their stock face the problem of restocking, and then they face the problem of how, in the future, we devise the right sustainable and viable strategy for farming. That is something that we have already committed ourselves to sit down and work out with the farming communities when the immediate spread of the disease is over.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Will the Prime Minister give the House an assurance that if any Labour Member uses racist language or language that invites racist instincts in this country, he will without hesitation, on principle and on the spot, withdraw the parliamentary Whip from such a Member?

The Prime Minister: I have made it clear that it is entirely unacceptable for any Labour candidate to use language of a racist nature or language calculated to stir up racist feelings in this country. The right hon. Gentleman and I—and, indeed, all the main political parties—signed up to the Commission for Racial Equality statement. We will abide by that statement, as I am sure all political parties will.

Mr. Kennedy: I welcome the Prime Minister's comments. I agree that all the main party leaders in this country signed the pledge from the Commission for Racial Equality. In particular, if we are in a pre-election mode in this country, is it not deeply important that we ensure that those words are worth more than the paper they are written on?

The Prime Minister: It is generally accepted on both sides of the House that Britain benefits from being a multicultural, multiracial society and that many people, including many hon. Members, have backgrounds from other countries. I dare say that virtually all of us have in us some blood from other races and nations. In this modern day and age, surely it is not merely a principle that is morally right, but in our self-interest that anyone, irrespective of race or ethnic background, is a full and proper member of our society.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): When I arrived in the House in May 1997, I became acutely aware that many of us were suffering from a very serious medical condition. However, I subsequently realised that, for most of us, it is a selective condition—but for millions of people in the United Kingdom deafness is a real problem. I want to take this opportunity to thank those hon. Members who signed my early-day motion on testing for deafness in babies.

Will my right hon. Friend be kind enough to ensure that that programme is extended to all regions of the United Kingdom, so that all babies can benefit from the test, which will undoubtedly improve their educational outcomes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend draws attention to a very serious problem. Many children are perceived to have particular learning disabilities, whereas their true problem is one of deafness. The Government's neo-natal hearing screening scheme is now being piloted at some 20 sites across the country. Subject to the successful

piloting of the scheme, it is our intention to introduce it nationwide and to try to ensure that, for those children who have that disability, it is spotted early and dealt with.

Q2. [154369] **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): Mr. Speaker—*[Interruption.]* While Labour Members jeer, large parts of the country are living in seige conditions—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must hear the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Loughton: Labour Members may jeer, but as they do large parts of the country are living under siege conditions and many thousands of our countrymen face losing their livelihoods. Will the Prime Minister now give us his estimate for the number of dead livestock by May?

The Prime Minister: The number of dead livestock obviously depends on the number of premises in which the disease is detected. What we have—*[Interruption.]* It is impossible for me to predict precisely the number of premises in which the disease will be detected in the coming two months. It is important, however, that where the disease is detected in any premises—in other words, they are infected premises—the animals are slaughtered within 24 hours. As I said, with the exception of Cumbria, where that is very difficult to do because of the spread of the disease, that is now happening in the vast majority of infected areas.

Q3. [154370] **Liz Blackman** (Erewash): Is my right hon. Friend aware that some private hospitals are charging different amounts for the same operation—a lower amount if patients pay cash up front and up to twice the amount if the operation is paid for by a private health insurer? To get round that problem, some private health insurers encourage their clients to pay in the first instance and to split the difference on the balance. Given that evidence, does he think that the whole area of private health and private health insurance needs to come with a Government health warning, particularly in the light of the Conservative party's policies?

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the practice to which my hon. Friend refers. However, many people believe that the national health service provides, and should provide, the best guarantee for them of good treatment. An enormous amount of change and investment is necessary, and it is this Government who are making the biggest substantial investment in the national health service since its creation.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Does the Prime Minister appreciate that, in the face of the worst crisis in my constituency and the south-west generally in my time as a Member of Parliament—the regional development agency has just assessed that, this year, it will cost the south-west £1 billion, with the cost to be borne by businesses of all sorts—and with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food virtually at breaking point and other Departments desperately trying to provide information, the role of an MP becomes absolutely critical? Therefore, I would find it inconceivable if my constituents were suddenly to be unrepresented at the time of the greatest crisis that they have faced. This is a national emergency.

Has the Prime Minister noticed the contribution that Brigadier Birtwhistle has made, and is he aware that there is a regional brigade commander in every region of this country? In the face of this national crisis, with the Prime Minister having recognised at last the contribution that the Army can make, can I encourage him to give it full responsibility in the regions?

The Prime Minister: The Army has full responsibility for all logistical operations in its regions. Based on talks with people in the areas most affected, I think that the relationship between civil service officials and the military is working well. The position, however, is very difficult, particularly in areas such as Cumbria where the disease is at its height.

There are two separate effects on business: the effect on the farming industry and the effect on the tourism industry. On tourism, it is important that both sides of the House send out the clear message that we want people to go into the countryside, but stay off the farmland. That is the right message to give to people. There are masses of things for people to do, and there is no reason for them to cancel their holidays. Although we can look and are looking at what Government help can be given, the single biggest support that we can give to the tourism industry is custom, trade and business.

Q4. [154371] **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the generous purposes of Government policies are often diminished by public administration and by long and complex forms, obscure language and protracted procedures? Will he champion a campaign in all Departments to base public administration on the minimum number of questions necessary, plain English and service with a smile?

The Prime Minister: That has probably been the ambition of most Prime Ministers for a long period. It is right that the measures that have been taken for schools, hospitals and the police will reduce bureaucracy. It is important that we make those changes and reforms, but it is also important that we make the big investment in our schools, hospitals and police that the country needs. As a result of the investment already made, we have the best primary school results this country has ever seen, we now have 17,000 more nurses in the health service than a few years ago, and the latest police figures show that, in the past 14 months, numbers have risen by 1,400, which is the largest rise in well over a decade.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Prime Minister pay particular attention to foot and mouth in Powys, where Brecon and Radnor has 11 cases and Montgomery has 16? We are on a knife edge. The carcases are supposed to be buried within 24 hours of the disease being identified, but we have only 50 troops available in Wales. Their headquarters is in my constituency. Will the right hon. Gentleman use his good offices to get more of the Army involved in Wales?

Will he consider delaying the general election for one or two months so that he and his Ministers can concentrate on the issue?

The Prime Minister: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, I have nothing to add to what I said on Monday. In respect of the Army, we sometimes hear that more troops are required on the ground and I will consider the situation in Powys. We have a sufficient number of contractors available to carry out the work. The problem is organising that and finding the burial sites that are needed. In the past week or so, as a result of the work by the Environment Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, we have identified about 48 or 50 sites in different parts of the country, the most visible of which is in Cumbria, where a large site is being used for burial. We thought—I think rightly—that the priority was to achieve the policy of 24 hours from report of a case to slaughter. As I have said, disposal is happening more quickly as we open up burial sites. However, I shall consider the particular problem of Powys this afternoon.

Q5. [154372] **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): As our nation's hearts go out to farming communities, can we spare a thought for the families of the 6,000 steelworkers who face great misery without receiving a peep of sympathy from the Conservatives or their stringpullers in the press? Will my right hon. Friend welcome the announcement by Corus yesterday that it will work with trade unions on a package to retrain as many of those steelworkers as possible? Surely the way forward in the 21st century is to have a social partnership, with Corus joining the car and aerospace industries in working with employees to ensure their future. Will he put his authority behind the help that the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have given? They are providing grants and advice on working with the European rules to ensure that the rescue package succeeds. The steel community, after 20 years of being butchered by the Conservatives, now has a Government on its side.

The Prime Minister: We will certainly examine carefully the proposals by the trade unions and management on specific help with training. We also stand ready to help in any other way that we can with those several thousand people who unfortunately face losing their jobs. Again, I pay tribute to the way in which the trade unions have put together their package. They have acted in a highly responsible and commercially sensitive way. I hope that the company listens to them; we certainly will.

Q6. [154373] **Sir Raymond Whitney** (Wycombe): Last month, the International Monetary Fund warned that the Chancellor's spending plans risk damaging the economy. It said that the much-trumpeted golden rule is an inadequate guide to fiscal policy. Given that recent economic and financial developments have reinforced the criticism of the IMF, will the Prime Minister advise the Chancellor that his policies are heading towards boom and bust?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not think that I can. The hon. Gentleman is wrong about the IMF. It said that the Chancellor should not relax his fiscal position and, of course, he did not, for the reasons that he gave in the Budget. I take it that the hon. Gentleman is against the extra investment that we are putting into schools, hospitals and crime. As ever, we have a somewhat confused message from the Conservatives about what their policies really are.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned boom and bust, and I am glad that he did. It is right to remind the House of what happened when he and his party were last in power. In the early 1990s, more than a million jobs were lost, interest rates were at 15 per cent., output plummeted and thousands of homes were repossessed. Today, there are a million extra jobs, lower mortgages, better living standards and a Government who have got rid of boom and bust.

Q7. [154374] **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): Last week, I met members of the Barnet senior citizens forum, who raised with me their concern about their perception of ageism in the NHS. I therefore welcome yesterday's announcement of the new NHS national service framework, which will ensure that services are provided on the basis of need, not age—*[Interruption.]* When does my right hon. Friend expect the new resources announced yesterday to make a real difference to pensioners in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: We certainly welcome the NHS statement, which forms part of the changes we are making. In response to the comments shouted by Opposition Members at my hon. Friend, let me remind them that we will be going into the election promising the largest ever investment in the health service, with 17,000 more nurses, a new hospital building programme and extra GPs on the way, while they will be going into the election arguing for cuts in that investment. I think that we will be waving bye bye to them.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. After four wasted years on the London underground, London commuters are preparing for the misery of yet another strike. At the same time, the Government's policy of co-operating with Transport for London and Mr. Kiley has totally collapsed. Where is the Deputy Prime Minister? Should he not be here to make a statement on the chaos of his policy, instead of running away from a proper debate on the subject?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Have you had an intimation of a further statement from the Minister of Agriculture concerning the report in *The Scotsman* today, which suggests that vaccination is now an option for the Government as a result of a report from Dr. Keith Sumption? Does the Minister want to tell the House whether the report has been influential and, in particular, will he respond to the allegation in *The Scotsman* that the timing of the general election is impinging on the Government's policy to eradicate foot and mouth?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

BILL PRESENTED

ELECTRICITY ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Simon Thomas, supported by Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, Mr. Richard Livsey, Mr. Dafydd Wigley and Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones, presented a Bill to amend the Electricity Act 1989 to transfer from the Secretary of State to the National Assembly for Wales certain functions relating to the granting of consent for the construction of generating stations in Wales: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 April, and to be printed [Bill 76].

Bus Services (Provision of Information)

3.33 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require operators of bus services to record, compile and publish certain information on the quality of their services; and for connected purposes.

Buses are the work force of our local transport system, with two thirds of public transport journeys being made by bus. Crudely put, if bus services do not work, public transport does not work. Bus services are certainly essential in giving people choice in how they travel throughout the country, but for far too long, and certainly in the 12 years until 1997, their development has been a story of abject failure.

It is well known that the previous Government deregulated bus services outside London and, as a result, bus usage fell by a staggering 24 per cent. As a consequence, private operators cut less profitable routes and the public found buses less reliable as routes and timetables were chopped and changed. That process of decline became self-perpetuating: as services were cut, fewer people used them, so there was less revenue available to reinvest in them.

In Harlow, an acute form of that problem has developed. The quality of our local service, which is predominantly provided by the Arriva bus company, has varied between the barely acceptable and the frankly disgraceful. In the past year alone, 400 of my constituents have contacted me about the failings of the service, of which I shall provide details. Too often, services run late—in some cases, by up to 45 minutes—and on some routes that is a persistent and regularly occurring problem. Arriva has found it difficult to recruit drivers, so services have often been cut without adequate local consultation.

People who rely on the bus service to get to work, such as the postmen who have contacted me, are forced to take taxis or use their own car because they know that they cannot count on the bus to get them to work on time. Children who once used the bus service to get to school can no longer do so, so their parents use cars during the rush hour and thereby add to problems of congestion. Pensioners, many of whom regard the bus service as a lifeline, feel greatly let down as they stand in the cold and the rain waiting for a bus. To give some scale to the local problems, in the run-up to Christmas the lost mileage rate peaked at 13.5 per cent. Bus services are now the second most important issue in my constituency postbag.

I do not want to give a wholly negative impression. Positive changes are beginning to improve the position. There has never before been the long-term commitment to increase investment that is embodied in the 10-year transport plan, whereby £59 billion will go to local transport schemes, targeted to achieve a 10 per cent. increase in bus usage. That is a massive and welcome shot in the arm. The establishment of the quality partnerships between local authorities and private bus operators envisaged under the Transport Act 2000 will certainly improve services. Especially helpful is the permission for local authorities to contract out whole routes to a single operator if that is judged to be in the public interest. The national target that no more than 0.5 per cent. of scheduled mileage should be lost for reasons that lie within operators' control represents a clear step forward,

as does the Government's insistence that they want improvements in reliability and punctuality to be achieved in conjunction with increased usage.

Although improvements are being made, we have to do more. I have been lobbying and pressing Arriva locally on those issues for more than 18 months. Sometimes, the response has not been all that I expected: for example, I was given a commitment that no further changes to the timetable would be made without full local consultation, but that commitment was unilaterally breached by Arriva. Latterly, however, I have been persuaded that Arriva, whose national management have become engaged in resolving local problems, is determined to improve services.

I understand the company's difficulty in recruiting drivers at a time of very low unemployment, but Arriva is now developing strategies to overcome that problem. The lost mileage performance indicator has improved significantly, from the pre-Christmas peak of 13.5 per cent. to low single figures now. Especially welcome is the company's senior management's agreement to meet every three months in my constituency representatives of the district council, the county council, pensioners and me to review progress.

That brings me to my main reason for introducing the Bill. At our first meeting some weeks ago, I was surprised and concerned by Arriva's attitude to the publication of its performance information. We were given performance information, some of which I have quoted today, but when I made a request—a reasonable one, I think—for it to be made publicly available every three months, I was told that that was not possible because the information was commercially confidential. I believe that that is, quite simply, wrong—and that applies to all bus operators, not only Arriva, that are protected by commercial confidentiality in that way.

The issue has broader ramifications. When drawing up my Bill, I was told by colleagues that they could not get two operators in their constituencies to sit down and discuss local services with them because of issues of commercial confidentiality. If we were talking about companies that sell cars, I could understand the problem, but we are talking about a public service. Organisations providing public services widely accept that performance can be enhanced through benchmarking and publicising performance against agreed criteria. Such a process can shame poor performers into action and be used positively as a motivational tool to achieve organisational change and improvement, which is why we have legislation requiring schools, rail operators, the Civil Aviation Authority, local councils and many others to publish their performance indicators. There is no such requirement on bus companies, which can plead commercial confidentiality.

That strikes me as a glaring omission. It is not as though the information is not already being compiled. On local authority subsidised routes, operators are contractually obliged to provide electronic ticket machine data to the local authority to justify the subsidy. For all routes—not just those subsidised by the local authority—the traffic commissioner is charged with inspecting and ensuring that 95 per cent. of bus services arrive within a specified time frame in accordance with the timetable. If they do not, the traffic commissioner can levy penalties. That is currently undertaken randomly, but clearly it could be developed.

I know that there will be a host of objections to what I am proposing. They include complexity; the time taken to compile the information in an understandable form; and the need to rely on the honesty of drivers when compiling information, to name but a few. In principle, those are the same objections that every organisation uses initially to argue against performance indicators when it has a vested interest in not letting the public know how well it is performing.

Those objections should be rejected. With good will, it must be possible to devise an acceptable, simple and fair system for measuring the performance of bus operators. That change—allied to the extra investment now being made in our public transport system and increased regulation—is the only sure way to restore confidence in our bus services, which are important to local communities.

I strongly believe that change is long overdue; it is a change whose time has come. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Bill Rammell, Ms Hazel Blears, Ms Karen Buck, Mr. Ivor Caplin, Mr. Jeff Ennis, Dr. Ian Gibson, Mr. Alan Hurst, Mr. Bob Russell, Angela Smith, Mr. Ian Stewart, Mr. Brian White and Mr. Anthony D. Wright.

BUS SERVICES (PROVISION OF INFORMATION)

Mr. Bill Rammell accordingly presented a Bill to require operators of bus services to record, compile and publish certain information on the quality of their services; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June, and to be printed [Bill 77].

ELECTION PUBLICATIONS BILL [*LORDS*]

Ordered,

That—

(1) at the sitting on Thursday 29th March, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords relating to the Election Publications Bill *[Lords]* shall have been received; and

(2) notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules in respect of the Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Orders of the Day

Private Security Industry Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

3.43 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill forms part of the Government's commitment to reducing crime and disorder. It introduces statutory regulation to the private security industry to drive out criminals and drive up standards. It will assist the building of important crime reduction partnerships between police, the private security industry and others. It is a regulatory Bill, but it makes straightforward and sensible arrangements for the private security industry and is consistent with our general aim of keeping regulation to the minimum necessary.

The private security industry is a thriving, diverse industry that has grown rapidly in recent years and is now part of daily life. We are all used to seeing private security personnel in shopping centres, department stores and office blocks; delivering cash to banks and building societies; and in many of our public service institutions. At present, there is no statutory regulation of the industry. I pay tribute to the industry for taking significant self-regulatory steps in recent years to raise its standards and image through trade associations and its training and inspectorate organisations.

The Government believe, however, that voluntary self-regulation is not enough. It cannot deal with the criminal or unscrupulous elements in the industry. There are no effective controls to prevent such people from leaving one area or firm and setting up again elsewhere, which can seriously hamper the work of the police in dealing with them.

Clients of the private security industry, by definition, give privileged access to those providing their security, and those providers are placed in particular positions of trust, with inside knowledge of their clients' weaknesses. That trust can be abused in ways that have damaging or even tragic consequences.

A recent survey revealed that some 350,000 people were wholly or mainly employed in the private security industry—a large number of people. The industry has a total annual turnover of more than £2 billion, but despite its size and important role in the security of our communities, no proper regulation is in place.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): The Minister mentioned the figure of 350,000. I expect that other hon. Members have different figures from other surveys, which suggests that there is some doubt about the number of people employed in the industry. Does the figure that he quoted include people employed, for example, by shops?

Mr. Clarke: The figure that I quoted from the survey includes people employed in-house, which I think is the hon. Lady's point. She is right that the numbers vary between surveys. There is a large number of part-time workers, and there are definitional issues as well. I have previously used the figure of 250,000, but the latest advice that I have is that 350,000 is an appropriate figure. It is not germane to the substance of the Bill, but it indicates the importance of the sector to all our lives. As I said, despite the sector's size and role, no proper regulation is in place.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the public have severe reservations about the activities of those sectors of the industry that are prone to exploitation by rogue elements. That is why both the industry and the police have long sought statutory regulation. We believe that a statutory framework is the most effective way to drive out the undesirable elements and thus increase public confidence in the industry.

Regulation has been long awaited. My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), whom I am delighted to see in his place, tabled a private Member's Bill on the subject as long ago as 1977. I pay tribute to him, as he has played a long and distinguished role in trying to ensure that the House gives proper attention to this important issue. He has consistently argued for that, and in preparations for the Bill we had a number of discussions about the right way to proceed.

In 1995, the Select Committee on Home Affairs recommended a statutory licensing system. The Government of the day decided that statutory regulation was not the answer and that the industry should regulate itself. At the time, the Labour party said that that response did not go far enough, and we indicated our intention to regulate the industry on our return to office. That is the position that we have reached, and is why the Bill is before the House.

After taking office, we undertook a consultation exercise with those most directly concerned: in particular, the industry, the police service, local authorities and the entertainment industry. As part of the exercise, we met many typical small to medium-sized security firms that saw regulation as a way of promoting confidence in the industry, as well as protecting the public. They were willing to be regulated even if that came at a cost, because they recognised that confidence in their services had to be their paramount concern.

Following the consultations, we published a White Paper in March 1999 outlining our proposals and inviting further comments. The White Paper has been deposited in the Library as a background paper to the Bill. The key aspects of our proposals were, first, that it was essential to vet people working in the industry to exclude criminal elements; secondly, that companies providing a recognised standard of service should be recognised through a voluntary inspection scheme; and, thirdly, that regulation would help to raise standards in the industry, building on progress made through self-regulation. We received about 180 responses to the White Paper from a wide range of bodies, which were generally supportive of the proposals and strongly in favour of regulation.

The Bill essentially reflects the proposals in the White Paper. It was carefully scrutinised in the other place, and a number of details have been improved in the light of the helpful arguments that were advanced, not least by Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members. As the House will know, I always hope to take account of the well-argued and constructive proposals that are made by all hon. Members during the passage of a Bill, in order to achieve as much consensus as possible.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has the Minister made of the incidence of crime in the

private security industries of European Union member states that have systems of statutory regulation? What assessment has he made of the costs of those systems?

Mr. Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South has done the most distinguished work on that subject, on which he has published one of his numerous monographs. I have read the monograph, which deals with the various issues to which the hon. Gentleman refers. We have considered regulatory systems, although the word "assessment" is perhaps too strong. We have not conducted a rigorous assessment of the security systems of every European country. In many countries, practices are entirely different, so it is difficult to achieve a base for international comparison, but we have considered the arrangements in other countries and sought to achieve a progressive element for ourselves. As my right hon. Friend points out in his private arguments and in that learned monograph—

Mr. Bercow: And well thumbed.

Mr. Clarke: Yes, it is well thumbed, and it shows that, in the experience of other countries, a powerful form of regulation can work in driving down crime levels. The effectiveness of such regulation depends on the country and the culture to which it is applied, but such experience has been gained.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I think that the success of such measures largely depends on how good the regulatory system is, how much the security industry is respected and the close relationship between private security and the police. If they trust each other, and the public trust those involved in private security, crime prevention is much more successful than when the police and the public are alienated from the industry. We have experienced that recipe for catastrophe for the past 20 or 30 years.

Mr. Clarke: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, he speaks with knowledge that is gained from great experience in the field. The partnership approach that he advocates is precisely that which is set out in the Bill. That is why we welcome the fact that the industry, trade unions and police are all in favour of establishing a regulatory regime that can achieve the public confidence that he describes.

The main proposal to achieve that aim is our over-arching provision to create a non-departmental public body called the Security Industry Authority, whose aim will be to regulate sectors of the industry in respect of which there is genuine public concern about the activities of criminals and cowboys. We do not propose to regulate for the sake of doing so when public concern does not justify action or when the regulatory burden might be disproportionate.

That is why the SIA will be responsible for licensing individuals who are offering services under contract in designated sectors of the industry. It will also be responsible for regulating those involved in door supervision—bouncers—and in wheelclamping services, including people who offer services under contract to others and those who are employed in-house. In addition, it will inspect companies in response to voluntary applications and issue approved contractor status to those meeting an acceptable standard. Finally, it will be responsible for setting and raising professional standards within the industry.

The Bill extends to England and Wales and has been welcomed by the industry and the police service. It does not apply to Scotland, which is considering whether to make proposals to regulate the private security industry.

The functions of the new authority are set out in clause 1. Essentially, it will license individuals and approve companies with the help of an inspections regime; keep the private security industry and the legislative framework within which it operates under general review—I shall return to that point, as a general evolution is needed over time—and set, approve and ratchet up standards. A key feature of the effectiveness of the SIA will be the calibre and independence of its members and senior officials. It will need to establish good working relations with the industry in order to keep itself properly informed of the realities of the sector that it is regulating, for the reasons set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South. There will be a place in its membership for the industry.

The Government's overriding intention, which I want to emphasise, is to ensure that the authority and its officials are properly independent of the industry and are seen to be so. They must carry the confidence of everyone with a stake in the industry—the police, insurers, the public and others. If the Bill becomes law, I assure hon. Members of our determination to secure that independence and integrity, which will be critical to the success of the regime.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am sorry for missing the Minister's earlier remarks. Will he ensure that those who serve on the authority not only understand the industry but are independent? That is important.

Mr. Clarke: I apologise if I was not clear about that. At the beginning of my speech, I said that the Security Industry Authority will need to establish good working relations with the industry to keep properly informed of the realities of the sector that it will regulate. It is obviously important for some members of the authority to have direct personal experience of the industry. It is vital to reach a position whereby the independent agency carries such authority that its integrity is generally accepted.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I accept the Minister's comments about the authority, but the Bill will not cover people who install alarms. Why has that change from the proposals in the White Paper been made?

Mr. Clarke: In summary, we made the change because the better regulation taskforce, which considers burdens on industry, examined the extent to which legislation was needed to tackle crime in the alarm installation industry. We concluded that the need to tackle criminality was not clear enough to justify the inclusion of such a provision in the Bill. I shall deal with the point in more detail later, but I emphasise that one of the key functions of the new authority is to keep the legislative framework under general review. Similar issues to that mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman might arise in future.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The Minister is dealing with specific matters and industries that the Bill

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

may cover. Have he or his officials considered whether paragraph 5 of schedule 2 covers those who are involved in computer programming, and the security aspects of such involvement? If he believes that the provision covers people in that important industry, will he consult more widely with the industry during the Bill's passage?

Mr. Clarke: My officials and I have considered that carefully. I shall address the point in detail later; I believe that I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurances that he seeks. However, I was seduced by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) into going into a specific subject earlier than I intended.

The employment status of the relevant individuals and the type of security services that they provide determine who is affected by the Bill. Clause 3 defines the employment status of those who will be caught by the regulatory framework. All individuals who provide security services directly, their supervisors and managers and the directors or partners of their company or firm will be required to have a licence. That also applies to those who supply services on an agency basis.

Schedule 2 defines the sectors of the industry that are regulated. There are two main groups: first, those providing manned guarding services and, secondly, those engaged in immobilising vehicles—wheelclampers.

Manned guarding is a diverse activity, but it has the common feature of guarding premises, property or people. The Bill proposes that individuals in the manned guarding sector should be licensed if they provide services under contract to a client. We do not generally propose to require them to have licences if they are employed in-house by companies. Those companies will already have satisfied themselves about their employees, and the Government do not intend to add an additional layer of checking where it is not necessary.

The Government are fully aware of arguments in the industry and elsewhere that in-house staff should also be licensed. That relates to a point that the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) made earlier. We appreciate the weight of opinion behind those arguments. We were initially attracted to that idea, but, for the reasons that I gave the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, we decided against it because we believed that it would be an additional bureaucratic burden on business.

The Government are not closed to the arguments that have been made in favour of regulating in-house staff. We will bear them carefully in mind. The authority has a general duty to keep the operation of the industry and its parent legislation under review, and we will also have a formal review of all the arrangements after the authority has operated for three years. The Bill is flexible, and the Government can add or delete sectors of the industry by regulations. We will pay close attention to any recommendation from the authority that in-house manned guards should be brought into regulation.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is right to be cautious about extending the burden of regulation, especially as it could affect large numbers of small businesses. He will be aware that the British Security Industry Association covers 70 per cent. of the sector, including a number of large companies. Will he tell the House what proportion of the companies in the sector are small—that is, employing fewer than 50 people?

Mr. Clarke: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the figure that he requests. The thrust of his point is correct. The BSIA, with which we have worked closely, has been a strong advocate of the Bill. We are glad to have worked closely with it. However, it also has a commercial interest in strengthening the position of its members vis-a-vis some of the smaller operators in the field. That is why we have been concerned to see what the impact would be on those smaller operators, and why, on the balance of judgment, we finally took the decisions that we have taken about those specific sectors, and about in-house staff.

The provisions for the review and consideration of the process and its application will allow us to see whether we have been too bureaucratically heavy-handed in relation to some parts of the industry, or whether some parts of the industry—such as in-house staff—that are not within the remit of the Bill will need to be regulated. That is the judgment that we have made about the right way to proceed, but I am sorry that I do not have the figure that the hon. Gentleman requested.

Door supervisors, or bouncers, form an important sub-set of the manned guarding sector regulated by the Bill. There are professional, reputable companies and operatives providing door supervisor services; but the fact that door supervisors operate most often at pubs and clubs, particularly at venues where young people are likely to gather, has meant that on too many occasions, disreputable and even criminal elements have infiltrated the sector.

We know that some door supervisors have turned a blind eye to drug dealing on the premises that they are meant to be protecting. Worse still, we know of door supervisors who have used their position to deal in drugs themselves. We are also aware of bouncers committing physical assaults on members of the public. The Bill therefore requires all door supervisors to be licensed, whether they provide their services under contract to a client or are employed in-house by a pub or club. I shall come in a moment to the licensing regime and its relationship to the local authorities.

I mentioned partnerships earlier. This will be an important area in which we can establish good partnerships between the police and local door supervisors in pubs and clubs. For example, in Manchester, 130,000 young people are in the city centre at 2 o'clock on Friday and Saturday mornings. That is an enormous number of people. Even in my own city of Norwich, between 10,000 and 13,000 young people are in the city centre on Friday and Saturday nights.

Mr. Bercow: Not because of the MP?

Mr. Clarke: The MP was out in the centre of Norwich with the police at that time of the morning a couple of weeks ago, and I think that the numbers were about 50 per cent. higher than they would otherwise have been because the word had got around that I was going to be there.

There are serious points relating to this. For example, the city safe scheme in Manchester, which I commend, involves a radio system between all the bouncers and the

police to ensure that issues can be dealt with rapidly. That requires mutual confidence. In Norwich, there have recently been two tragic deaths of young people, and the question of how bouncers have operated has been important. We have a compact between the police, the local authority, the clubs and the bouncers to improve professional standards. That will be an important aspect of what we do.

Wheelclampers form a second important sector regulated by the Bill. I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), whom I am delighted to see in her place today. She has been a strong, consistent campaigner for proper regulation of the industry, and, since being elected to the House, has taken an active, positive approach to the issue, which I want to place on record.

We are addressing the issue of wheelclamping on private land—that is, land that is not a road to which the general public has access. Roads are separately regulated under the Road Traffic Acts. In our view, landowners must be able to take action against those who park on private land without permission, and wheelclamping—or at least the threat of it—may be an effective way to deal with irresponsible parking. However, it is crucial that such wheelclamping is carried out in a reasonable manner. To some extent, the law has already enshrined those principles. For example, in 1995, the Court of Appeal adjudged, in the case of Arthur and Arthur *v.* Anker, that clampers had acted legally as adequate warning signs had been displayed, the release fee was reasonable and there was a reasonable method of payment.

The judgment provided useful guidelines, but only in broad terms, to courts faced with similar cases. The court did not define a general standard for the size of signs or what a "reasonable" release fee might be. That leaves the motorist who is aggrieved at having his or her car clamped on private land with only limited practical means of redress. Unless the behaviour of the clamper is outrageous, the motorist may well be uncertain of his or her rights and may also be dissuaded from going to court by the potential cost of legal fees.

We believe that that gap in the law needs to be filled, which is why the Bill ensures that all wheelclamping on private land carried out as a business or as part of one's employment, or for a release fee, will be regulated by a licensing system. Each individual who provides wheelclamping services to others will therefore need a licence, as will his or her director or manager.

We also considered whether the licensing regime needed to cover the wheelclamping by businesses of cars on their own land using their own employees, or in-house wheelclamping. We concluded that it did. Immobilising a car gives the clamper such power over the car owner, with all the inherent danger of that power being abused, that we would leave the public open to the risk of further abuses were we not to legislate.

However, in the example of in-house wheelclamping, the Bill allows the authority to avoid undue regulation by being able to require a licence only of the employer, if it is satisfied that the employer will vet employees to a suitable standard and also ensure their compliance with all the requirements and conditions of the licence.

Finally, the Bill requires a private individual or anyone acting on behalf of that individual to be licensed if he or she wishes to engage in do-it-yourself wheelclamping that involves charging a release fee. It also regulates three other sectors: private investigators, security consultants and keyholders. Those groups are much smaller in number than manned guards and wheelclampers and their activities give significantly less cause for public concern. None the less, such practitioners are in a special relationship of trust with regard to the security of their clients, and our White Paper proposals to take them into a statutory regulatory framework were welcomed.

The Government believe that the public are justified in expecting those who offer such services under contract to be subject to regulation. However, that does not affect operatives in those sectors who are employed in-house by companies. Again, we believe that employers' own screening processes are sufficient.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) asked about IT security consultants. I am happy to clarify a point relating to security consultants that has caused concern in some circles. Paragraph 5 of schedule 2, to which he referred, extends the provisions to security consultants whose activities are broadly defined in terms of giving advice about security precautions against any risk to property or the person.

In keeping with the rest of Bill, that is a broad definition, accompanied by some clarificatory exemptions. Concern has been expressed about the position of the information security industry in relation to those definitions. Just as with tangible assets, there are real threats to the security of information and security advice, and precautions are needed to protect it.

At present, there is no regulation of the information security industry. However, the Government are committed to regulating only where necessary. The Department of Trade and Industry will therefore consult the information security industry on the extent and effectiveness of existing precautions—protected measures—and whether further action is required. In the light of that, I am happy to make it clear that we do not currently intend to bring the information security industry within the scope of the new licensing regime established by the Bill.

The Security Industry Authority, when established, will undertake full and detailed consultations about the discharge of the remits placed on it by the Bill. Nobody will be regulated by the Bill without their full knowledge and understanding. All relevant types of security consultant will be invited to participate in the authority's consultations at the appropriate time. I am happy to make those points clear and I hope that I have dealt with the confusion that arose.

Mr. Hawkins: I am grateful to the Minister for his remarks, which are helpful to those involved in the information security sector of the IT industry, but is not he conscious of the fact that the broad wording of paragraph 5 of schedule 2 may accidentally catch some of those people, even if he does not intend that it should? Will he undertake further to consider that wording and whether it might be improved?

Mr. Clarke: I am certainly prepared to look at the wording, but this is a historic Bill for which, as I have said, my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South has pressed for many years, and I am keen for its wording to take account of significant changes in the way in which security is offered. Over the past 20 years, for instance,

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there have been considerable changes in the style of security, the approach to security and the technology that is used. That is why we have adopted a flexible stance in the Bill, requiring the Security Industry Authority to review the position and committing ourselves to consulting the industries concerned. I acknowledge that the wording of the Bill should relate to what we know now, in 2001, but in a broadly drafted context. That is our rationale, and that is why I have been able to give the commitments that I have given.

All individual employees, supervisors, managers or directors in the sectors that I have described will be required to have licences. Let me return to the point made by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield. We are aware of the arguments in favour of taking other sectors into this regulatory framework, and particularly aware of the arguments relating to installers of alarm and security equipment. As with in-house manned guards, we were initially attracted to the idea of including them in regulation, but we were persuaded against that by the argument about the regulatory burden and, to a significant extent, by the lack of any substantial evidence of criminality. In the case of some sectors mentioned in the Bill, we have such evidence.

We are not closed to arguments, but the Bill already gives the SIA a major task, and we do not want further to front-load its waiting list of people to license. We prefer to get the authority up and running with the duties given to it by the Bill in its present form, and then to listen to the voice of experience as it emerges. We will, of course, pay close attention to any recommendations from the authority.

It will be an offence for anyone to engage in licensable conduct, as defined in the Bill, without a proper licence. It will also be an offence to employ an unlicensed person providing security services. As a result of a Government amendment in another place, the Bill also makes it an offence for an occupier of premises to permit unlicensed clamping of vehicles on those premises where such activities require a licence.

A licence will be required for each designated security service provided. For example, if someone legitimately works as both a manned guard and a wheelclamper, he or she will need to be licensed for both activities. Exemptions from the need for a licence will be allowed when an individual is already subject to a type of vetting that affords protection for the public that is at least equivalent to that achieved by the criteria imposed by the authority.

The authority will determine the criteria on which it will issue licences. The criteria will be published so that applicants and the public will know what the requirements are. There will be two types of criterion. First, the authority will check an individual's criminal record with the newly established Criminal Records Bureau. In the case of applicants in all but one of the regulated sectors, the authority will obtain a criminal record certificate showing both spent and unspent convictions. Because of particular concerns, door supervisors alone will be the subject of an enhanced criminal record certificate, showing spent and unspent convictions together with convictions for minor offences, and local police intelligence.

The Government believe that those exemptions from the provisions of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 are fully justified if private security operatives are to be licensed properly. That belief was shared by those who commented during our consultation period.

It will be for the authority to determine what weight to give any criminal convictions revealed by the checks. It is unreasonable to say that any criminal conviction whatever should automatically prevent the granting of a licence—the authority will consider each application on its merits—but it is likely that certain serious offences relating to violence or drugs will bar an applicant from gaining a licence.

The second type of criterion that the authority will take into account relates to skills and training. The authority will have an important role in setting and raising standards in the industry generally. I should say at this point that both the British Security Industry Association and the main trade union in the sector, the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union, have been active in promoting the case for proper training and development of staff, and the Government associate themselves strongly with those efforts.

The Government will wish the authority to consider carefully how to ratchet up minimum quality thresholds. Any proposals will need to be discussed carefully with the industry.

A number of current training and quality standards are relevant to the private security industry. Some of them are accepted as pretty good, but some are not so good. The SIA will need carefully to examine the range of quality of those standards before deciding on the standards that it wants to see in place. Although the authority will not want to reinvent the wheel, it may also not want to buy one off the shelf.

As the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said, in considering the type of quality standards that it wants to use, the authority will of course have to pay attention to standards in other European countries. I am clear that the authority should be thinking in terms of standards that are challenging for the industry. However, as with all training, it will also have to bear in mind what is practicable and achievable.

The authority will be able to attach conditions to a licence, and it will be an offence to contravene them. The authority will also be able to refuse, modify, suspend or revoke a licence, and the criteria for doing so will be published. There will also be a standardised system of licence applications and procedures, and a standard licence format to help with public recognition and enable the licence holder to work anywhere in the country.

Mr. Bercow: I am, as always, listening with interest to the hon. Gentleman's speech. He will be aware that the Government are furnishing themselves with the power to make regulations on exemptions from the licensing requirement and, for example, on arrangements for the grant of approvals. Detailed policy will be contained in those regulations. He will also know, from previous skirmishes, my interest in that subject. Can he assure me that those regulations will be subject to the affirmative procedure, so that the House has a proper opportunity to debate them? If the answer is no and he proposes to opt instead for the negative procedure, will he at least

undertake, in the name of getting it right, to provide a draft of those regulations before the Bill is further considered?

Mr. Clarke: We have discussed those two points at great and entertaining length. The fact is that Oppositions always ask for affirmative orders, whereas Governments are always inclined not to agree them. Occasionally, however, we have agreed them. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath may have been in a Committee that considered other legislation which has been passed when I accepted from Conservative Members an amendment for the affirmative procedure. Therefore, although our mind is not closed to proposals, we shall make practical decisions in each case.

I am not sure that I can give the assurance that the hon. Member for Buckingham seeks that we shall be able to publish detailed draft regulations during the Bill's passage. I can, however, assure him that we shall do that as soon as we are able to do so.

I also have an answer to the question on small companies that the hon. Member for Buckingham asked earlier. It is apparently the case that of 2,000 manned guarding companies in the United Kingdom, 1,600—four fifths, or 80 per cent.—had 50 or fewer employees.

The authority will be able to charge a fee for licence applications. The fee should be the minimum necessary to allow the authority to be self-financing. I make it absolutely clear that it is not our intention to erect artificial financial barriers to employment in the industry. The exact fee will be determined by several factors, but we expect it to be about £35 to £40 for a licence that usually will last for three years. That is not a commitment to a specific figure, but an indication of the scale of charges that we envisage. We do not believe that that sum is extortionate. A fee of £40 for a three-year licence is equivalent to 25p a week. We do not believe that that should be a barrier to employment in the industry.

We would hope that employers will want to reimburse employees for the cost of a licence. However, we do not believe that it is appropriate to shift the onus for payment from the individual to the employer, as the Bill correctly places responsibility for licensing at the level of the individual security operative. We believe that the fee must follow that responsibility. However, the indications that I have had are that, in many industries, employers will reimburse employees for the cost. We hope that that will be general practice.

There will be an avenue of appeal to the magistrates courts against a decision by the authority to refuse, modify or revoke a licence or a decision to impose conditions on a licence. That avenue of appeal reflects concerns expressed in another place and is a welcome improvement.

Earlier, I mentioned delegation to local authorities. Although the Bill vests licensing powers centrally with the security industry authority, the Government are of course aware that many local authorities operate schemes to register door supervisors and wish to continue to have a role in licensing them.

It is important that setting the licence criteria will remain the responsibility of the SIA, as we do not want to move away from a national standard in terms of licensing criteria. The Bill therefore makes no provision for local authorities to apply criteria other than those set out by the authority. However, it envisages the possibility of local authorities undertaking the processes for the grant of licences to door supervisors—that is to say, receiving the applications, conducting the necessary checks, and deciding the eligibility for licences. As with decisions of the SIA, there are avenues of appeal to the magistrates courts against a local authority decision.

Given local authorities' familiarity with the local scene, allowing them to conduct the necessary checks will clearly have some potential advantages. However, I should emphasise that delegation will take place only with the consent of the local authorities. There is no intention of simply foisting these duties on them against their will. We shall hold detailed discussions with the local authorities about the practicalities of delegation well in advance.

Mr. Hawkins: The Minister will know from other debates of the Opposition's concern about the Government's propensity to place extra burdens on local authorities without providing the necessary funding. Will he undertake to ensure that the Government will provide the appropriate funding to allow local authorities to carry out this additional work?

Mr. Clarke: I said that delegation would take place only with the consent of local authorities, and one consideration for the Government and the authorities would be the financial arrangements involved. I know that the previous Conservative Government at no time placed burdens on local authorities without paying for them, and I am therefore delighted with the integrity of the position adopted by the hon. Gentleman.

The final element of the licensing system will be a public register listing every licensed person and the terms on which they have been licensed. The public and the police will thus be able to establish clearly whether an individual is properly licensed to engage in regulated security activities.

The second main strand of the SIA's functions is the approved contractors scheme. The Bill establishes a system whereby providers of security services who meet certain standards can obtain recognition from the SIA. The Government are aware that some bodies in the industry and elsewhere favour making this a compulsory scheme. However, we have decided against that, at least for the present. We do not believe that a full and comprehensive case for imposing this additional burden across the board on the industry has yet been made. We believe that the majority of reputable companies will want to seek approval under the voluntary system.

We are aware of arguments that the Government should set a lead by requiring that public contracts for security services will not be awarded to companies failing to meet the standards set by the SIA. I cannot give that absolute guarantee, but I can certainly say that we shall draw the virtues of the approved contractors register to the attention of the procurers of public service security contracts, and that we will make it clear to security companies that we are doing so. We believe that that will further increase the attractiveness of the scheme in the eyes of companies.

The Bill contains provisions to convert the voluntary scheme into a compulsory one, if the authority and the Government of the day are convinced that that is the right thing to do. Once again, we will listen very carefully to what the SIA tells us about the operation of the voluntary scheme.

[Mr. Clarke]

Providers of security services will be able to apply to the authority for approval against a set of published criteria. If the standards are met, the company will be able to advertise itself as approved.

The supporting regime is similar to that for the licensing of individuals. The authority will draw up and publish its criteria; it can withhold or delay approval until the criteria are met; it may attach conditions to the grant of an approval; and it may charge a fee for processing the application.

There will also be a right of appeal to the magistrates courts against any decision of the authority in this area, and there will be a public register of approved companies. It will be an offence falsely to claim approval under the scheme.

It is important that the authority can actively police the licensing regimes that it establishes. The authority will therefore have powers of entry and inspection, but the powers contain a number of safeguards. For example, they are restricted to premises other than those solely used as domestic dwellings, and the purpose of the entry and inspection must be stated. These safeguards balance the rights of the individual with the need for the authority to have an effective enforcement mechanism.

These additional safeguards were introduced and welcomed in another place in the light of concerns expressed in debate about the civil liberties implications of the powers.

Sir Norman Fowler: Before the Minister finishes, will he say what he thinks the chances are of the admirable measures in the Bill reaching the statute book by the time the general election is called?

Mr. Clarke: Very high. We shall have to see what Conservative Front-Bench Members and Liberal Democrat Members have to say about the matter, but my impression so far—subject to correction—is that there is a broad consensus, as there certainly was in the other place, as to the approach to be taken. There may be important points of detail to be debated—I do not want to trivialise that fact; but I believe that there is a general desire that we should respond to the wishes of the police and the security industry by getting legislation on to the statute book. I wait with interest to hear what will be said during this debate. I am confident that the Bill will receive Royal Assent by the time a general election is called—whenever that may be during the next year and a month.

As I was saying before I was so politely interrupted, the Government believe that the benefits accruing from the Bill are several. The SIA will, for the first time, introduce a licensing regime that is universal, consistent and transparent. By licensing all door supervisors, the authority will drive down the incidence of violence and drug offences in pubs and clubs. By licensing all wheelclampers, the authority will deter the cowboys who prey on innocent motorists.

The authority will also set about ratcheting up standards across the regulated sectors. It will play a central role in the future relationship between the private security industry, the police and the Government and the public whom we all serve; it will strengthen the partnerships that are so important.

It is important for the authority to work closely with the industry that it will regulate. However, it is also crucial that the authority is wholly independent of that industry. That will enable the public to have increased confidence in the industry, which, in turn, will, we hope and believe, be likely to lead to increased market opportunities for it.

The Bill contains a comprehensive set of proposals and I hope that the House will agree that it deserves a Second Reading. I commend it to the House.

4.26 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Unscrupulous and criminal activity by those who have been employed in the security industry has been of concern to Members on both sides of the House and in another place.

In his opening remarks, the Minister paid tribute to the long-standing interest of the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George). Similarly, I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who has also been interested in the matter for a long time. Sadly, as the Minister and hon. Members know, because foot and mouth is a serious problem in my right hon. Friend's constituency, he is unable to be with us. Had that not been the case, I have no doubt that he would have wanted to participate in the debate. As he was the Minister of State at the Home Office when the Select Committee on Home Affairs investigated the matter in 1994, I am sure that the present Minister will agree that my right hon. Friend's work was extremely useful in preparing the background for the measure.

I pay tribute, too, to the former Member for Burton, Sir Ivan Lawrence, who was the Chairman of the Select Committee in 1994. He made a significant contribution to the Committee's report on the industry—as the Minister will confirm.

The Opposition's approach to the Bill is that it should not place unnecessary, overly complex, bureaucratic or burdensome regulations on the legitimate sector of the industry. I am sure that the House does not want the Bill to go further than is necessary or desirable. We must be especially careful not to hit the smallest people hardest. We do not want the Bill to impose a huge bureaucratic burden on small businesses; as we know, it is often easier—relatively—for big business to comply with Government regulations.

A large company can afford to employ people in compliance and administrative departments to ensure that regulations are satisfied. However, for people legitimately trying to run a small company, who are working all the hours God sends to build up their business, extra bureaucratic regulation is a huge problem. Thus, in Committee, we shall want to spend a great deal of time considering how the legislation would operate—especially its effects on small companies. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who raised the matter in an earlier intervention, will be as keen as me to probe the Government carefully on that.

The Minister described the proposed new security industry authority and how the Government envisage that it will operate. Conservative Members never feel comfortable with the creation of new quangos.

When the Bill was in another place, it received not only quite a lot of attention from the Lords but a surprising amount of scrutiny from the national press. I was

particularly interested to read a description by one of our most distinguished parliamentary reporters of the debate in another place, in which he said that some called the new security industry authority "Ofbounce". He asked where, oh where was the libertarian voice that would scrutinise whether the authority was really necessary. I have a feeling that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and I are in our current positions precisely to provide that libertarian voice and to ensure that there will be proper scrutiny. We do, however, recognise that there have been huge abuses throughout the country by so-called cowboy clampers.

I want to pay personal tribute to Mr. Alan Franklin, editor of *The Surrey-Hants Star*, which covers not only my constituency but the constituencies of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who intervened earlier, and my right hon. Friends the Members for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) and for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay). Over a period of not months but years, Mr. Franklin has highlighted many of the problems that my constituents and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends have had with particular clamping companies, especially a company that has been used by South West Trains.

Some clamping companies, even those employed by large public limited companies, have frequently indulged in a thoroughly inappropriate approach to law-abiding members of the public. It is particularly worrying, as the Minister will acknowledge, when single ladies return late at night from their work in central London to a poorly lit station car park, where their car may be a great distance from a well-lit area, only to find that it has been clamped—perhaps because the signs about parking charges were obscured, as they have been in some of the cases that Mr. Franklin has highlighted—and then find it almost impossible to get someone from the clamping company to come out and release the car. Understandably, they then feel frightened and vulnerable.

In those circumstances, it is not surprising that there is huge concern. The editors of local and regional papers, who have taken up this cause and tried to embarrass not only the clamping company but the public limited company that employed it into ensuring proper standards, are doing a very worthwhile job.

Some of the cases that have been highlighted nationally have caused huge worry. In a case that was decided by the Court of Appeal in June 2000, a 61-year-old lady was clamped when driving home from hospital following a chemotherapy session—she had had to park her car in order to be sick. It was an appalling case. The clamping company had been employed by the local authority. I am glad to say that the lady concerned was supported by the Automobile Association, and that when it was explained to the Court of Appeal that the sign warning that illegal parkers would be clamped had been obscured in this instance by another vehicle parked in front of it, it ruled that the lady concerned could not reasonably have been expected to see the sign and ordered repayment of the fine imposed on her.

There were, however, even more significant worries when, in February 2000, the Data Protection Registrar began making inquiries, following suggestions that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency had given motorists' names and addresses to conmen who were posing as prosecuting or police authorities. Several drivers received what appeared to be official police penalty notices, but they were fakes, posted by wheelclamping companies.

In that instance, it was reported in the national press that wheelclamping companies were persuading landowners to let them enforce parking restrictions on private land in return for a cut of the fines improperly collected. Instead of clamping cars, which would deter other drivers from parking, unscrupulous companies were photographing vehicles' registration plates and asking the DVLA to provide the registered keepers' details. Again, that is a matter of huge concern to hon. Members on both sides of the House.

As a result of the wide reporting of such scandalous cases, we all recognise that the House probably needs to act. We shall want assurances from the Government that the provisions that will criminalise those who employ unlicensed operatives will be well publicised. For example, perfectly respectable businesses and individuals may wish to employ wheelclampers to stop the persistent, unauthorised use of their parking spaces.

In another place, my noble Friend Lord Cope cited the example of a dentist who had to employ wheelclampers to deter those who improperly used his surgery car park when visiting nearby shops. He asked whether the dentist would need to be licensed by the new authority. We certainly understand that, under the Bill, the dentist would find himself liable to criminal penalties if he were to employ an unlicensed wheelclamper. However, what would happen if he applied the clamp to an illegally parked car, or instructed one of his employees to do so? We should be interested to hear, in the Minister's winding-up speech, whether in those further circumstances the dentist or a similar professional would be caught by the offence proposed in clause 6.

Despite the limited defence to such a charge provided in clause 6(2), it would be helpful if the Minister could say how the Government intend to publicise the Bill's provisions to law-abiding people, not only those who will need to register with the new authority, but those who will use their services and the individuals who may, even on a limited and irregular basis, carry out such clamping. We want to know how the provisions will apply to people who voluntarily carry out the activities that will be regulated under the Bill. Will they be obliged to be licensed by the new authority?

Under schedule 1, the Secretary of State will have the unfettered power to appoint the new authority's members and chairman. He can appoint as many members as he likes—the Bill contains no lower or upper limit; nor does it state who can be appointed. When challenged in another place, the Minister's noble Friend Lord Bassam let slip that the Home Office expected that the Association of Chief Police Officers would be invited to nominate a representative; but is that all? Will representatives of the Police Superintendents Association and the Police Federation also be appointed? Will a senior judge or senior magistrate be appointed?

The Opposition think that that provision could be made much more specific. A more specific provision than that exists for, for example, the local probation boards established under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. I am sure that the debates in Committee will provide an opportunity to explore that important matter in more detail. The Secretary of State should not have an

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

unfettered power to appoint as many or as few people as he likes to the new authority, as well as appointing its chairman, and the Bill should state where those people can come from.

Will the Minister comment on the decision to make the register of licensed persons open to public inspection? Given that the register will hold not only the names of licensed persons but their addresses, what safeguards does the Bill contain to prevent someone from obtaining the home address of a licensed doorman or wheelclamper against whom he or she may bear a grudge? If such a licensed person were self-employed and worked from his or her home address, even allowing that person to specify a business address would not suffice because, in those circumstances, the business and home address would be one and the same.

Even if only work addresses were open to public view, there could be security implications. We are all aware of cases in which, sadly, private revenge attacks involve the arson of business premises—for example, fuel is poured through the letterbox and set on fire. Therefore, we shall wish to explore the need for further safeguards in that context.

The Minister will be aware that concerns were raised about the register of political donations that was set up by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Section 69(4) of the Act specifically provides that home addresses shall not be made available to the public. Conservative Members think that those concerns apply equally powerfully to operatives engaged in what may be sensitive security work.

We are aware of a number of complaints from police officers and others in sensitive positions about the potential for criminals to obtain home addresses from the electoral register. On a recent visit with the Solicitor-General, I was made aware that even senior people in the Crown Prosecution Service have been put at risk by the activities of serious and organised crime. People in the service felt that they and their families were being intimidated and threatened. That is a huge concern to those of us who are interested in the proper implementation of law and order and the administration of justice. The Government failed to act when such concerns were raised during the passage of the Representation of the People Act 2000. In enacting this Bill, it is important that we do not create similar problems, so we shall want to deal with that issue in detail in Committee.

Some people have expressed the concern that the Bill is really an attempt to provide a statutory framework for the kind of private policing arrangements that the Government envisage in their so-called 10-year crime plan, so that they can attempt to minimise any fuss that that might create. I remind the Minister of the Home Secretary's comments to the Police Federation conference back in May 1995, when the right hon. Gentleman was in opposition. He said:

> "There must be restriction in any event on what the private security industry is allowed to do. It must not be allowed to replace our fine and long-established tradition of public service policing by constables, accountable to the community."

Mr. Clarke: The words of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary stand today as they did when we were in opposition. I have made it clear in several speeches, including one to the British Security Industry Association, that the office of constable sets a constable apart from the rest of British society. It is an important constitutional role. Nothing that we or any Government do should weaken or diminish the significance of that role. My right hon. Friend and I stick with the words that the hon. Gentleman quoted.

Mr. Hawkins: That is helpful, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Since the Government came to power, many speeches have been made that suggest that the Home Secretary and the Home Office in general are moving towards a blurring of the distinction between police officers and private forces.

Mr. Clarke: I do not want to develop this argument at length, but that is simply not the case. We are not seeking to blur the distinction; it is very important. We are in favour of developing partnerships between the police and the private security industry, and the Bill will assist in that.

Mr. Hawkins: I, too, do not want to prolong the debate on this issue unnecessarily, because we shall return to it. However, when Ian Blair, the former chief constable of Surrey, expressed his views about working closely with private uniformed forces, those views were warmly endorsed by the Home Secretary. The Minister knows that the police were greatly concerned about the way in which the distinction was being blurred. Perhaps the Home Secretary has learned better since then. However, we hear the Minister's comments and shall return to them.

One reason we are worried about the Government changing their mind is because of the Bill's timing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) highlighted the concern that the Government might not be seriously planning to enact the Bill before the general election. When the Home Secretary was in opposition, he attached huge importance and urgency to the measure, but he has introduced it late in this Parliament. In September 1996, as the then Opposition's spokesman on home affairs, he told the Police Superintendents Association conference:

> "I regard statutory regulation of the industry as a priority."

Indeed, the *Official Report* is littered with comments by the former Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), who repeatedly told the House throughout 1997 and 1998 that a Bill such as this would be introduced "as soon as possible." Given what the Labour party said before and after it came into government about the urgency of the measure, it is surprising that the Bill has been introduced at such a late stage.

Mr. Clarke: Honestly, after 18 years of Conservative government, during which time no action was taken on the matter, it is a bit steep to be chided for not acting quickly enough.

Mr. Hawkins: The Minister is remarkably sensitive. I have given him many examples of the Home Secretary referring to the matter as urgent. I was in the House several times when the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth said that the Government would act as soon as possible. Yet only at the last moment—if the rumours are to be believed—is legislation being introduced.

The distinguished parliamentary commentator Mr. Quentin Letts covered the proceedings in another place. The Minister rightly paid tribute to my noble Friend Lord Cope and his contribution towards improving the Bill. However, grave concerns were expressed about the Government's approach to the cost of licences. When they originally presented their White Paper, £22 was the best guess for the cost of the licence. By the time the Bill reached the other place, the cost had risen to between £35 and £40, which the Minister repeated today. We are worried that, once we create a quango or new authority with wide powers to increase charges, they will go up and up.

Lord Bassam spoke of his desire to ratchet up standards. We fear a ratcheting up of costs and prices. We shall continue to ensure that there is proper scrutiny. Although the Bill has merits, we hope that the Government will not try to rush it through. We want to ensure that before it becomes law, there is proper protection, analysis and scrutiny, which the Government have denied other Home Office legislation.

4.49 pm

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): I want first to declare an interest as a member of the GMB union, which has many members in the industry, and as the union official responsible for much of the industry in the early 1980s.

I welcome the Bill. As the Minister recognised, much has been written by my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) and others about the history of the security industry in this country. Originally, it employed many people from a military background and retired police officers. Much of the industry was born in wartime as a result of the need for additional security. During the 1960s and 1970s, the private sector business began to develop, servicing companies that wanted to improve their internal security.

There are a great many reputable companies with which I have had contact over many years. Throughout that time, they have endeavoured to raise the credibility of the industry, to have honest contracts, to provide honest security, to employ honest people, and to do a good job for the people whom they serve. However, they have had difficulties in some sectors. Differentiation of services by reputable companies means that some sectors regulate themselves. I know that the cash-in-transit sector is included in the Bill, but the market has good control over much, although not all, of that sector, which raises standards. That is due to the endeavours of the traditional, larger companies in the industry.

At the other end of the industry—the "man guarding" end—it has been an uphill task for those employers and employees who want to raise standards. There are two reasons for that. The first is the lack of wage regulation. It was difficult for a reputable company such as Securicor, Group 4 or Chubb to try to raise standards if a cowboy company said that instead of wanting £5 an hour as a contract price, it was prepared to do the job for £1.20 an hour. The consequences were that their staff were employed at 50p an hour—that is an accurate figure, as I am sure hon. Members will recognise—when the basic wage paid by a local authority was £1.75 or £1.80 an hour. That differential meant that reputable companies were continually being undercut.

The second reason, which is the corollary of the first, is that companies were employing people so cheaply that their margins were too tight to enable even the reputable ones among them to cover the on-costs of training or of vetting to keep out criminal infiltrators. Some of the companies would use the same uniform for two people on different shifts. At that time, the early 1980s, the reputable companies, the trade unions and the British Security Industry Association decided that something should be done.

We now know that the wage problem has been at least partially resolved by the minimum wage legislation, which I welcome. The biggest impact that the legislation had on male employment was in the security industry, where it has done a great deal to raise wage levels and allow companies to compete on a fairer platform. However, there is still a problem to be solved, and I welcome the Bill because it attempts to lay down rules within which people will have to operate if they want to provide private security. It will hit the cowboy companies, some of whose practices are atrocious. Apart from making employees share uniforms, they intimidate customers into taking their security services to the exclusion of those offered by other companies. They deliberately employ known criminals to case the joint so that others can come in later and make merry. Health and safety considerations are unknown to such companies.

When I was a union official, a shop steward came to me and said, "I really have to complain about this." I told him that I had heard all the complaints before. He told me, "We are trying to provide a decent service, but I've just been along to a site that we cover from Monday to Friday. When I left at 4 o'clock on Friday afternoon, I handed over the keys to a certain face, but when I came back at 6 o'clock on Monday morning, the same guy was still there and asked me 'Can I go home now, mister?' I told him he could." We checked it out and found that a contract security company covered the site at the weekend and that one person had been on duty from Friday afternoon right through to Monday morning.

Incidentally, I do not think that the individual concerned would have been entitled to British citizenship. Some of the companies employing such people exploited the corruption in our immigration rules, and although I would not want to deny anyone employment, people should go through the proper procedures to enable themselves to be employed. That case convinced me that something had to be done about the industry.

The Government are right to regulate. There is no argument to be made that we are intervening unnecessarily in the private sector. I am no believer in unnecessary intervention and regulation: if the market can deal with a situation, it should be left to do so, but if it cannot deal with a situation—I do not think that it can in this case—there is a need for state intervention. Winston Churchill said words to that effect in 1912 and I do not see why I should disagree with them today.

The Government are also right to set up the Security Industry Authority. Again, I am not one to argue in favour of having more quangos if another way of addressing an issue can be found, but we need a body that is at arm's length from the Government. Here, I add my voice to a plea that has already been made to the Minister by constituents and union members to whom I am close. When appointing people to that body, please will he appoint someone who is credible, has experience,

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is convincing, and will pull the industry forward? There is a fear that others will dance circles around someone who is not so qualified.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I give my hon. Friend the assurance he seeks. I tried to emphasise that exceptionally important point in my speech and he is right to raise it again, as are others. Independence and integrity are critical to the whole system.

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I shall be happy to give way to him at any time if he wants to comment in a similar vein. His response will be warmly welcomed by those concerned.

The Government are right to concentrate on individual licences, but I am not sure about the cost. We are supposed to be encouraging welfare to work, to use the current phrase, but someone who wants to get off the dole and into a job will regard £40 as a high price to pay for a passport to that desirable end. Can the Minister be a little more innovative: for example, might it be possible to set up a special scheme or training programme—perhaps paid for by the levy—to help those who are out of work, or might the companies be persuaded to make a contribution?

It is important that we reach a clear understanding about training, especially essential training. We are not talking about a four-year apprenticeship, but there is a need to be specific about the sort of training that is required. In addition, skills will have to be updated as conditions in the industry change and new technology is introduced. We all look forward to hearing the Minister's comments in that respect.

The Government must think again about the regulation of companies. I understand the arguments that the key issue is ensuring that the individuals who actually provide the service are properly vetted and trained and that the market mechanism enables clients to decide which company can provide the best and most credible service. However, I think that the industry needs a bit of a fillip, which could be provided by ensuring that companies have to register. If there is a case for voluntary registration, why not go the whole way and have mandatory registration? That is the way to ensure that the high standards to which the Minister and others have referred are adhered to.

If we do not have mandatory registration, criminals may set up a security company, insist that their employees go through a vetting process, and then use that information to conduct criminal activity. I may be wrong, but I do not think that that would be caught by the Bill. It would be better to put extra responsibilities on the directors. If they work as security officers, they are covered by the Bill, but, worryingly, if they are backseat directors running a criminal activity, they are not. I wonder how the police view the matter; I think that they would have reservations about that aspect of the Bill.

We have regulation in the banking industry because the market did not take care of it. Too many people had too much inside information to be able to give objective financial advice, so it was decided that they should state their interests before giving financial advice. Essentially, that is what the regulatory authorities in the finance industry are about. Financial institutions are asked to register so that people know where they are coming from and are aware of their asset bases. There is a parallel in the security industry as it, too, must combat crime. There is a strong argument that security companies should have to demonstrate their credentials and register them with the authority. That would not be a major incumbency on those companies—from the point of view of minimising regulation, one cannot argue that it would be an additional burden. It would be a fairly small administrative task which companies should be well able to undertake, considering that they have to regulate all their contracts with clients and make sure that everyone is in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. That is a complicated business, but registering the basics would be different.

Others have argued that there is a case for registering in-house security staff. I recognise the argument in favour of that, but, to be honest, I also recognise the argument that it should be left alone as the market can take care of it. People who employ staff directly can make decisions on their quality, how they should be vetted and so on. The jury is out on that one, and I would like to see how things develop before insisting on such registration. However, the question of registering companies needs a rethink, and the Minister may have an opportunity to do that in Committee.

As I said, I very much welcome the Bill, which is long overdue. It addresses the genuine fears of people in all walks of life who are connected with the security industry, including the police, the companies themselves—whatever their size or shape—and, perhaps most importantly, those who work in the industry. Like other Members, I am concerned about the late introduction of the Bill and I am worried that it may not reach the statute book before the next Parliament. If it does not, I hope that it will be reintroduced. After 20 years or more of debate, there is more unity on the issue than there has ever been. I urge the House to agree to the Second Reading today and, if necessary, agree to that again in the next Parliament.

5.3 pm

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Unlike the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), I do not have any interests to declare. Touch wood, I have not been wheelclamped yet and have not been bounced out of a nightclub. The Minister will be interested to hear that. In Committee, I usually divulge aspects of my life that engage him, and about which Conservative Members make notes for their leaflets.

Mr. Bercow: Give us the details.

Jackie Ballard: I said that I had not been bounced out of a nightclub. I am not going down that track.

My party does not support unnecessary and over-bureaucratic regulation, but we welcome the Bill, which will regulate an important sector of private industry that directly affects the safety and security of the public. Lord Thomas of Gresford led for us in the other place and set out our generally supportive position on the Bill. However, he also raised several issues of concern, some of which the Government responded to in the other place, and others which we shall seek to address in Committee.

As other Members have said, there is a clear need to regulate the private security industry, which is a large, important sector that affects the public, often in their daily lives.

It will come as a surprise to many people that the industry is not already regulated, and as a surprise to others that it has taken so long to regulate it. According to the Library briefing, there have been 17 private Members' Bills on the subject in the past 20 years, so the Opposition cannot claim that they were exactly hyperactive in ensuring that legislation was enacted during their 18 years in government.

As the Minister said, some 350,000 people are employed in the industry, but the total number is not precisely known. That in itself is an argument for regulation. Many of the functions performed by the industry straddle the boundary between the private and the public sectors, so it is important that it is subject to regulation not only to ensure high standards, but that the limits of the powers of private security operators are clearly defined. The public need to have confidence in the system, and it is important that the industry and the people who work for it and with the public are subject to checks and balances.

It has been widely reported, including in Home Office research studies, and as we have heard from other hon. Members, that there has been a relatively high level of criminality in certain sectors of the industry, particularly among door supervisors, or bouncers. That has been reduced considerably in recent years with the introduction of door safe schemes and proper training and supervision, which many local authorities have pioneered. However, as so often happens, it takes only a few rotten apples to give an entire sector a bad name. No doubt that is why so many companies involved in the business have welcomed regulation.

In common with other hon. Members, I have had letters from companies that operate internationally, pointing out that the UK is one of the few countries in which they operate where there is no licensing system, and the only country in the EU other than Greece where the industry is still largely unregulated.

Mr. Bercow: It was estimated in 1996 that approximately 2,600 crimes were being committed each year by people hiding behind the disguise of a security officer's uniform. The hon. Lady said that the position had improved in recent years. Has she any idea of what the figures were for last year?

Jackie Ballard: No, but I am sure that with his encyclopaedic brain, the hon. Gentleman does. I note that in 1996, his party was in government, and I am surprised that it did not do anything to address the number of crimes attributed to the industry.

The Select Committee on Home Affairs 1995 report stated that standards, particularly for training, in much of the sector were unsatisfactory and below the standard that the public needed and had a right to expect. That report was published during the time that the hon. Gentleman's party was in power. The Select Committee's comments applied particularly to the manned guarding sector, and the same sentiments are expressed by a large part of the industry. The Bill is therefore widely welcomed.

The debate so far has concentrated on the personnel employed in the guarding sector. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North gave an example of the exploitation of an employee. I recently spent a day with an inspector of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in my constituency. We were called to a site where a member of the public had reported that a dog was employed, so to speak, as a security guard. The person who made the report was concerned that no one had been seen coming to feed the dog. It was on a long chain, and no suitable shelter had been provided for it. I mention that in passing; the House may wish to take up the matter at a future date.

I come to specific issues in the Bill. We welcome the setting up of the Security Industry Authority, although that entails the creation of another quango. It comes rather rich for the Conservative Opposition to criticise the Government for creating even more quangos, but I can safely criticise them. Both the other parties have created many quangos, but I can claim that my party has not, particularly in the past 90 years. When we are given the chance in a few weeks time, we will not do so either.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): Does the hon. Lady concede that virtue comes easy to those with least attractions?

Jackie Ballard: I think that I should be upset about that intervention. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to see me later.

We welcome the establishment of a body that is responsible for regulating the industry through licensing, inspection and setting or approving standards, and for overseeing implementation of the Bill and making representations to the Secretary of State with regard to further legislation. However, we want further to examine the body's composition in Committee, because as the Bill stands, its membership is selected entirely at the discretion of the Home Secretary. There is an argument for its composition to be specified in legislation, in the same way as that of many other quangos. The Minister said that there would be a place on the authority for representatives of the industry. I understand also that the Government gave assurances in the other place that they would consult the industry on other appointments. However, we would like further clarification, so perhaps the Minister can provide that today.

We welcome the introduction of mandatory licensing for people who are involved in the private security industry. That provision lies at the heart of the Bill's intentions, as it seeks to ensure that certain minimum standards are met. We also welcome the Government's clarification in the other place about who is subject to licensing and who is not.

However, if the Bill is to ensure that the whole industry is subject to the same standards, I must reiterate the question that my noble Friend Lord Thomas asked in the other place: why are licences not required for in-house operatives? In reply to my intervention on the matter, the Minister said that the 350,000 figure included in-house operatives. The Government's White Paper said that members of the public should be encouraged to ask to see an individual's licence. How will the public know that they should not do that if the individual in question is an in-house operative? Such a discrepancy will lead to confusion. The White Paper also said that regulation would apply to the whole of the manned guarding sector and that the exclusion of in-house security personnel from

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the scope of licensing would create an unacceptable loophole and reduce confidence in the system. Notwithstanding the Minister's remarks, we will pursue that issue in Committee.

We also seek clarification on the Secretary of State's power to exempt particular individuals from the licensing requirement. In what circumstances is that power likely to be employed and what criteria will be used? We recognise the need for the authority to set licensing criteria, but there is no indication of what those criteria should be, beyond the requirement that the individual concerned must be

"a fit and proper person"

to be engaged in licensable conduct. The definition of that requirement and the specific criteria that stem from it are for the authority to decide. My noble Friend Lord Thomas said that the term "fit and proper" was a "chestnut of a definition". Case law suggests that considerable discretion is used in interpreting the term. According to Lord Thomas, it makes many barristers "happy chappies". Of course, if he wanted to be politically correct, he would have said "happy chappesses".

We welcome the Government's amendment to the appeals provisions, especially with regard to licences. We also welcome the approved contractors scheme, which is an important way of ensuring high standards throughout the industry. However, I repeat the question that we asked in the other place: why is the scheme voluntary and not mandatory? That question is especially important if the Government are seeking to ensure high standards across the industry. We acknowledge their argument that there is provision for the Secretary of State to make the scheme mandatory if the conditions call for that to happen. We also accept that they do not want to overburden the authority or the industry in the early stages of regulation. However, it has been argued that there is a need for a more robust scheme, because that is the best way of ensuring effective regulation of the industry. That argument was well expressed by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North.

We recognise that the powers of inspection and entry are a necessary measure of enforcement. However, I am sure that the Minister will not be surprised to learn that we will be concerned to ensure that those powers are not disproportionate and that individuals' privacy is properly respected, in the spirit as well as the letter of the Human Rights Act 1998. We welcome the amendments made by the Government in the other place to refine the authority's powers of inspection and entry. The amendments were tabled after my noble Friend Lord Thomas expressed concerns about the matter. We will reconsider the provisions, however, to satisfy ourselves that they do not unnecessarily impinge on civil liberties. In particular, we would like to ensure effective scrutiny of the guidelines adopted by the authority with regard to the powers.

Two other issues have caused us some concern. First, I understand that on Report in the other place, the Government tabled amendments that sought to exempt from the licensing requirements accountancy firms that are engaged in activities that are included within the scope of the Bill. I am told that the amendments were tabled because of representations made by the accounting community, but I know that some sectors of the security industry have expressed anxiety that such measures will lead to an uneven playing field between different types of consultancies that offer essentially identical services. Will the exemption give investigative services departments within accountancy firms an unfair competitive advantage over private sector investigation agencies?

Secondly, other hon. Members have mentioned the need to keep an effective check on the operations of the industry, as well as to maintain standards. We are concerned to ensure that the security industry does not assume a more extensive public role. In other words, we should not allow licensed private vigilantes.

The Minister began the debate by setting the Bill in the context of the Government's approach to crime and disorder. In the introduction to the White Paper, the Home Secretary stated that

"there will be the opportunity for the private security industry to play a wider role in securing community safety."

He went on to state:

"It has also been suggested recently that the private security industry might be able to assist the police by providing a form of complementary patrol service. The Government is considering the issue and welcomes constructive debate in this area.

In response to an intervention by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), the Minister said that the Government were convinced of the importance of the office of constable and would do nothing to diminish it, but he said nothing about limiting or extending the tasks to be carried out exclusively or primarily by people holding that office. We are concerned about that. We believe that the patrol of private property by a private company is one thing, but that private patrolling of public property is quite another.

Although we broadly welcome the Bill and believe that it deserves a Second Reading, I have flagged up a number of issues that we will want to consider very closely. We will seek to make improvements with a view to ensuring that the industry as a whole is required to meet minimum standards, not only some parts of it. We want the Bill to capitalise more fully on the White Paper, and we also see the need for safeguards in respect of the SIA's powers and any unnecessary extension of the Bill's provisions on inspection and entry of premises. We look forward to seeing improvements to the Bill in the weeks ahead and hope that it will be enacted before Parliament dissolves.

5.17 pm

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I welcome the Bill wholeheartedly. It is an important measure that builds on the Government's policies for security and law and order. The issues that it addresses are of particular importance to our seaside and coastal towns, one of which I represent. The provisions are not narrow, tidying-up measures for places such as Blackpool, as the Bill raises significant public order issues that relate to how seaside and coastal towns should promote a culture of quality and reliability, and an antipathy to the yob culture that too often disfigures them. They relate also to how we should prevent actions that will upset residents and tourists in such towns and damage their tourist image.

My interest in those issues derives not only from a general interest in matters that affect seaside towns—I am president of the British Resorts Association and convenor of a Back-Bench group of MPs who represent seaside and coastal towns—but from the effects on my constituents of

many of the issues raised in the Bill, especially in relation to local private security and wheelclamping. In the light of public concern about no-go areas in seaside towns, the Bill provides an important balance and reassurance to people who are concerned that proposed modernisation of the licensing laws—and perhaps, dare I say it, of the casino laws—will have a negative impact on the character of their towns. The reassurance and regulation that the Bill offers are therefore important.

The Bill is about securing comfortable public space and balancing rights. I wrote to the Home Secretary on 19 July and said that the activities of some of the private security and clamping businesses that attracted increasing numbers of local complaints were also beginning to have a negative impact on tourism, which is crucial to the economy of many seaside and coastal towns. Small and medium-sized businesses, which are central to generating prosperity in the leisure and tourism industry, are anxious for the Government's proposals on regulation, as outlined in White Paper, to be implemented as soon as possible.

I was therefore delighted when the White Paper's proposals appeared in the Queen's Speech and later in the Bill. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister and the Home Office team for fighting the cause vigorously with Government business managers and giving us the opportunity to consider the measure today.

I want to concentrate on wheelclamping and security, which the Bill regulates. Wheelclamping has long been a matter of dispute. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who have eloquently and persistently spoken about the issue. The Library research paper reminded us that it has featured in private Members' Bills since 1969. It is therefore important to consider it properly, now that it has the advantage of inclusion in a Government Bill.

It is perhaps instructive to quote the Automobile Association on cowboy clamping. It states:

"One unsavoury practice of the cowboy clamper is that he will often lie in wait and target his victims—seeking out the elderly, disabled, young mothers with children and people who will pay up with little fuss."

That is amply corroborated by examples from my constituency. The AA also states:

"Cowboy clampers can rarely be traced as they mostly use mobile telephones and work from Post Office box addresses—people lucky enough to track down a clamper, who has acted illegally, can sometimes pursue them through the small claims court. However, they rarely respond to letters and telephone calls."

After I sounded off about wheelclamping in the local paper, I received a visit at one of my advice centres from a large and burly representative of such a company. I am still here.

I pay tribute to all those in my constituency who have raised the issue, especially Mr. Alan Smith, trading standards officer for Blackpool borough council. I also pay tribute to the local police, who were sympathetic if often frustrated that current law did not allow them to intervene more vigorously, to my local paper, *The Gazette*, which has run an effective campaign through detailing some of the activities of wheelclampers, and to my local hotelier group and others who have approached me on the subject.

It is testimony to the continuing, diverse attractions of Blackpool that other hon. Members throughout the country gave me examples of the effects of rogue wheelclampers on their constituents when they visited Blackpool. From memory, I can name my hon. Friends the Members for Wigan (Mr. Turner) and for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna), and the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis).

Perhaps the best example of rogue wheelclamping inflation that I have come across was described in a letter that I received in the first week of January from Mr. and Mrs. Salmon from Guisborough in Yorkshire. They had the misfortune to attend the new year's eve ball at Blackpool tower. I am sure that it was a great and elegant occasion, but when they returned to where they had parked their car—they believed that it was a perfectly proper parking place—it had been towed away by a private firm called Mac Security. In view of the large amounts of money that the gentlemen subsequently pocketed, I am tempted to call it "Big Mac".

Mr. and Mrs. Salmon were given a mobile telephone number to ring, and told that the car would not be released until after 9 am on new year's day. Their letter states:

"We were told to ring back in the morning and to have two hundred and fifty pounds in cash for the release fee . . . This resulted in us having to wait outside in the cold till 3 am until we were able to get a taxi (at a cost of twenty pounds) . . . We then had to pay a further twenty pounds for a taxi to return to Blackpool later that morning with two hundred and fifty pounds cash to get our car back."

I could cite several other examples.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) referred to the practice of targeting women. One of my constituents who was eight-and-a-half months pregnant was left in a Blackpool car park after finding that her car had disappeared. She had to pay £205. A deaf and dumb holidaymaker was stranded when his car was towed away. In nine months, police in Blackpool received approximately 131 complaints about clamping. The aforementioned gentleman who visited my surgery finished off his nine months by extracting from an elderly couple from Lytham in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) a sum equivalent to their weekly pension after a late-night confrontation with them.

What do people receive for the money? In the last case that I cited, the people received a squiggly receipt for £250 in cash, written on a torn-out sheet from a plain invoice book. It contained no phone number or details of a registered company. There was no form of redress whatsoever.

The Bill therefore tackles significant abuses, and I am delighted that our Government have picked up the torch. I was surprised that an element of the old Adam remained in some Opposition Members. That was shown by the amendments that Lord Cope tabled in another place to restrict the ability to license wheelclampers. Such a restriction would not have conveyed the right message. Although the matter must be kept under review, I hope that the Government will resist similar amendments.

When, God willing, the Bill receives Royal Assent, it is important that the police use their initiative to pursue and control clampers in the period before the Bill is fully effected. I speak for several hon. Members who have been frustrated by the slow progress of police and local authorities in implementing anti-social behaviour orders. I hope that those problems do not occur when the Bill is enacted.

I want to consider the second aspect that especially interests me and on which the Bill provides particular relief. Licensing security companies is a key issue in

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Blackpool. We may not be able to compete with the figures that my hon. Friend the Minister provided for Manchester or his triumphant tour through Norwich, but it is not unusual for 30,000, 40,000 or 50,000 mainly young people to be in the pubs and clubs of Blackpool town centre between midnight and 2 am on a Friday or Saturday. As most people know, Blackpool attracts between 6 million and 8 million visitors a year, and there are no fewer than 58 clubs in the town centre. Clearly, in those circumstances, regulation of the behaviour of security staff—bouncers, as they are colloquially known—is of key importance, in terms not only of setting the tone for whether people have a good night out, but of preserving public security and public order.

I pay tribute to the fact that much of the self-regulation in many clubs in my constituency and elsewhere has been proactive and responsible. However, as the Minister and the hon. Member for Surrey Heath made clear, there have, sadly, been too many cases in which it has not. In my constituency, I have been involved in issues that have convinced me of the need for regulation. I was involved in a campaign to get to the bottom of a particular case before I became a Member of Parliament, while I was a prospective parliamentary candidate. The case involved a young man of 17 who died after taking an overdose of ecstasy, having been admitted to a club in a condition that any reputable or sensible bouncer would never have permitted.

On another occasion, I visited Wakefield prison, to talk to one of my constituents who was serving a sentence for murder. I do not want to comment on the specifics of that case, as it is still before the Criminal Cases Review Commission, but my conversations with him—along with other background information—revealed the hidden twilight world of drug dealing in which, all too often, relations between unlicensed bouncers played a significant part. In my constituency last year, there was also very sad case involving a young man—he was a doorman—who was savagely beaten almost to death outside one of our clubs in circumstances that underline the need for proper licensing of doormen.

We need the controls that the Security Industry Authority will provide. It is sensible that there is to be a right of appeal locally, but I want to flag up a concern, which has been referred to already, about clause 4(1). There may be rightful concerns about the weaknesses involved in excluding in-house staff who are not bouncers from the remit of the Bill. In the other place, my noble Friend Lord Bassam, in outlining the reasons for that decision, said:

"The Bill proposes that individuals in the manned guarding sector should be licensed if they are providing services under contract to a client. We do not propose to require them to have licences if they are employed in-house by companies. These companies will already have satisfied themselves about their employees, and the Government do not wish to foist onto them an additional layer of checking where it is not necessary."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 18 December 2000; Vol. 620, c. 576.]

I applaud that spirit. Speaking as a Member of Parliament with a large number of small and medium-sized businesses in his constituency, I would not want those businesses to be overburdened with regulation.

It is right that we should be concerned about bouncers and that the Government have addressed that issue in the Bill, but there are other security guards, especially in seaside and coastal towns, about whom we should also be concerned. For example, there are security guards in amusement arcades, and in amusement areas where there might be private rides, most of which will be accessible by children not necessarily accompanied by an adult.

In those circumstances, I hope that the Government will take full and considered account, in the review procedure that they have proposed for the operation of the legislation, of the need to protect children from any rogue elements among such security guards. I would like an assurance that any procedures to check whether those guards are registered on the sex offenders' register, or are involved in any other child protection issues, will be properly taken on board if, as the Bill proposes, they are not to be separately licensed and regulated.

I welcome the Bill overall. It contains important provisions that will benefit my constituency specifically, and seaside and coastal towns in general. Those towns are doing a great deal to regenerate themselves with single regeneration budget money, town centre partnerships and community building. In a town such as Blackpool, in which history and geography have combined to pepper residents cheek by jowl in unprecedented numbers, it is particularly important that sensitive issues such as wheelclamping and security arrangements at places of leisure and tourism are properly regulated and give a sense of confidence.

It is not only the quality of life inside people's homes that is important in those towns, but the quality of life on the street and in other public places as people go about enjoying the facilities that towns have to offer. That is why the Bill will make such a significant and important contribution to the quality of life in seaside and coastal towns, and why I give it my strongest support.

5.36 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I agree with the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) about the importance of seaside towns; he made that case extremely well. I also agreed with what he said about wheelclampers and with what the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) said about criminals employed in the security industry. He made the case for licensing in that area, and he was right.

I was once a director of the private security firm Group 4, but I have not been so since 1993 and I have no other connections with the private security industry.

This has been a long journey. In my view, the significant turning point came on 4 July 1973 when the Security Industry Licensing Bill was introduced in the House. I should make it clear that it was my Bill. It was one of the 16 or 17 Bills that have been introduced since 1969 on the subject. I said at that time:

"My Bill is not a call for licensing for its own sake. It is a recognition that there are important issues at stake, issues involving public policy on crime and individual liberty and privacy. This industry is not one that can go entirely unregulated. The Bill would establish a licensing board on the lines of the Gaming Board. It would aim to ensure minimum standards throughout the industry and to eliminate the criminal element within the industry."—[*Official Report*, 4 July 1973; Vol. 859, c. 539.]

Many of those aims are echoed in the present Bill.

My Bill had the support of four formidable Conservative politicians of the time: Bill Deedes, Edward Gardner, David Walder and Michael McNair-Wilson.

Such was the force of our argument that the Bill passed without dissent, and the House moved on to an emergency debate on the railways—nothing changes much in the House. The only trouble was that it was a ten-minute Bill, and it has taken almost 30 years for the Home Office to catch up with the case that I was making.

It would be churlish of me, therefore, not to welcome the Bill that has now been introduced, and I do so gladly. I have, incidentally, a range of other measures that the Government might like to adopt, such as the privatisation of the Post Office; the ending of the £5 billion a year pensions tax; and the cancellation of the absurd rules on annuities. Perhaps when the Minister of State continues his upward climb in the Government he will take that into account.

I am afraid, however, that at this stage I can give the Bill only two cheers, because under the terms of the guillotine—which we call the programme motion and which we shall debate next—it stands a fair chance of going exactly the same way as my ten-minute Bill did in 1973. Under the guillotine, proceedings in the House are not planned to end until 1 May. A general election on 3 May would, therefore, kill the Bill stone dead. There would be no Act of Parliament, and no licensing system.

I should be happy to receive an assurance from the Minister of State that a 3 May election is the very last thing that he or the Government want. I know that he is on the inside track to No. 10, so if he is likely to give me that assurance, I of course give way.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance because I do not know what is in the mind of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. However, if an election were called for 3 May, is it the right hon. Gentleman's view that it would be helpful for the official Opposition to do what they can to secure the passage of the Bill during this Parliament?

Sir Norman Fowler: That is probably the most significant intervention that I have heard from the Government side about a 3 May election. I have not previously heard it put to the Opposition that we should be in the business of co-operating should a 3 May election be called. Those who heard the Minister's intervention may conclude that a 3 May election is becoming more likely, not less, but I leave it to the commentators to think about that.

The Bill is being debated on Second Reading, and although I am not in charge of Opposition affairs I think that it is a bit much to say to us that it should simply be ticked through. However, I listened to what the Minister said. I went on a deliberate fishing expedition, but I did not expect to land such a big catch.

Incidentally, I happen to take the old-fashioned view that Governments are elected to govern. Only when they have got through a crisis should they think about elections, but I am not at all sure that that is entirely their current view. Indeed, the Minister made that clear. Therefore, in such circumstances, my speech is directed as much to my own Front Benchers as it is to the Government, so that they will pick up the Bill after the election.

The case in principle for licensing private security remains the same as that outlined by me and others such as the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George). I pay tribute to what he has done over the years in consistently making the case on licensing, which we have put to Governments of both parties, and it is good to see the west midlands mafia working together in such a way.

I was glad to hear the Minister talk about this thriving and successful industry. I welcome the words, but I must observe that they were not the ones that Labour Members used in opposition. The language of the Labour party has changed radically, but I welcome that conversion.

In our crime debates, we tend to concentrate on detection. Obviously, detection rates are vital, but so too, self-evidently, is prevention. The first orders issued to the Metropolitan police said:

> "It should be understood at the outset that the principal object to be attained is the prevention of crime. To this great end every effort of the police is to be directed."

As the years have passed, all European police services have been forced to give more priority to detecting crime, preserving public order and handling emergencies. Correspondingly, less police work has been devoted to preventing crime. One example makes the point.

In the late 1950s and the 1960s, the British police were still able to provide police escort services for cash in transit, but by the 1960s the increase in criminal attacks on cash being transported produced a demand for police protection that forces were unable to meet. The result in the 1960s and 1970s and since was the development of cash-in-transit services by private companies.

Such companies already offered guard services to protect offices and factories—the traditional role referred to by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North—but protecting cash in transit brought the private security industry face to face with the public, often for the first time. Not everybody liked what they saw.

The public certainly wanted crime to be prevented. They wanted burglars to be prevented from burgling and robbers to be prevented from robbing and they accepted, I believe, that the private security industry was crucial in that, but they also wanted the confidence that companies and the people they employed were providing such services properly. Furthermore, they needed to have confidence in the integrity and honesty of those companies and employees.

Of course, there is a civil liberties issue here. If we put a person in a uniform, put him in an armoured van and perhaps give him a stave to defend himself, to some extent we give him an authority that the ordinary citizen does not possess. Again, the public need to be reassured that that power, which is implicitly given to such people, will not be abused.

An enormous concern has been that people with criminal records have been employed in the industry. Back in 1973, I gave the example of a Manchester company run by a man who admitted that he had twice been convicted of grievous bodily harm and who employed four or five staff with criminal records, including one who had served sentences of three and five years for burglary and receiving. Over the years, there have been countless examples of that.

It is extraordinarily ironic that we have allowed that position to continue year after year. Given the intense struggle to establish an organised police force in this country, and given the special position that private

[Sir Norman Fowler]

security companies hold in respect of the public, it is amazing that we have enabled anyone who wants to do so to set up such a company.

The case for licensing has been pressed for many years and I pay tribute to Jorgen Philip Sorensen, head of Group 4, who has worked so hard since the 1960s to achieve licensing. Goodness knows, there are many examples from other European countries to show the way. Most European Union countries have a licensing system. Belgium, for example, issues licences to security companies, which are subject to renewal after two years. Each has to provide a list of shareholders to prevent criminals from controlling security companies while staff are officially checked as being free from criminal conviction. Such systems in Europe have stood for many years as a sensible way forward.

I welcome most of the provisions. We have a private security industry that is probably bigger than the organised police force, so it is sensible to establish the Security Industry Authority, which will administer a compulsory licensing scheme for private security guards, door supervisors and the rest.

Mr. Clarke: In no sense am I making a partisan point and I gladly pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's efforts over his years in the House, but, given the powerful points that he has made, why did not the Conservative Government of which he was a member legislate on the subject?

Sir Norman Fowler: It is nice of the Minister to say that I was a member of the Government, but I have not been a member of any Government since the 1980s. I was not a member of the previous Government; I was chairman of the Conservative party, outside the Government and a simple Back Bencher. However, it is common knowledge that I have pressed Ministers of both parties to get down to it and introduce a licensing system.

The problem with the licensing system that is being introduced is not what is included, but what is excluded. I raised the issue of the regulation of alarm installers with the Minister and I heard what he said. Such regulation was an aim of my ten-minute Bill and I used the example of an alarm company employed by a firm to fit a window alarm. The alarm was so useless that when the very thing happened that it was supposed to guard against and a window was broken, it was not activated. Later tests showed that a whole troop of burglars could have processed through the window without the alarm system being activated or disturbed in any way whatsoever.

The installation of alarms is a question not only of quality, but of reassuring the public. Furthermore, it is important not only that the quality of the alarm and of the installation are considered, but that the householder is given reassurance that the installer, who, by definition, has to have access to the house, is a man of some integrity.

Burglar alarms no longer constitute an exceptional defence: we need only visit towns and cities to realise that. Years ago, in the 1980s—when I was a Minister—I toured a modest private estate in Liverpool. Every house had a burglar alarm.

I was reassured by what the Minister said. I gather that the Bill takes a first step, and that it will be possible to add to its provisions if problems arise. On that basis too, it deserves support. The "step by step" approach is surely sensible, from everyone's point of view. I have one important concern, however, which may sound strange coming from one who used to be on the board of a major private security company.

I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said towards the end of his speech. I feel that we should be concerned about the limits of private security. We have seen a massive extension of private security operations over the past 30 or 40 years: we now see private security companies dealing not just with cash in transit, but with prisoners in transit. The Minister challenged me about opposition and government. I recall that, in opposition, the Labour party said that the legislation governing the system of prisoners in transit would be repealed by an incoming Labour Government. I see no sign of that, but I welcome the conversion.

What I do not support is the use of private security to patrol our streets. That, I think, is where a line should be drawn. Such a use of private security would take us back to square one: after all, it was the breakdown of private patrols that led to the establishment of an organised police service in the first place. It is crucial to the continuance of good police public relations for the job to be done by trained police officers—trained men and women to whom the public can turn for help, and whom they can trust.

Long ago, when traffic wardens were first introduced, it was optimistically said that they were there to help the motorist and to offer friendly guidance. I am not sure that many members of the public, especially motorists, see traffic wardens in that light today. Local authority parking attendants in particular do not come top of their list of the most helpful public servants whom they encounter. If anyone wants to verify that, I suggest that they drive around the streets of Westminster and try to park.

We should bear it in mind that in terms of relations between police and public, Britain is probably better than any other European country. That is not to say that relations cannot be improved. Some of the defects were highlighted in the Macpherson report. The police have to win the respect of ethnic minorities, just as the original police force had to win the respect of the public. I believe, however, that much of the rapport between police and public results from the fact that we have a largely unarmed police force patrolling the streets. That force is visible and approachable.

I think that it would be fatal for those good relations if we gave such a role to private security—a move at which some have hinted. It is a highly skilled job that needs not just initial training but constant training throughout life, and is basic to the continuance of good relations in this country. I hope that, as well as performing a licensing role, the new authority will keep under review what private security should and should not do. That is surely a legitimate interest for it to have.

While I welcome the Bill, I think it necessary to keep in mind the limits of private security as well as seeking a degree of regulation for its activity. I obviously regret the fact that the Bill has come so late that the prospect of its enactment is remote, but I hope it will be noted that there is now a consensus in the House in favour of proceeding

along the lines proposed. It has taken 30 years for us to reach this point; it would be a tragedy were we to let the opportunity slip.

5.55 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his kind remarks, and congratulate him and his Department on the Bill. It is a credit to the Government that they have found time for it. As has been said, the last Conservative Government presented a Green Paper but failed to introduce any legislation to follow it up, despite pressure from Members of Parliament, motoring organisations such as the Royal Automobile Club and the Automobile Association and, incidentally, the media.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) welcomed the Bill, but was a little less forthcoming about whether he supported any idea of encouraging Front Benchers to co-operate with the Government if a general election were called. Perhaps he might use his influence behind the scenes if necessary.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady is well aware that I am but a humble foot soldier. It is not for me to seek to intervene in these matters, which, of course, fall under the aegis of my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran) and others. Will she in passing, however, be as gracious as she ordinarily is and acknowledge that her hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) himself lamented the fact that the Government had been so dilatory in introducing the measure?

Ms Winterton: I would not say that the Government were dilatory. I have campaigned for legislation such as this for a number of years, and I know that it has been important to get it right. There has been further consultation, in addition to that connected with the Green Paper. I also know that the Department has had to deal with other legislation. Let me add that after four years we have legislation, whereas after 18 years of Tory government we had none.

It will come as no surprise to Members that I intend to talk about wheelclamping. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces who is not present: obviously, he has ministerial duties to perform. Under the last Government, when Labour was in opposition, he campaigned vigorously for the outlawing of cowboy wheelclampers, and he was very helpful to me when I took up the issue. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), who not only campaigned for such action in the last Parliament but ensured that it remained high on his agenda when he became a Home Office Minister. He was absolutely right to do so.

The problem of cowboy wheelclampers may be localised, as we have heard today, but when it occurs it causes incredible misery and distress. We all know—motoring organisations, among others, would confirm this—that wheelclamping can be an extremely lucrative business for anyone with a mobile telephone, a strong arm and £50 for their first clamp.

Six years ago, the wheelclamping industry was estimated to be worth about £150 million annually. Until now, the lack of Government regulation has enabled clampers to make plenty of money but provided clamped motorists with almost no protection. I do not think that anyone would argue that landowners should not have rights over their own property or be able to take action to deal with problem parking. However, we have to make it clear that when we talk about cowboy wheelclampers, we are talking not about proper parking control measures but simply about a money-making venture.

Wheelclampers have little incentive to stop people parking in restricted areas—quite the opposite. They want people to park illegally, as they would see it, because that is precisely how they make their money. They want to get people on to a given piece of land so that they can make money from them. Very many ordinary people have suffered at the hands of cowboy wheelclampers who, with their clamp-and-deliver tactics, have been described as modern-day highway robbers. Actually, I am the one who so described them, but I thought that the description was probably worth repeating. I should like to give a few examples of how they have achieved that reputation.

Only last week, I was contacted by a constituent named Jasmine Steers. She is a disabled woman who had parked outside a restaurant where she had often parked before. She had no idea that clampers were operating in the area, but was approached by some who demanded £70 in cash from her. In her letter to me, she said:

"I needed to have my car as I am disabled and my children need picking up from school. I got my chequebook out to pay when the man turned around and stated he will only take cash . . .

I had to walk to my bank—remember I am registered disabled and walking causes me great pain—to get the £70 that he demanded. I would have thought that any legitimate company would accept a cheque. When I got the receipt, I noted that the company operates out of a postal box address. This sent more warning flags up to the legitimacy of this firm. I quizzed the man on who his boss was and he still refused to answer my questions."

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) said, cowboy clampers tend to pick on elderly people, disabled people and women who are on their own or with young children.

Another constituent of mine was clamped when she had her eight-month-old baby with her. She was extremely distressed by the circumstances, and said:

"In effect I was being asked to hand over £70 to unidentified persons in the street, who got out of a private car and who claimed to be acting for a wheelclamping company on behalf of a property owner who they refused to identify."

Only yesterday, I was contacted by the British Parking Association about a woman in Harrow who had suffered at the hands of wheelclampers. She was fined £240 when her car was towed 20 miles away, to what seemed to her to be a dump. She was asked to meet a man at a railway station to be driven there so that she could collect her car. She was extremely frightened and felt very threatened.

Reputable wheelclamping companies have been pressing for the industry to be cleaned up. As the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) said, a few bad apples can give any industry a bad name, and that applies equally to the wheelclamping industry. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) mentioned the media's role in highlighting wheelclamping problems. I should like to acknowledge the role of the *Yorkshire Post*, the *Doncaster Free Press*, the *Doncaster Star*, the "Ed Doolan Show", BBC and ITV and everyone else who has raised the issue, drawn attention to it and helped in the campaign to get something done about it.

[Ms Winterton]

I am extremely pleased that the Government tabled and passed an amendment in the other place to ensure that landowners also take responsibility for what happens on their land. Very often, those who are clamped are told by the clampers that the landowner will receive no benefit from the fine. Landowners say that, as they make no money from clamping, they are not responsible for what happens and are simply trying to protect their property. People are, however, very suspicious about such declarations. Occasionally, when people are handing over cash to a clamper, they may feel that landowners sometimes rake off some of that money. It is sometimes difficult to avoid such conclusions.

It is therefore important and welcome that the Government have introduced that amendment, to ensure that landowners have a responsibility for the way in which clampers operate on their land. The fact is that land does not move—unlike clampers, who can operate with nothing more than a mobile telephone and a PO box and who do move. The amendment will make it possible to hold landowners to account. I am grateful to the Government for listening to my concerns and those of the RAC on the issue.

My only real concern with the Bill is that there will be delay in establishing the Security Industry Authority. I wonder whether there is some way to ensure that, once the authority is established, it will be able to consider complaints that are arising now. I know that organisations such as the RAC are keen to play a part in that type of arrangement. We have to send a message now to those people that this Bill will be coming into force and that these are the expectations that the authority will have of landowners and wheelclamping companies. I should like a record to be kept of current incidents involving outrageous behaviour, so that the authority can take those complaints into account when it starts considering to whom to award licences.

My hon. Friend the Minister and his officials have listened very carefully to the concerns of the police and motoring organisations on the issue. I pay special tribute to him because he really has listened. I think that everyone has been incredibly impressed with the way he has responded to concerns and taken them on board. I know that colleagues in those organisations would like to join me in thanking him.

I hope that, regardless of whether there is a general election in the near future, the Bill will be supported by Members on both sides of the House and that we ensure it is passed as quickly as possible. It is extremely important that we have consensus on the issue. Our ultimate aim is to send to cowboy wheelclampers the message that their bully-boy days are over.

DEFERRED DIVISION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): I have now to announce the result of the Division deferred from a previous day. On the motion on Local Government, the Ayes were 362, the Noes were 134, so the motion was agreed to.

[The Division List is published at the end of today's debates.]

6.9 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton). She made a characteristically thoughtful and sensible speech. For the second time in a week, I am about to speak in a debate on a matter on which there is a large consensus, and that grieves me—although I hope to inject some controversy into my later remarks.

I do not know what my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on the Front Bench is going to say, but he is looking uncomfortable at the degree of consensus about the Bill evident across the House. Consensus is not his natural style, to his great credit, but he will have to demonstrate a good deal of it this evening.

It is also a pleasure to speak after my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler). Subject to the Prime Minister's decision, my right hon. Friend may have made his last speech in the House. In many respects, I hope that I will be proved wrong, but it was wonderful to hear him bring to fulfilment a campaign that has characterised his political career. I am sure that he was delighted to be able to speak as he did today.

I wish to speak on the security industry aspects of the Bill, and on wheelclamping. Both topics flow from constituency interests. I am privileged to have the British headquarters of Group 4 in my constituency—at least, the front gates and the postal address are in my constituency, and many Group 4 staff employed at Broadway in Worcestershire are my constituents, but the company's head offices are in fact situated in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown). He and I therefore have an important constituency interest in Group 4. Incidentally, the British Security Industry Association has its headquarters in my home city of Worcester, which is not in my constituency.

The key message from Group 4, which should guide the House in its consideration of the Bill, is that the Bill contains no measure that a good company should not be pursuing already. If that is true, the Bill cannot be objected to in any real sense, and we should welcome it.

I am involved in a campaign—I hope that it lasts as long as that pursued by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield—to bring a solution to the vexed question of foxhunting. I am struck by the strong similarities between the Bill and the proposals of the Middle Way Group, of which I am joint chairman.

I do not want a make a party political point, but it amuses me that the Bill appears to have passed through the other place without causing any significant controversy. Some useful amendments were tabled, and the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central mentioned the one relating to wheelclamping and land. In contrast, my humble proposal to license foxhunting seemed to engender much anger in the House of Lords.

It seems to me proper that an activity that impinges on other people, as the operation of the private security industry clearly does, should be subject to some form of statutory regulation or licensing. There is nothing wrong in principle with that, but in saying so I have to grapple with the other part of my persona. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham will wind up the debate, and no doubt will exhibit a real reluctance—which I share—to impose excessive regulation.

I was not a member of the previous Government. I sat on the Government Benches and encouraged my colleagues, but they did not have the wisdom to include me in their ranks. I therefore cannot speak from inside knowledge, but I suspect that the reluctance to introduce regulation arose from the tension between an understanding that something had to be done to protect people—including employees—from a poorly run security industry, and an unwillingness to add to the bureaucratic burden borne by the private sector.

Therefore, if the Bill is granted a Committee stage, the House will have to consider how to strike the balance between those competing principles. It will also have to ensure that the Bill does not give advantages to the big operators and discriminate against the small ones—and I say that as Group 4's constituency MP.

The small operators are not always the cowboys in the industry. Group 4 is a role model for the industry rather than a cowboy, but some bigger firms' practices are also sometimes suspect. The balance between regulation and competitiveness is a difficult one to get right.

Group 4's position is straightforward. It has campaigned for 30 years for statutory regulation of the industry, so it is hardly surprising that it welcomes the Bill. Interestingly, the company states that the measure is a

"vital first step towards the fullest possible regulation of the industry . . . We are pleased that the Bill provides for the possibility of converting the system of inspection and approval of security providers from a voluntary to a compulsory one."

It adds that it firmly believes that only a mandatory system will free the industry from the unscrupulous operators who would undermine it. If the Bill is enacted, the Minister must consider that matter carefully when he implements it.

Under the Bill, everyone in the industry—from chief executives and headquarters staff up to the guards and uniformed operators who offer security services in public places—will have to have a licence. I attended the lunchtime reception held today by the Police Federation, where I was reminded that police officers undergo an intensive training programme and a two-year probation period, and that they continue their training on the job throughout their careers. The federation contrasted that experience unfavourably with the provisions in the Bill.

The better companies offer intensive training, which continues throughout their employees' careers with them. It is right that that should happen, and it is important to recognise that private security staff do not merely hang around Woolworths or shopping malls, keeping an eye out for the occasional shoplifter. Such staff can be engaged in extremely difficult and testing situations.

A recent tragic case involved a security guard who refused to pursue a shoplifter out of a shop. His judgment proved to be correct—the shop assistant who did pursue the shoplifter was subsequently stabbed to death. That is the sort of challenging situation that can arise.

Security officers deal with people in public places, so they necessarily are exposed regularly to people's more eccentric acts. On occasion, private security guards have had to deal with people attempting to commit suicide by burning themselves to death, or with people trying to jump off bridges or hang themselves.

Training is needed to handle such difficult and sensitive situations. The industry is concerned that the proposed Security Industry Authority may not insist on sufficiently adequate training when it issues licences. That is important, but the challenge that we must face is to ensure public safety while at the same time maintaining the right regulatory touch. If there is to be a Committee stage for the Bill, I hope that those of my hon. Friends who are selected for it will test the Government on what they anticipate will be the SIA's action in that regard.

I emphasise that I am concerned about the lack of mandatory regulation for companies. I need to be reassured by the Government that they have done the right thing in not making the provisions of the Bill mandatory.

I said earlier that not all the cowboys are small operators: some are of quite a significant size, and can engage in some very off practices. At the moment, it is possible for people to be on the dole one hour, and in uniform and serving in very sensitive public places the next. I understand that that has happened in some prominent public buildings in London. The absence of a criminal record does not mean that a person is fit and proper to engage in sensitive public activities.

Companies must be well managed. Like the people whom they employ, they must also be fit and proper. The Government will have to consider that matter very carefully.

The independence and impartiality of the proposed SIA will be an important issue too. The SIA will have properly to reflect the interests of the different parties, both in the industry and among those who are served by it. Schedule 1 gives the Secretary of State power to appoint members of the SIA. Group 4 believes, and I am inclined to agree, that the framework for the composition of the SIA should be laid down in legislation. Group 4 also believes that the SIA should contain representatives from the industry, employees, customer groups and others. It suggests that the authority should have 12 members, and that that number should be set out in the Bill.

I believe that the Minister prefers a more flexible approach. That is another matter that needs to be tested in Committee.

Group 4 certainly believes that the Minister's proposal to leave wide discretionary powers with the Home Office will lead to uncertainty—to have a floating number of members is not practical. If the Government want flexibility, Group 4 thinks that it could be provided by allowing Parliament to consider the size and composition of the SIA at a later date, but for the time being to stipulate in the Bill what the size and composition are to be.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Does he agree that we require from the Government some practical reassurances in the Bill on the subject of the composition of the authority, in order to dispel any notion that either the present, or a subsequent, Home Secretary might try to use the power of appointment to the authority as an opportunity to offer somebody a bauble for loyal service in a wholly unrelated field?

Mr. Luff: As always, my hon. Friend makes an important point. The House is ill advised to give Ministers flexibility unless it is genuinely needed. Whatever Ministers' reasons for trying to distort the purposes for which they were given discretion in the first place, it is helpful if as much detail as possible is included in a Bill. At present, that is an unfashionable view; to be fair,

[Mr. Luff]

it was not especially popular with the previous Government either, but it has become splendidly unpopular—Bills are now largely concerned with setting up order-making powers for Secretaries of State. That is not acceptable.

Group 4's suggestion meets the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend and me. It is that the authority should include two members from the industry's employers; two members from employees in the industry; one member from the police and criminal justice system; one member who represents local authorities; one representing insurance providers—an important group; and one member representing customer groups. The industry has some big customers who could easily supply an individual to fill that role. Finally, there should be a member to represent the public. That is a more difficult challenge—I always worry about the appointment of surrogates for the general public.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand the intelligent approach suggested by Group 4 and other companies in the field. However, how would the hon. Gentleman deal with the point that I made about the need to ensure that the authority is an independent organisation and not simply an agglomeration of special interests—however significant?

Mr. Luff: That is a philosophical debate. How can we guarantee independence if a Minister is given complete discretion to make appointments? With all due respect to the Minister, for whom I sincerely have a high personal regard, I do not trust him to behave independently in making appointments to a public body. I do not trust any Minister to do that. If Ministers have a framework in which to operate, the prospects of independence are enhanced. There is a debate to be had on that subject. The Minister smiles benignly; I am not sure whether that is from the knowledge that he has won the argument or because he suspects that there may be something in my argument. He nods to indicate the former. However, he needs to reflect on the matter.

The Minister should reflect especially on Group 4's point that there should be more than one representative from the industry. The industry is diverse, with companies of different sizes and scales of operation. At the very least, the authority should include a big fish and a small fish. It would be good if the Minister were to say that during this debate or in the Standing Committee.

I emphasise Group 4's excellent point about the desirability of including employees on the authority. The voice of employees needs to be heard loud and clear; they have often been the victims of badly run security companies.

The authority's powers are also of some concern. The Bill allows for the authority to establish minimum standards. Group 4's view is that minimum standards of training are needed and that they should be specified in the Bill. I made a similar point earlier, so I shall not labour it. Are Ministers really content that so much discretion should be allowed to them and to the authority in the formulation of proposals?

The subject of in-house security staff is contentious. Many people in the industry are worried about the exclusion of such staff from the Bill's provisions. Group 4 and the British Security Industry Association share those concerns. They believe that a two-tier system of private security could develop, and that

"failure to regulate in-house staff may provide a loophole which could help unscrupulous people to find their way into the industry and undermine the very principles of the Bill."

The Minister of State, Home Office is currently not at the Dispatch Box, although he has been replaced by another Minister of State, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), for whom I also have high personal regard.

I hope that Ministers will consider including provisions on in-house staff. The criminal justice White Paper provides for the extension of private sector work in policing; that is a powerful reason for arguing that case. The growing role of the private security industry in many aspects of the lives of local communities means that the industry must keep a watchful eye on the Human Rights Act 1998. We must be certain that the Government are right to exclude provisions on in-house providers.

The BSIA has concerns on that point:

"There are two main points to consider here. a) businesses may choose to revert to in-house security, as it could become cheaper than employing contractors, once the cost of regulation has been added to contract prices, and b) individuals who cannot obtain a licence may seek work within in-house operations. It will be interesting to see what form of vetting the Government recommends for in-house security. Will businesses be allowed to access enhanced criminal records to assess the suitability of their in-house staff? If so, why not include licensing for in-house officers as a legal obligation?"

That is a powerful case; the Government must answer it.

The burden of the cost of licensing must not fall on employees. I still have reservations about the minimum wage, despite everything that has happened. Recent increases in the rate will pose severe challenges for some businesses—not necessarily because they pay at that rate, but because of differentials. However, in the private security industry, the absence of a minimum wage often led to shabby treatment of employees. There is no doubt that scandalously low rates were paid, so in that particular industry, the minimum wage brought great benefits. The company should meet the cost of the licence and I hope that the Government will keep that firmly in mind.

I am slightly surprised that the Bill lists no exemptions. Group 4 suggests that the Act should not apply to

"a police officer . . . a prison officer . . . a member of Her Majesty's armed forces . . . a member of the Ministry of Defence Guard Service . . . an officer or employee of a Government department, government agency or non departmental government body . . . a person who in whatever capacity carries out any designated activities in relation to a public works or supply contract relating to the provision of prison escort, custody and immigration services."

They are, of course, already separately regulated.

It is strange that there are no exclusions. It is important that correct boundaries and delineations be set out in statute; the case for exemption seems strong.

There is some urgency on these issues, because the Government seem to be planning to make much greater use of the private security industry. Indeed, we seem to be going through privatisation by stealth. I suppose that I should welcome that, but I am somewhat surprised

because when the White Paper on the industry was published in 1999, the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), said:

"I have no plans for police patrol or any other police functions to be carried out by the private security industry, except that we have proposed that the escorting of certain abnormal loads should, in future, be carried out by the private sector. Representatives of the police and other bodies have raised many matters in discussions, but neither I nor my Ministerial colleagues have proposed any changes to responsibility for police patrolling. No Ministerial committees or Working Groups are currently examining any such proposals.—[*Official Report*, 27 July 1999; Vol. 336, c. 263W.]

I found that answer difficult to reconcile with the White Paper "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead", published last month. It seems to have a different vision of the future relationship of the private security industry with the police service. In the chapter on the police, we are told that one of the key measures is

"experimental accreditation of security or patrol staff from other organisations, working under police co-ordination to deliver improved community safety."

In a little less than two years, there seems to have been a huge shift in the Government's thinking.

The White Paper rightly notes:

"There has always been a wide range of people contributing to community safety in various forms. These include park keepers (some with constabulary powers), security guards in shopping centres, car park attendants, neighbourhood wardens, night club bouncers and the private security industry. The issue for policing is how these various activities can be co-ordinated to make the most effective contribution to making safer communities."

The paper talks about the Private Security Industry Bill and the Government believing that there is

"scope for some evaluated schemes to determine the effect on public reassurance of the police accrediting and co-ordinating a range of independent bodies to work in conjunction with them in delivering community safety."

It says that these activities could be co-ordinated with policing needs by an officer with an enhanced role as a community beat manager. That proposal represents a very significant shift in the Government's position.

Now here comes the more controversial part of my remarks—my more partisan remarks.

Mr. Bercow *indicated assent.*

Mr. Luff: I see that my hon. Friend is pleased to hear that.

I am afraid that I am a bit cynical about this because police numbers are down, and in my area, very sharply down. The very useful document "Police Service Strength", produced by the Library, shows that under each and every Conservative Government, police numbers in West Mercia rose, sometimes by—

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): Does the right hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that—

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Lammy: I am sorry. Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that between 1979 and 1997—for me, formative years—in constituencies such as Tottenham, crime increased by 166 per cent., and that the partnership approach that the Labour Government have put forward is what has begun to tackle that?

Mr. Luff: I am reluctant to be drawn too far into this argument, because I suspect that you would rule me out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, but let me say this. Crime was falling at the end of the last Conservative Government, as a result of the measures that we introduced, and in recent years crime—especially violent crime—has been rising again, causing great distress to my constituents, so that kind of Millbank argument cuts no ice in Worcestershire. It is hardly surprising because in Worcestershire, police numbers have been falling for the first time in more than 20 years.

If the hon. Gentleman wants the figures for police numbers under the various Administrations, they increased by 9.9 per cent. in the first—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman was quite correct when he said that if he went too far down that path, I would call him to order.

Mr. Luff: I certainly have no intention of going down a primrose path that leads to being out of order, but there is an important point here. The Government plan to make increased use of the private security industry in partnership with the police, and my contention is that they are doing so because police numbers are falling and the Government need to cover up for that loss of numbers. The Minister of State, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green, looks puzzled. I have no wish to make you unduly anxious about the orderliness of our proceedings, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will simply say that police numbers in Worcestershire increased under every Conservative Government and have fallen by 7 per cent. under the present Government. That is the fact that I cannot get on to the public record because there is a conspiracy of silence—

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Luff: With pleasure.

Mrs. Roche: I shall be extremely brief. The figures do not bear out what the hon. Gentleman says. If he looks at them, he will see that, during the Conservative years, police numbers were falling, and that it is only now, as a result of the resources that we have put in, that that picture is changing. That is the truth.

Mr. Luff: I am drawn into considerable difficulties here. I am glad to provoke the Minister, but she is simply wrong—as far as my constituency is concerned, at least.

In Lady Thatcher's first term, in West Mercia there was an increase of 9.9 per cent. In her second term, there was an increase of only 0.7 per cent. In the third term, under Lady Thatcher and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), there was an increase of 5.4 per cent., and in the final term, under my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon, there was an increase of 0.3 per cent. There was an increase—sometimes big, sometimes modest—in each and every Parliament. However, under the present Administration, police numbers have fallen by nearly 7 per cent.

Those are figures from the document produced by the Library, confirmed by Home Office figures published last week. I am not surprised that the Minister does not like to be confronted with the truth, but it is the truth. I am afraid that is why I am so cynical about provisions designed to increase the role of the private security industry.

[Mr. Luff]

I find it difficult to get this subject debated because, when I make these allegations, the BBC—not unreasonably—wishes to find someone to counter them, and there is a conspiracy of silence on the other side. No one will answer for those figures. They are a matter of fact and I am afraid that the Minister will have to accept it. I will happily give her a copy of this document after the debate. It is excellent; I commend it to her.

The use of the private security industry is a matter of some concern to the Police Federation. Fred Broughton, chairman of the staff association, has expressed his concerns. In a press release in 1998, he said:

"Mr. Blair's comments"—

not the comments of the Prime Minister but those of the chief constable of Surrey—

"show that chief officers do not appear to be able to guarantee effective patrolling strengths within their current budgets and are seeking ways around this . . . Our view is that"

the proposals by the chief constable of Surrey to make greater use of the private security industry three years ago

"will reduce standards with lesser calibre patrol officers with limited performance".

In a statement of the Police Federation's view on the proposal to use the private security industry more, which appears on its website at present, the federation says:

"Private policing would operate against the public interest and any proposals to hand over the existing responsibilities of the police to the private sector should be strongly resisted. We do not want a two-tier system of policing, where those who can afford to pay for protection do so and those who cannot, lose out."

I am not sure that I go all the way with the Police Federation, but its concerns need to be addressed.

The security industry already has an important role—that is why the licensing proposed in the Bill is so important—in shopping malls, in prison escorts and in privately funded public patrols. In Group 4's own village of Broadway, in my constituency, there is a privately funded public patrol, which brings great comfort to the residents.

As the Government are obviously trying to privatise the police through the back door and to use the private sector more intensively than before, it is entirely proper that the industry should be more effectively regulated. More opportunity for Group 4 and the other operators, provided by the Government, should be accompanied by more responsibility, and that is essential if the services provided by these companies are to be acceptable to the communities and organisations that they serve.

I suggest one thought to the Minister. I understand that the Government have shown considerable reluctance to commit themselves only to employing registered companies. Obviously, when the Bill becomes law and is put into effect, all individuals will be licensed, but companies will not. There may be something to be said for the Government at least considering sending a message that they will use only companies that register, and will not just rely on those that comply with the literal terms of the Act and have their individual members licensed.

I shall try not to make my final point too long, but it is important. It follows on from the comments by the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central about wheelclamping. She is right to say that there can be reputable wheelclamping: it does happen. I would like to have a wheelclamp for the cars that regularly park outside my flat, where they should not be. I have a notice that I run off from my word processor, which is fairly offensive and normally gets them moved, but it is nevertheless a problem.

The horror stories about wheelclamping are legion. Clampers in Doncaster threatened to hold a mother's three-year-old daughter to ransom until £60 was collected from a bank. Clampers in Sheffield demanded a woman's gold tooth as payment. One woman was asked for sex unless she came up with the release payment immediately. A hearse with a body in the back was clamped outside a church. Sixty-one year-old Marina Vine was clamped when, driving home from hospital following a chemotherapy session, she pulled over to be sick. This is the type of problem that we must deal with. There are real cowboys in the wheelclamping industry.

The British Parking Association, to its credit, has done its best to deal with this menace, but it has no powers. The code of conduct that it has drawn up contains some very welcome provisions. It says that

"release should be undertaken within 2 hours of payment, and where the circumstances dictate that de-clamp operatives receive the release fee on site, they should attend the clamped vehicle to accept the fee and release the vehicle within 2 hours of the intent to pay being stated";

and that

"enforcement staff shall be uniformed and carry photo identity cards";

and that

"the release fee shall not exceed that which would be paid if the vehicle had been clamped on-street in that area as determined by the DETR (currently this is £45 to £58 outside London and £75 to £85 within London)".

It is difficult to reconcile all these good intentions with the activities of the cowboys. I have a constituent who wishes to remain anonymous because he is fearful of recriminations from the parking company. I had a representation from him in January. What happened was as follows:

"My son was in my wife's car and he was stopping at the Copthorne Hotel in central Birmingham last Friday night. He was dropping off his suitcase at the hotel and was going straight out, he was unable to park at the hotel so he pulled his car onto some waste ground at the side of the hotel at 7.30pm."

My constituent admits that there were signs, although they were not very visible. He was actually doing something wrong.

"He returned to the car at 7.45pm and it had been towed away within 15 minutes, there was a contact telephone number but the voice message said the office was unmanned until 9am.

When he phoned the office in the morning he was told he had to pay £240.00 cash to get his car back."

From what I have heard from the hon. Members for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) and for Doncaster, Central, £240 to £250 seems to be the cowboy going rate at the moment. My constituent continues:

"When the 3 men arrived back with the car they wanted the £240 in cash and were not prepared to say who they were. As they were next to a police station, my son asked to have an address or a copy of the invoice so he could go into the police station to see if they were bona fide traders."

That was a prudent step for him to take. The letter continues:

"This request was refused and the men drove off after a brief argument. Then when he phoned again the price to get the car back was £270.00."

The company involved is Parking Solutions (U.K.) Ltd, PO Box 7765, Halesowen, B64 6AY. My constituent and his father have phoned Parking Solutions and the police, who said that it was a civil matter and there was nothing that they could do.

My constituent continued:

"in the end we had to give in and pay the £270.00"—

I have the receipt here. He goes on:

"To add to the saga damage has also been sustained on the rear bumper which they say is our problem (Seems there is a disclaimer on the notice board).

Since the weekend I have spoken to the police who say it is a civil matter, trading standards who say it does not fall in their area of responsibility. Birmingham Trading Standards advised me to check to see if they were a registered company and told me to contact the company Licensing Office".

All that work was done to try to deal with a cowboy contractor.

My constituent

"spoke to Parking Solutions asking for details of their insurance company which they refused to do on the phone. They said I had to write in for this information which means I have to disclose my home address which I am not happy about."

I understand my constituent's concerns about disclosing his home address. He continued:

"I am now taking advice from Worcester trading standards who suggested I do the following which I have done:

Talk to the Tax Man and see if Parking Solutions declare the cash".

I hope that the hon. Lady will commend that course of action to her other hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench.

Mr. Bercow: I am shocked by the example that my hon. Friend cites. I wonder whether he might choose to refer that important issue to the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mrs. Heal).

Mr. Luff: I shall carefully consider that characteristic suggestion from my hon. Friend.

My constituent has sent an invoice for the repairs to the company, but he used the address of the Worcester trading standards office, rather than his own, for fear of recrimination. He says that Worcester trading standards office advised him to

"Send full details to my MP to raise in Parliament as they are also not happy with this practice."

It is a pleasure to be able to comply so comprehensively with a constituent's concerns.

Earlier this week, I received a very good reply from the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who is temporarily not present on the Treasury Bench, and my constituent will receive a copy of it tomorrow. I am pleased with what the hon. Gentleman says about the provisions on such incidents, but he adds:

"Among other provisions, the code lays down both a ceiling on charges and a complaints procedure. Although we cannot say at this stage exactly what provisions a code under the Authority would include, we certainly envisage it covering both those points."

That returns me to my earlier points about the comprehensive nature of legislation. It is crucial that the code of conduct should include such matters, and I hope that it will. I would like the statute law to specify that the code should include such provisions.

For example, to return temporarily to foxhunting, we envisage that its codes of conduct will have statutory force and we specified some of the matters that should be included in those codes. I commend that course of action to the Minister. We should specify what the code of conduct should say about the greatest abuses. I am sure that the authority will take care of such matters, but we are here to act for constituents from whom we have heard horror stories.

Ms Rosie Winterton: We should consider the fact that if too much is laid down by Parliament, we may not be able to overcome some of the on-going problems. Some cowboy wheelclamping companies now adopt different methods, such as taking photographs of cars and sending out notices demanding penalties. It is important to be able to vary the code of conduct easily, without having to return the matter to Parliament.

Mr. Luff: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I obviously was not explaining myself clearly, and I apologise to her. I am saying that certain matters so obviously need to be encompassed in the code that they should be specified. We must ensure that the authority imposes a ceiling on charges and a complaints procedure.

I am not a lawyer; I do not understand the provisions of the Human Rights Act, and so on, but I think it sensible to allow the authority to insist on certain provisions. I certainly do not suggest that we should draw up a complete list; I am saying that it should at least state that a code of conduct should be established, dealing with such issues as the authority thinks fit, but including X, Y and Z. There is a strong case for ensuring that such issues are included.

I have spoken for 35 minutes, which is longer than I intended to when I rose, but these issues are important not only for my constituents—as employers, employees and as victims of cowboy wheelclampers—but for the general public, who want the security industry to offer the level of competence and security that they have a right to expect, but which has not been offered until now. I am sorry that the Conservative Government did not get around to resolving their own internal conflicts, which I discussed at the beginning of my speech, and I am glad that this Government have done so. They have fewer qualms about regulation than we do, but I commend them on the Bill. I hope that they will consider the detailed issues that I and other right hon. and hon. Members have raised, and that the Bill will reach the statute book at a relatively early date—notwithstanding the guillotine motion, which we shall debate later.

6.45 pm

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), I am member of the GMB, but that is not especially relevant to what I wish to say. I have not seen many of our wheelclamping colleagues at GMB branch meetings in Luton; it is possible that they are not even members of the GMB, so what I say will not offend fellow members.

[Mr. Kelvin Hopkins]

I commend the speech made by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), especially the last part of it, in which he emphasised the importance of the police, who are unarmed and on the streets of Britain. We should be proud of them. Although there are always problems in policing and patrolling the streets of any country and any city, the police in Britain do a good job, often in difficult circumstances. They are often understaffed, and I shall deal with that in a moment.

The hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said that particular qualities are required in the security industry. Police officers possess exactly those qualities. That suggests that there might be a case for extending, rather than restricting, the areas in which the police operate. I should not wish to see a creeping privatisation of the police force. Indeed, my constituents would prefer their streets to be patrolled by police officers, who are accountable to the police authority and the Home Office, rather than by private sector organisations. People might expect a Labour Member to make those comments, and I shall continue to hold that view.

Mr. Luff: I commend pages 83 and 84 of "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead", from which the hon. Gentleman will see that the Government have rather different plans.

Mr. Hopkins: I listened with interest when the hon. Gentleman was reading that document. My hon. Friends on the Front Bench will be aware that my constituents are keen to have more police on the beat and that, however the Government have done, we still need more, and they have a good case. There could be a little less trouble on the streets if we had a few more police. I shall certainly continue to write to my hon. Friends asking them to provide the resources so that we can have more police, especially in Luton, North, and, in equity, elsewhere in the country.

I very much welcome the Government's decision to regulate the private security industry and to take steps towards filling a gap that has existed for far too long. The Bill deals with a range of activities that we deride as "cowboy", but that is sometimes a slur on cowboys. I shall cite some examples from my constituency later.

I wish to focus specifically on wheelclamping and the impounding of vehicles parked illegally on private property. I have described what has been happening in my constituency in letters to Ministers, and I have described it publicly as "legalised mugging", because it seems tantamount to that. In my constituency at least, the charges imposed are extortionate—for example, £80 to release a wheelclamp, and £150 a day for an impounded car to be released.

There are many examples from all over the country, but in my constituency a middle-aged couple were delivering clothes to a garage at the back of a charity shop when wheelclampers pounced on them. The husband was sitting in the driving seat with the engine running while his wife quickly unloaded the car boot. His car was clamped while waiting, and he was surrounded by a gang of young men, demanding £80 to release the clamp. It is alleged that, at one point, one of the young men threatened to head butt the driver. By all accounts, the gang was very menacing indeed.

In another case, wheelclampers marched an old-age pensioner to a cash machine and made her withdraw £80 from her account to pay them, despite the fact that she had a disabled person's sticker on her car. Those are just two examples, and I shall not waste time describing others, as we have heard some previously.

The Government are right to want to regulate activities on private as well as public land. In one area of my constituency, there is a small unadopted road next to a shopping centre. Wheelclampers wait in a van and pounce as soon as a car comes round the corner and parks even temporarily with the driver still in it. They leap out, clamp the car and demand £80. That has happened time and again.

My concern is that the Bill deals only with private wheelclampers, but I have written to Ministers on more than one occasion urging them to consider the possibility that the local authority could play a role in wheelclamping even on private land. Local authorities undertake some wheelclamping, and they have a right to do that. For example, my local authority employed a private wheelclamping firm to undertake wheelclamping on its behalf. However, the authority sacked the company because it misbehaved in the way that other wheelclampers misbehave. Thus even when a local authority was involved and employed a private sector organisation, the private organisation behaved badly and had to be dismissed.

Local authorities are now considering other ways to overcome the problem. They and the police wish to wheelclamp in many cases, but the small amount of wheelclamping that would take place on local authority land would not be sufficient to make it financially viable for local authorities to set up a system involving a pound and a wheelclamping team. However, if they were given responsibility for wheelclamping in general within their area—for example, they could act on behalf of the police in an agency capacity or on behalf of local residents—they would have more scope and their greater activity might enable them to set up a self-financing scheme. A reasonable charge to the owners of the clamped cars would pay for the service, and the authorities would not even have to charge the private property owner on whose land the car was parked.

I have personal experience of the problem. I live a mile or so from Luton Town football club and it is customary for visiting fans to park their cars in the road outside my house. I do not mind that; it is not a problem. However, on one occasion, a group of young males parked their car in the driveway of my house. They locked it up and quickly ran away, and I was not going to tangle with them. When they returned, they jumped into the car and drove off.

I did not know how to handle that situation, because I certainly was not going to remonstrate with four large male football fans who were rather more youthful than me. I thought that they had been a bit cheeky, to say the least, but I had no one to whom I could turn. The police would not bother with such a case; they have more important things to do. The local authority has no role, and I was not going to get in touch with a private wheelclamping firm. I might have found that they were friends of the football fans—who knows?

In that case, one would have liked the local authority to have had a role. I would have liked to have been able to ring up the council and say, "Someone has parked in

my driveway. Can you bring your service round to deal with the problem?" The local authority would then have taken charge. People would not argue with it, because it would have the staff and the resources to deal with the problem. It would also have the police to back it up, should that be necessary. I would not have been happy to use a private firm, but I would have been happy to telephone the local authority. Therefore, we should consider giving local authorities a role in the future.

Everyone else in the Chamber seems to have an idea when the general election will take place. I do not, and the Government may be in office for the full five-year term. However, it is possible that the Bill will not reach the statute book before the election—whenever that may be. If it does not, I hope that a second-term Labour Government will reintroduce it and consider giving local authorities a role. They could permit and encourage—not compel or require—local authorities to play their part.

I have spoken informally to local government officers about the problem, and they have said that, provided that the scheme operated on a sufficiently large scale, they could operate it and would be happy to do so. Indeed, I know that some private citizens and firms have asked local authorities to impose restrictions on people parking illegally on private property. Local authorities cannot do that at present, but if a new Bill gave them the appropriate rights backed by law, they could certainly assist. That would work extremely well and everyone who faced the problem of illegal parking could telephone the local authority. To me, that looks like creeping municipal socialism, but I am not averse to that. I hope that the Government will, at least, consider that possibility in future.

6.55 pm

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): I welcome the proposal to regulate the private security industry to ensure that those employed in it can carry out their jobs professionally. I say that because in the summer of 1991 I was employed as a security guard to patrol a huge building in Fleet street that was to house a large accountancy firm. Therefore, I am delighted that, 10 years later, I have the opportunity to speak in the House on this subject.

I am sure that many Members recognise that the private security industry in London and the major conurbations employs many ethnic minority people. I was a student who needed work during the summer holidays and I know that many young men and women—both black and white—take up such employment primarily so that they can read their law or biology books while they are on night patrol, ensuring that buildings are kept safe and sound.

However, the industry also provides permanent employment because many people in communities such as mine in Tottenham are in lower socio-economic groups and take up much needed work in that sector. I was saddened, therefore, when I heard the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) challenge the minimum wage. Many people in the industry rely on it, and I am glad that the Government have recently increased it.

Many young people and those in lower socio-economic groups will welcome the fact that, to some extent, the industry will be professionalised, regulated and supervised. They do not want to work alongside people who have criminal convictions and they do not want to be vulnerable in the workplace. They want to be recognised for the service that they provide and the Bill will, at long last, give them security. I welcome that.

By definition, private security employees are entrusted with protecting people. Whether they are security guards, door supervisors, professional security investigators or, indeed, wheelclampers, it is in everyone's best interest that people employed in positions of such trust should meet required standards and be registered for all to recognise. The Bill will promote standards within the industry and serve the public interest.

I appreciate that the private security industry covers several activities, but the sector that springs to my mind, as the youngest Member of the House, is the door supervision sector, which is made up of people who are readily known as "bouncers". I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends have at one time—perhaps in the not too distant past—been under the so-called protection of bouncers and many will have children who frequent pubs and clubs. Such venues attract a large number of young people, often under the influence of alcohol—legitimate, of course—on a Friday or Saturday night.

Bouncers have unfortunately been a magnet for illegal drug dealing. We had a problem with a small underground club in my constituency. Drug dealing often stems from the people who are meant to protect our younger generation. Unfortunately, many of us have examples of bouncers who engage in criminal activity. In some London clubs, they take drugs off the dealers, kick them out and peddle the drugs themselves. I am delighted that the Bill will at last ensure that drug dealers and criminals will be unable to engage freely in that activity in our clubs. Many bouncers have also been too readily involved in physical assaults on people who have gone out to enjoy themselves on a Friday or Saturday night. There is no justification for that, as I am sure all hon. Members would agree.

Legislation is the only way to ensure that such problems do not occur and that no bouncer has a criminal background. It sends a clear message that inappropriate behaviour by those workers, who are entrusted with the care of the public, will result in their licences being revoked. All aspects of the private security industry will benefit from the promotion of standards that will result in regulation, and I hope that there will be a more creative use of private security workers.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister's announcement about extending neighbourhood warden schemes, especially in deprived areas. It must be clear from the outset that the use of private security guards to patrol housing estates, parks or other public areas should only complement the work of the police. I was saddened, if not surprised, to hear the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire challenge partnership schemes, which I think are the future of crime prevention.

Jackie Ballard: How does the hon. Gentleman envisage preventing private security operatives from substituting for the police rather than complementing their work?

Mr. Lammy: That is not a matter for me. However, partnership must be the way forward. In deprived areas such as mine, the police can never police on their own.

[Mr. Lammy]

They rely on the community, neighbourhood wardens, neighbourhood watch schemes and residents associations. All must play their part. The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire used the word "partnership", but he talked about privatising the police without recognising that my constituents need that partnership in order to police our estates. I welcome a Government who turn their back on paternalism and a top-down approach to crime. The input must also come from the bottom up.

There is no suggestion that security guards will act as a quasi police force. They will not be given powers of arrest that are any different from those available to the general public. I dare say that people who criticise proposals for neighbourhood wardens do not live on estates with repeated vandalism and aggression, which is often perpetrated by a small minority. A partnership approach is essential. The Bill has a role in the wider issue of crime prevention.

Jackie Ballard: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about partnerships and policing to create safer communities. However, does he not understand that there is a fundamental difference between paid-for private security operatives who are brought into a community and community-based volunteer neighbourhood watch schemes? They are completely different.

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Lady seems to suggest that paid-for private operatives have existed only for the past year. Estates in different parts of the country have for a number of years used private security firms to manage affairs in their buildings. Local authorities, including mine, have employed private companies to do that. If there is proper scrutiny, that sector has a role in working alongside the police and ordinary people in neighbourhoods that are worried about crime.

In my road in Tottenham, the neighbourhood watch scheme works closely with security people on the nearby estate and the police to ensure that our homes are no longer burgled. The number of burglaries is decreasing because of the partnership between the residents in the neighbourhood watch scheme, security on the estate at the top of the road and the police half a mile down the road in their local station. The use of private security firms has not come about in the past year; the arrangement has been in place for some time and the Government seek to cement it.

On wheelclamping, I should say that I do not drive. I believe that I am in good company in this place—my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) are Londoners who also do not drive. I have therefore not been a victim of overzealous clampers, but I rely on other people and friends to drive me. I have been horrified to see friends, many of whom are on low incomes, charged a stack load of money—usually £200-plus—to get their cars back. It is difficult for them to retrieve their cars or get the clamps removed. I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) about the need for greater involvement of local authorities in that exercise. I hope that the Government will consider that further.

I hope also that the Government will consider the position of local authorities that contract out services to private companies and then find that they are not reliable or as good at the job as they had expected. A constituent of mine, who had saved for a long time to go on holiday, returned to find that her car, which had been deemed by the private contractor to have been vandalised, had been towed away. Ultimately, it was revealed that wheelclampers had damaged the car, and the outcome was that my constituent was awarded some compensation. I hope that local authorities who contract out services will come under the auspices of the Bill, although I suspect that they do not. The matter needs closer attention.

I welcome the Bill. It will make my constituents very happy because it will help to prevent crime and foster the partnerships that are needed in areas such as mine. In addition, many ethnic minority people are employed in the sector, and they need the security of knowing that they are not joining organisations that employ criminals and that they are recognised by the Government as a professional body of people, with all the rights and obligations that come with that status.

7.12 pm

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): I welcome the Bill, which addresses a number of problems in my constituency and in the neighbouring black country area which have been made known to me. I pay tribute to my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who, as other Members have said, has done considerable research on this subject and is recognised as an authority on it. He has fought a long and lonely battle for the licensing of security operatives. I believe that he wants to contribute to the debate and I look forward to his comments with interest.

The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) rather sidetracked the House on policing. If, in their years in power and their subsequent years in opposition, Conservative Members had been as concerned about the security industry as they had been about the police, we might have had an even better record on crime prevention than this Government have managed so far. During their 18 years in power, the Conservatives showed little inclination to tackle security issues, which I know are of considerable significance to the public.

We must be clear that the industry is in many ways complementary to the police and law enforcement. I thought that the industry employed 300,000 people, but it was said earlier that the estimated figure is now 350,000. Many of those people are very underpaid, work extremely long hours and receive poor training. The Government have already tackled the first issue with the minimum wage, which will shortly go up to £4.20 an hour, but there remains a tranche of issues that are addressed in the Bill and on which action is long overdue.

Given that combination of adverse circumstances, it is not surprising that staff turnover in the industry is enormous. Consequently, any training that is given is of little benefit to the industry as a whole. In many areas, security work is regarded as not only low in pay but low in status, and it is unattractive to potential employees. That is ironic when one considers that given the industry's vital role in preventing crime, the level of responsibility is completely unrecognised and inconsistent with the prevailing pay rates, public status and training.

It is hardly surprising that security work is in many ways regarded as a potential employment opportunity for crooks. I make it clear that I am all in favour of the

rehabilitation of offenders. We want ex-criminals to go into full-time, rewarding employment and to contribute to society. However, I am highly suspicious when people with a track record of abusing the law suddenly demonstrate a totally uncharacteristic enthusiasm for applying for positions that involve upholding the law. In reality, the inside knowledge that many security operatives have when working for companies offers opportunities for rewards that are far greater than those to be gained by any honest employment.

The most conspicuous example that I have come across occurred in my constituency a few years ago, when an ex-criminal got a job as a security guard and was then made a supervisor in the same company. Unfortunately, he had been imprisoned following the murder by strangulation of a young woman in front of her child. Earlier, he had beaten up an old lady who subsequently died in hospital. In case any Conservative Members try to intervene, I might add that his release from jail took place under the previous Government.

The company had employed that man without knowledge of his history. Not surprisingly, when it was exposed the company went bust. One can only imagine the horror felt by other employees following the revelation of the criminal past of the man who had been supervising them as well as dealing with others as part of his work. That underlines the need for change. Under existing legislation, there is no access to criminal records. Happily, the Bill will change that, and it is about time too.

The issue of door supervisors is also of enormous significance in my constituency. We have heard talk about the importance of partnership arrangements between the police, licensees and the security industry in enforcing law and order in that context. I can advocate the benefits of good working partnership practices at local level. I can see those benefits even within my own family because I have an 18-year-old stepson who at weekends likes to go with his mates to a nightclub in West Bromwich, where they enjoy themselves dancing the night away.

When asked why he chose a nightclub in West Bromwich rather than one in a neighbouring police command unit and local authority, my stepson replied that he and his friends went to West Bromwich because they knew that if there was trouble in that nightclub, the bouncers would apprehend the troublemakers and keep hold of them until the local police arrived, arrested them and took them away, whereas troublemakers apprehended inside nightclubs in other areas tended to be thrown out on to the street, where they could continue to fight and engage in fisticuffs with any passers-by who caught their eye. That is a clear example of a company with a good working partnership with the police, benefiting not only the company's clientele, but the neighbourhood and the police. The Bill is designed to facilitate such partnerships.

A concern I share with other hon. Members focuses on the role of bouncers in drug peddling. I especially welcome the provisions that deal with the licensing of doormen and provide for the banning of those with inappropriate criminal convictions. My local police superintendent assures me that where drug problems exist in our area—happily, there are worse parts of the country for drug problems than West Bromwich—they are often directly related to door operatives who use the atmosphere generated by alcohol, music or peer group pressure among young people to peddle drugs.

Mr. Hawkins: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I entirely agree with him about the activities of doormen, but does he not feel somewhat embarrassed that, only about a month ago, in the Committee on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, he allowed himself to be persuaded by his Whips to vote down a Conservative amendment that would have introduced into that Bill provisions that were designed precisely to stop drug dealing by bouncers on nightclub doors?

Mr. Bailey: I am confident that the measures taken by the Government to curb drug dealing mark a considerable improvement on those taken by the previous Government and that they are likely to be more effective. It takes some nerve for a member of a party that had 18 years in government to pass such legislation to talk about embarrassment now.

Much has been said in the debate about wheelclamping, and some of the tales related by other Members make my personal experience pale by comparison. None the less, I shall spend a few minutes describing an experience of friends of mine and exploring the issues that arise from it, which I hope will be addressed by the code of practice for wheelclampers under the Bill.

Two friends of mine—highly respectable, law-abiding school teachers—went on a bank holiday Monday to drop off their daughter at a bus station in the centre of Birmingham. Unable to find a public car park, they saw what they thought was a private car park with no vehicles in it and parked their car there while they saw their daughter off. They returned within 15 minutes to find a white van, a wheelclamp on their car, and two very large and intimidating males demanding £85 for the release of their car. They did not have £85 on them and they were told that a cheque would not suffice, so they had to find a bank cashpoint. It should be borne in mind that that can present difficulties on a bank holiday: not only are banks not open, but sometimes the cash machines run out of cash. Had my friends not been fit, able-bodied people, obtaining that £85 to secure their car's release would have presented considerable difficulties. Afterwards, they described their emotions as suppressed anger, fear and fury at the fact that people could behave in such a manner.

Compared with one or two of the cases about which I have heard today, my friends' experience was not too bad. None the less, their case raises a range of issues that I hope the Bill will address. First, it is obvious that wheelclamping companies must be registered and the areas in which they operate clearly identified. Secondly, there should be a locally determined scale of fines that are considered acceptable and support the logic of the local neighbourhood parking scheme. Thirdly, people who transgress and have their car clamped should have the right to pay in a way that does not compromise their personal safety. Fourthly, they should be given a receipt bearing the company name. Finally, if they are not satisfied with their treatment, there should be a mechanism whereby they can make a formal complaint.

I note that the Bill allows considerable flexibility—some have criticised that—regarding the power given to the Secretary of State and the Security Industry Authority.

[Mr. Bailey]

There are many areas in which the Bill lays down no prescriptions, but instead leaves the matters for later prescription. I welcome the Minister's comment that the operation of the legislation will be continuously reviewed with a view to improving aspects that are not felt to be working appropriately. I should like to single out one such aspect: the inspectorate.

If we are to develop an effective licensing process, the inspectorate must carry out its job with appropriate sensitivity. The existing regime of inspectors has been too close to those elements within the security industry that have opposed the regulation of their industry. When the Bill is passed, a new inspectorate must be established with inspectors recruited who are appropriately qualified and directly accountable to the Security Industry Authority.

I conclude with one caveat: we look to the Minister and the authority continuously to review the process, make amendments where necessary and fill in gaps left by the basic legislation. None the less, we welcome the Bill. A properly regulated security industry will enhance the status of the profession, reassure the public and be of enormous benefit in the fight against crime. I am proud that it is a Labour Government who have, at last, acted.

7.29 pm

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): First, I must apologise for my sudden absence from the Chamber, which was not due to a lack of enthusiasm. As Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, I was meeting the Secretary of State for Defence in what may be our very last meeting. I am afraid that the task of juggling two of my major interests in this place could be done only by listening to half of the Minister's speech, rattling through the Defence Committee in an hour and a half—the speediest session we have ever had, despite the complexity and sensitivity of European defence and security—and returning to listen to my colleagues.

I shall save my colleagues from a speech of Brezhnevian proportions, although I could give one. The introduction of the Bill in the Commons makes today memorable. It is perhaps a little premature to express the aspiration that the Bill will soon become law, given the complex political situation that we are in, but we may be close to seeing legislation. I heard the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), in which he said that he had been a security guard. I was almost a security guard; I introduced my first private Member's Bill in 1977, and sought to show how simple it was to get a job in a security firm. I went to Iver in Buckinghamshire and was asked some penetrating questions by the managing director of the firm, such as "Are you frightened of the dark?", "Can you read?", and "How quickly can you start?" He asked for names of people whom he could contact. I gave the name of my father and my then secretary, neither of whom were approached. Bingo! I was offered the job, as long as the company could get a uniform large enough to fit me, which was probably its biggest task.

It was and is simple to get a job with a security company. When I asked the managing director what training I would get, he almost fell off his chair laughing because there was none. In many ways, our debate is 25 years late. The security industry should have had the intelligence—the self-interest even—to realise that going up the blind alley of self-regulation would be a disaster. It chose that course, in collusion with the previous Government, because it fitted in with the Conservatives' anti-bureaucratic activities and their alleged hostility to regulation. Apparently, when the former Deputy Prime Minister was approached to support regulation, he refused, as he was in the business of deregulating, not regulating.

Most other countries in—dare I say it—the advanced world regulate private security and, indeed, are in their third generation of legislation. Having learned the lessons of the past 25 to 30 years, at long last we are doing what others have done. I would have liked more evidence of experience derived from many of those countries, but the Bill is curiously British and suffers as a result. This is an important day both for me and the private security industry, which, at last, is on the verge of a major breakthrough. Along with other factors that I shall mention later, the Bill will provide it, its employees and those who hire security with a very different type of private security industry, which is more professional, competent, accountable and acceptable to the police and the population as the whole.

Perhaps the industry will rue the day when it saw me as the enemy of the private security industry. The position is quite the reverse: with others, including the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler)—who led the way in the House by introducing an early private Member's Bill in 1973—I made helpful suggestions, but I am afraid that the security industry chose to ignore them.

In my home, I have a plaque that says:

"To Bruce George, in appreciation of his dedication to the task of regulating the private security industry."

That plaque has been hanging on a wall in my house since 1978. When my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham said that he was the youngest Member of the House, I was tempted to say, "I was almost the youngest Member of the House when I first took an interest in the private security industry." One should not draw too many conclusions about the ageing process, but I have waited a long time. A good friend of mine, Peter Heims, once asked at a public meeting whether I was another flash in the pan; he asked whether I was another Member of Parliament getting quick publicity from introducing a ten-minute Bill, then disappearing. Well, Peter Heims, I proved not to be a flash in the pan.

The security industry is enormous, and the number of people it employs goes up almost daily. It has been said that it employs 350,000 people, but I can argue with some justification that it employs even more than that. It depends on how one defines private security. If one defines it in its broadest sense, I am certain that the figure is much higher than 350,000, dwarfing the Home Office and non-Home Office police forces.

The industry comprises manned guarding, both contract and in-house; cash in transit; private investigators, who come in many guises; security consultants; close protection; VIP protection; bodyguards; door supervisors or bouncers; private sector detention services; and manufacturers, designers, installers and maintainers of alarms, locks, safes and security equipment. That equipment includes safes, vaults and security containers; satellite tracking; closed circuit television and other electronic monitoring devices or surveillance equipment;

intrusion detection; access control; bomb protection; fire detection; metal detection; X-ray detection; telephone security equipment; computer security; security storage; security shredding; barriers, shutters, fences and security glass. The industry also comprises staff at places of entertainment, such as pop concerts—the list goes on indefinitely.

There are also products and services on the margins of private security, such as those in employment agencies that specialise in private security; credit check agencies; porters; receptionists; risk managers; museum curators; park rangers; computer operating staff; caretakers in colleges, schools and universities; car park attendants, who have a security function; managers; gamekeepers; and hospital porters. I could go on.

The industry is extremely large and, for a long time, it has been subject to public criticism. It is not a new industry; it goes back three or four millennia. There were locksmiths in the ancient world, as well as bodyguards, watchmen and craftsmen making security grilles.

According to modern detective writers such as Ellis Peters and Lindsey Davis, most monks were engaged in private investigation in one form or another.

Some people believe that the private security industry is a new industry that has supplanted the police. I shall not bore the House with historical evidence, but for most of the past 1,000 years policing and security work has been done by private individuals, groups engaged in self-protection, vigilantes, posses and amateur constables who usually transferred their responsibilities to others by paying them a fee. The role of the state was very limited. There was no police force in modern guise until the beginning of the 19th century. The process of creating the Peel police—the new police—took place over half a century.

The private security industry that existed previously was not expunged by the emergence of the police—the private security sector increased, along with the growth of the police. In many ways, nothing much has changed. Policing and security have been the responsibility of the state, but not exclusively. Neither the industry nor its relationship with the police is new, but that relationship will be on a much better footing after the passage of the Bill.

The modern contract security industry dates from Allan Pinkerton in the United States and the corps of commissionaires in the 1850s. Although the private security industry in its modern form began in Germany, Austria, the United States and Scandinavia, it developed in the United Kingdom only 50 years later. When it did develop, it was subject to enormous criticism and was alleged to be a private army. The idea of the massed ranks of Securicor or Group 4 marching down Whitehall to capture the seat of government stretches the imagination, but in the 1960s and 1970s there was a fear that a group of self-interested organisations was threatening the security of the state.

The image in the 1960s and 1970s, which has persisted, was of an industry with low pay, poor efficiency, an enormous turnover of staff and low public esteem. The industry was seen as disreputable. It was the object of contempt and derision and the butt of endless jokes. I and others tried hard, working alongside the more far-sighted members of the security industry, to put it on a different footing, but the attitude of the industry and the Government ranged from indifferent to hostile.

The Government post-1979 were decidedly unhelpful. In 1991 the Home Office produced a document that stated:

> "Inevitably, users of the industry get what they pay for. The Government considers that issues such as training and wages are fundamentally matters for the industry and its customers. It is ultimately for users to ensure that the company they choose is competent and reliable."

I am afraid that that was not the case.

There were several milestones in the progress towards regulation. Eventually, the Select Committee on Home Affairs took an interest in 1995 and produced an excellent report. A document written by the chief constable of north Wales was leaked. There were parliamentary debates. There were those in the industry who struggled hard to swim against the tide. Now we are at the point of regulation.

I am delighted that in 1997 my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced to the British Security Industry Association that regulation was to be introduced. A consultation paper was issued in 1999 and the Bill was introduced in the House of Lords. Sadly, it reached the House of Lords first, but I suppose that that was the decision of the business managers, who had a great deal of legislation to cram into a limited parliamentary timetable.

Many have asked why private security is necessary, and whether it undermines the police. The exponential growth in private security was deliberately fostered by Lady Thatcher for the same reasons as were attributed to the present Government by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff). Lady Thatcher wanted more people engaged in protection in support of the police. Many of the functions performed by the police as a monopoly for a century were taken away from them.

I believe that that was the right decision, although the police did not always like it. The private security industry is the best job creation scheme yet devised for retired military personnel and retired police officers at any level. Although they might whinge about it when they are serving officers or members of the Police Federation, their hostility sometimes changes to enthusiasm when they realise that there is life after leaving the police force. The Police Federation and the police force recognise that a properly regulated private security industry is not a threat, but a complement to the police force.

There is enough crime to go around; one should not try to hog it all. One should try to transfer many of the responsibilities at present held by the police to the private sector, as long as that does not compromise the primacy of the Home Department police forces. Now that the security industry is about to be legitimised by legislation, I expect that the police and the public need have no fears that they are handing over to the private sector tasks for which it is singularly incompetent.

When I was in Sweden a couple of years ago, I was told that the private sector was guarding the king's sons and nuclear establishments. At that time, the idea of some British private security company having bestowed on it tasks for which it was clearly ill-equipped would have been so laughable as to be almost criminal. I recall that the Select Committee on Defence—we took more interest in private security than did the Home Affairs Committee—regularly said that the Ministry of Defence should not give any further contracts to private security unless the industry was regulated. We are approaching a

[Mr. Bruce George]

period in which the rules of policing and security will have changed while new regulation is being properly implemented. I suspect that most people will say that those changes are for the better.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I am most interested in the case that the right hon. Gentleman makes, with which I am broadly sympathetic. Will he comment on the interface between the police and the public? One of the problems with policing is that people see fewer and fewer policemen and do not have enough non-adversarial contact with them. The Bill will have a strong impact on the police time that is available to deal with the public directly and to develop that relationship in order to build the trust between the public and the police that we all want.

Mr. George: A report published some time ago by the Police Foundation and Policy Studies Institute made the radical suggestion that the police should give up their basic patrolling functions to the private sector. It argued that that would allow them to concentrate on the detection of murder, rape and so on. It would have been a mistake to implement such a proposal, however, as the strength of our police must lie in their umbilical link with the public.

Under the previous and current Governments, the private sector has been increasingly present in public places. In some cases, it is even patrolling them. My late father was a copper for 29 years. During the last 15 years of his tenure in the Glamorgan constabulary, he was paid by the National Coal Board. That is a 1960s practice that could almost be called the privatisation of policing. My father had patrol duties and eventually became head of security of the Coal Board in Wales. I might add that he would not have much to do in that job if he were alive today. His salary as a policeman was paid by the Coal Board to Glamorgan, which then paid it to him. It is wrong, therefore, to suggest that the public-private relationship has changed only recently, although far more such practices now exist.

The police must have more presence on the street, even though everyone says that that is a less efficient form of policing. Thanks to the Home Office under the current and previous Governments, there is now magnificent funding for closed circuit television. I hope that a couple more of the bids that have been made in my constituency will be successful. Monitoring is carried out through closed circuit television cameras that were produced by the private sector, but paid for by the Government. The cameras are providing eyes and ears for the private sector to enable it to work with the police.

Community wardens will soon be walking around instead of policemen. People will be happy to see a uniform, even though it might not be the one that they want to see. If community wardens can communicate swiftly with the police, they will be a sort of municipal security guard on the beat, even if they cannot be bobbies on the beat. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 ensures that local authorities have more policing and security functions, so it takes a change of mindset to realise that the days are gone in which the coppers in blue uniforms and funny hats were dominant, although that is not necessarily for the worse.

Mr. Hayes: I entirely accept what the right hon. Gentleman says. Those days may be gone, but they have gone for good practical reasons. He is right to draw attention to partnership, however, because if the police were to withdraw completely from such roles, it would be injurious to the relationship that I described in my previous intervention. There is a need for a balance of partnership. Finally, he may be very lucky with closed circuit television, but the Government have turned down Spalding's bid for CCTV—a disgraceful decision that provides no comfort for people in my constituency. *[Interruption.]* Instead of chuntering on the Front Bench, the Minister should take some responsibility for the matter, as he is not very popular in Spalding at the moment.

Mr. George: My hon. Friend the Minister is popular in other areas. I suspect that crime in many inner urban areas is excessive even by rural standards.

Many things are changing for the better. We now have a partnership that will have an enormous effect on crime prevention and detection. There is very little that the private sector cannot do. Most of the functions of which the police are capable of performing can and are being performed by the private sector. As public forensic laboratories are overstretched, much forensic work is being farmed out to private laboratories. More investigators are probably attached to central Government Departments and to the private sector than to the police force. Technology has monopolised the private sector's expansion. It does not want police powers, as it does not want to be seen to be seeking to usurp the police. However, intelligent members of the police force, such as John Stevens, the Commissioner, and officers in my area, recognise that a new relationship must be forged.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I revert to the valid point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) made. If we allow our private security industry to play too great a role in policing domestic estates, is there not a danger of creating a two-tier justice system comprising those who can afford to employ such firms and those who cannot? Will the right hon. Gentleman comment on the differences between the powers of the police, who can arrest on suspicion, and those of private security firms, which can make only a citizen's arrest?

Mr. George: That will remain the case. I hope that Home Office funding will increase and that the accusation that only those who live in expensive areas can afford private security will thus disappear. In my constituency, the likelihood of imposing a levy on householders to pay for enhanced security is small. However, I recognise, as do the intelligent sectors of the private security industry, that community wardens do not want to be perceived as the protectors only of those who have the fattest wallets.

The private security industry has grown throughout the world for roughly the same reasons: increasing experience of crime and the fear of it. I visited Finland, which has a thriving security industry but hardly any crime. I asked where the perception of crime originated; it came not from Finland but from watching "Starsky and Hutch" and "The Bill". Such programmes give the private security industry a fillip. American and British television gave the Finns a greater fear of crime than reality dictated.

Private security has grown because it is a good industry to enter for people who want to make a profit. The increase in terrorism and environmental protest,

the demands of insurance companies, the Government's commitment to privatisation, Governments' failures adequately to fund the police, the growth of mass ownership of property that is "worth nicking", the role of advertising, changes in technology and the deregulated nature of the market are all contributory factors.

Let us consider good legislation. My former assistant and I have studied more than 100 measures from around the world. We devised a method of comparing different regulatory regimes, and we placed them in the following categories: non-interventionist, which pertains in this country; minimum narrow; minimum wide; comprehensive narrow and comprehensive wide. I shall not bore hon. Members with details, but I believe that the best category is broad. A broad regulatory system covers all the sectors of the private security industry.

I do not support a shallow system of regulation, which means only access to criminal records. I want the Bill to establish broad and deep regulation. I am in favour of heavier regulation; Conservative Members may not agree.

Mr. Bercow: I am listening to the right hon. Gentleman's speech with interest and respect, but given the length of time for which he has campaigned for a statutory regulation system, does he not agree that it should be visible, explicit and clear? Does that not lead him to be mildly suspicious of, if not unhappy about, the Bill's scope for secondary legislation? Would it not help if as much as possible were incorporated in the measure?

Mr. George: I shall deal with that point shortly. Before the hon. Gentleman gets too excited about my response, I emphasise that I would have loved to be subcontracted by the Minister to draft the Bill. I have drafted four measures, all of which—especially the first—were at least as good as the one that we are considering this evening. However, the four attempts that I made all met with miserable rejection by the hon. Gentleman's colleagues who were in government at the time.

I would like to have seen a more comprehensive Bill that filled in the gaps and met the criteria that I believe are critical. There is a problem with the Bill, as I have said clearly to the Minister, whom I deeply respect and admire. I am not saying that in an attempt to influence him—well, yes, I am. Forgive my earlier remark, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I apologise for lying to the House.

I am not quite certain what we are voting for. We shall be supporting a Bill that is quite exciting, because we do not know exactly what is in it. Even if the Bill is not as detailed as I would like, there is a great deal in it that offers the opportunity to deliver what I want to see. There is great flexibility in its provisions. However, that same Bill is capable of delivering a form of regulation that will be only marginally superior to what we have now. My dilemma is that, because we could be only weeks from a general election and days from the prorogation of Parliament, I, or anyone else with an interest in the subject, will hardly have ample time to table an enormous number of amendments or to consider them effectively.

I hope that the very thing that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) thinks is a weakness in the Bill might be to its advantage. The Minister can see the near unanimity not only in the House but in the security industry, which is delighted that the Bill is being introduced, but it does not go far enough. There have been few cases in the recent history of legislation of an industry begging the Government to dump more responsibilities on it. There are those who say, "Ah, but we don't want to burden industry." In my view, the security industry is quite prepared to have additional costs imposed on it, if the legislation will do the trick. I therefore look forward, in the next few weeks or days, to seeing a little more detail of what the Minister intends to do.

I recall that, when I gave evidence to the Select Committee on Home Affairs five years ago, the then Chairman, Sir Ivan Lawrence, said, "Aren't you, Mr. George, rather too heavy in your model of regulation? Don't you prefer the lighter touch, the model of regulation that is not heavy? What do you think about Oftel, Ofwat and Ofgas? Why not Of-sec-ind?" I said, "Mr. Chairman, my reply to you would certainly contain the word 'off'." I was not, therefore, at all enthusiastic about the light model of regulation.

Mr. Bercow: It is the sophistication that takes one aback.

Mr. George: Indeed. Sir Ivan Lawrence could see what I was getting at, because he had defended and prosecuted many people with a wide, or, indeed, a narrow vocabulary, including the Kray twins—a case that I was delighted he lost miserably.

It is important that the legislation should do the trick, and in many ways it does. The fact that it exists is a step forward. It will establish greater accountability. At the moment, who has heard of the British Security Industry Association, unless they belong to it? Not many companies do, out of the totality. To whom does one complain if one's burglar alarm turns out to be duff? To whom does one complain if the private investigator whom one hires does not find the person he is looking for—and does not even try—but charges a vast amount for doing nothing?

The regulatory authority will represent consumers, trade unions and employers, large and small, and I hope that it has a chairman who is genuinely independent of the industry. The Bill will lead to greater efficiency, greater accountability and greater transparency, so I do not want my criticisms to be considered as outweighing the positive elements.

The Bill will deal more effectively with crooks. How much longer can the industry tolerate being considered to be the repository of crooked coppers who set up private security companies after being thrown out of the Met or West Midlands police? How long can it endure people's taunts? I recall watching Inspector Frost discuss with his sergeant the culprit for a series of rapes. Suspicion turned to two security guards in a nearby factory. The sergeant said to Frost, "Those guys over there—have they got form?" Frost replied, "Course they have. They're security guards, aren't they?"

Such perceptions are partly the fault of the private security industry, because it has taken that route and not got close to the Government. Nor has there been legal access to criminal records. I know of endless examples of crimes being committed, but the Bill has a wider aim. I would not want the Government to think that the Bill's main purpose is to deal with crime, and I am sure that they do not—it is more to do with efficiency, accountability and professionalism, which is singularly lacking in many sectors of the industry.

[Mr. George]

The hon. Member for Buckingham tried to get me to criticise the Government; well, I shall make some criticisms. The Bill's prime weakness is its lack of width—it is focused too closely on manned guarding. As I said early in my speech, a vast sector of the private security industry is, for the moment, outside the scope of regulation. If one enters a major City bank, however, one can consider the security industry's penetration of such a building. There is closed circuit television, access control, security shredding and security lighting. It will have been designed by an architect specialising in security, and computer security is also involved. Every aspect of private security is there, but the only people who will be regulated are the two guys on the door, and they will not be regulated if they are in-house employees. It would be better to call this the "part of the private security industry" Bill.

Ample scope has been built into the Bill to allow the Security Industry Authority and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to enlarge the focus. Although that is right, I do not like the way in which it has been done, as the regulatory authority could not cope with 350,000 people suddenly appearing before it to demand approval to operate. Perhaps it is right to deal with manned guarding and bouncers subcontracted to local authorities first, after which we can regulate the other sectors. I hope that my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Minister tell us how much of the security industry will be regulated, because it genuinely wants regulation.

My next major concern—the exclusion of in-house security operatives—is linked to the previous one. Initially, in-house operatives were in the consultative paper, then they were out. Who nobbled the Home Office? As the press say, step forward the better regulation taskforce and those members of the security industry who are recidivist opposers of reform. In my view, they clearly nobbled members of the better regulation taskforce, who then put the screws on whoever advised the Minister. Out went in-house security, because, somehow, regulation would impose too many burdens on it: cobblers—absolute cobblers. I am not certain whether that word is acceptable in this permissive age, but the first one that came to mind would have had to be withdrawn.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. George: May I continue for just one sentence? I am sorry, but as I have waited for 25 years, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will continue to be indulgent. After all, I will not have a chance to speak in the Standing Committee if one is not established.

Let us consider the example of a factory whose security arrangements are a mixture of private and contract. Part of its security force is subject to regulation and standards, while the rest is not. Let us imagine a shopping mall in which some shops are guarded by in-house personnel, while others are guarded by contract personnel. The security staff will all wear the same sort of uniforms, and the register may state who is licensed and who is not; nevertheless, the system is nonsensical.

I promise to give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham in a moment, but there is another big problem. There are some excellent security companies in this country—world-class companies—but we have more rubbish companies than almost any other country, and they will find smart lawyers. A company hiring staff will say, "Why should we go to a contract security firm? It will have education and training standards, which will cost us. All the guards will now have to apply for licences, and that cost will be passed on to us. We do not want all the problems associated with improved standards; we will hire in-house staff."

That company—unless it is a good company—will say, "We will not train those staff. We will not pay them more than the minimum wage. We will duck and dive to do the minimum that will ensure that our insurance company is prepared to accept what we are doing." Alternatively, it may find a crooked private security company which, by some legal dodge, can masquerade as in-house security. I think that providing for in-house personnel not to have to be licensed defeats the Bill's objectives.

Now I give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He has nothing for which to apologise: I am listening to his speech with rapt attention, and my appetite for it is insatiable. I hope, however, that he will tell us—on the strength of his experience and knowledge, which I respect—something about what happens in other European Union countries. I mentioned this in an earlier intervention on the Minister.

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us something about the trends, in terms of the incidence of crime, in the private security industries of EU member states where there are statutory regulation systems, and also something about the costs of some of those systems?

Mr. George: The costs of a proper regulatory system are by no means excessive. Good companies such as Group 4, Securicor and Securitas, which is a Swedish firm now operating in the UK, work in regulated environments, and very profitably.

If I were asked, "Who is the biggest villain of the piece? Is it the Home Office, is it the private security industry, or is it someone else?", I would say, "If I must identify a single cause of the malaise in the industry, it is this: the public who hire want good security without being prepared to pay for it." In a properly regulated private security industry, men and women will not undergo the ridiculous two-day period of training with no examination and one day of on-the-job training that currently passes for proper training in this country.

Companies should pay people a decent wage. They should not necessarily recruit from the bottom of the employment pile, because they will generally get what they pay for. They should provide proper facilities, proper communications and decent uniforms. They should encourage the men and women whom they employ to feel a sense of pride in belonging to the security industry, rather than feeling embarrassed to admit that they are door supervisors, burglar alarm installers or security guards. It will cost—it will really cost—but we are demonstrating the price to be paid by those who do not pay a decent price. The price that we are paying is a low-status industry that has high personnel turnover and does not work with the police, which perhaps contributes to increased crime.

I had long thought that any legislation was better than no legislation, but I was wrong. With no legislation, we have at least the possibility of decent legislation being introduced eventually.

There is no federal responsibility for the issue in the United States, for example, but some states have very good regulatory systems. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Member for Buckingham, but some of those states very definitely have a free-enterprise culture. Florida, which is not known for its great enthusiasm for central intervention, has one of the best regulatory systems that I have seen. It is an excellent system. I visited the regulatory authority in Orlando and its head office in Tallahassee and was enormously impressed. British Columbia, most of the other Canadian provinces and most of the Australian states also have excellent regulation.

I am delighted to say that, in the European Union, the French and the Germans are no better than we are on the issue. Undoubtedly the best regulatory systems in Europe are in Scandinavia, principally in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. Spain also has an excellent regulatory system although it is a little too detailed. I really do not think that the design of women's tights should necessarily be the responsibility of the Interior Ministry and the subject of statutory instruments. That is going too far. I could willingly send the Minister diagrams of those instruments of torture. Russia also has an excellent regulatory system.

Currently, we are with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and some countries in Africa and in Latin America in having no regulation whatsoever. I want us to create the type of system that I have seen in numerous other countries. When people see security guards in the United Kingdom, I want them to say, "They look almost as good as police. They are paid almost as well as police. They are alert, helpful and professional. Just look at how they are dressed—clean shoes and nice uniforms. They are proud of their job."

Conversely, in the 1970s, in Wolverhampton, a firm called Shield used to recruit by going round the Salvation Army on Fridays and Saturdays. It found the down-and-outs and offered them a weekend's kip in a private security guard's uniform. It would take them to a site at 8 pm on a Friday and pick them up again at 8 am on a Monday. Not many companies operate like that now, thank goodness, but too many still do.

I have described my vision, which may sound a bit apocalyptic, of how the industry should operate, and I can genuinely see the way forward. We now have a minimum wage and stipulations on how companies should operate, some of which are based on European initiatives. Technological growth will force many companies to choose between employing better technology or more people. As labour becomes ever more expensive, the greater the pressure will be on those companies to strike a balance in how they operate. I can certainly see the industry evolving into something that is very different from what it is today.

I should like other provisions to be included in legislation. Intruder alarm designers and installers, for example, should be covered by legislation. Some dreadful companies are operating in that sector. Although there is not the same incidence of crime among those who install intruder alarms, I believe that, for the sake of efficiency, the sector should be regulated.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: A moment ago, in his excellent speech, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the need for the public to be reassured by private security guards. I am sure that he will know the Bill backwards. I am wondering whether the public have any way of distinguishing security guards who are licensed under the Bill from those who are not. Paragraph 2 of schedule 2 deals with the duties of manned guarding. However, none of the six sub-paragraphs in that paragraph deals in any way with the issue of identification. Does he think that it would be a good idea if security guards employed by firms that are licensed under the Bill had somewhere on their uniform an insignia showing that they are so licensed?

Mr. George: My private Member's Bills in 1977, 1984, 1987 and 1994 offered models for regulation. They addressed that problem, but I suspect that the Home Office believes that primary legislation does not need to go into such minute detail. My Spanish friends can describe exactly the size, weight and shape of a badge, but it is more important to strengthen existing legislation to ensure that no uniform can be confused with that of other, public, services.

It is very important that staff wear a badge that can be easily seen, and readily inspected by any appointed person. I am worried that the regulated sector will be given different privileges from the non-regulated sector. How will people distinguish between security guards who are in-house and unregulated and those who are regulated and under contract?

The better regulation task force looked into fit-person criteria and produced a scintillating piece of nonsense. I mean no disrespect to plumbers and cleaners, but to compare their roles with those of alarm installers and locksmiths displays a degree of unreality. It is necessary to regulate the people who set up security apparatus in other people's homes. Why should home owners not know that those people have been well trained and that they have not just come out of the slammer? Their job is not comparable to a plumber's, who is entrusted with a different set of tasks.

A further criticism—or suggestion—that I would offer has to do with a matter on which the Bill remains flexible. The Bill, rightly, will require individuals to be licensed, but it proposes only a voluntary code for companies. There is ample precedent in other industries—such as financial services, gaming, gas supply, insurance, meat processing, telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, water and aviation—of companies being subject to standards and having to prove certain matters to the licensing authority before being awarded a licence to operate.

In my Private Security (Registration) Bill of 1994, I went into some detail about what companies should be required to present by way of information. It specified that information should be given about the characters and backgrounds of directors and officers of the firm, and about their criminal records. It also specified information about the financial records of the firm, its directors and officers, and information about the character of the private security services that the firm proposed to provide. That 1994 Bill also specified that a proposed firm should have adequate insurance, and that its premises should be adequate.

The latter point is very important. My 1994 Bill said that a proposed private security firm should operate from premises considered to be "suitable for the purpose". In my model, a licence could not be given to a company

[Mr. George]

offering, say, a central monitoring station for the intruder alarm industry if that station is not strongly protected. That protection must be able to deter a person from taking over the premises and thus allowing burglar alarms to ring without response. I hope that companies will be subject to compulsory standards.

The part of the Bill devoted to training standards is an element that has the potential to be developed in a way that I would consider appropriate. However, the drafting leaves me with no idea whether that will happen. If the Minister has already covered that matter during my absence, I apologise—I shall check in *Hansard* tomorrow.

We could carry on with the present BSIA system of two days' formal training, plus one day on the job and no examination. However, I should much prefer the Home Secretary to issue stronger instructions—not mere guidelines—to the SIA to the effect that he does not want to maintain the current arrangements, which amount almost to an absence of training.

Perhaps the following account of training in other countries will scare some people. In Belgium, security officers receive 120 hours' training; within eight months they must pass a test. Additional specialist training of 40 hours for weapons is given—that will not apply to us—as well as 75 hours on the protection of people and 16 hours on guard dogs. Incidentally, I was invited to speak at a conference on guard dogs in Barking—the organisers did not know why I was helpless with laughter when they telephoned me.

In Belgium, an extra 65 hours' training is given for people who are responsible for cash in transit. Managers receive an extra 70 hours. Why not? Why should training be confined to the poor infantry? Why should not there be training for non-commissioned officers and the officer corps?

In Denmark, the training period is 120 hours; there is no examination. In Finland, it is 40 hours. In Germany, the situation is almost as bad as it is in this country. In the Netherlands, three weeks' basic training is required, with additional training leading to a basic security diploma that must be passed within 12 months. In Spain, 200 hours of training is set and supervised by the police, and an examination must be passed. Thereafter, training of 75 hours a year is required. In Sweden, security officers need 217 hours of training before they are accredited. The mother of all security training schemes operates in Hungary, where 350 hours are imposed. In a British university, that would probably lead to the award of a master's degree.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what assessment he has made of the merits of the Security Industry Training Organisation? It was founded about 10 years ago and is known for its independence. It operates not only in this country but internationally. Can he also offer the House a pearl of wisdom on the merits of ISO 9000 and of the proportion of private security industry operators in this country who conform to it?

Mr. George: I suspect that most of them have never heard of it. In the absence of standards set by the Government, the many privately established standards—on the ISO model—are better than nothing. I should like a system such as that proposed in my Bill, which stated that:

"The Council shall make rules specifying the training to be received by all private security agents, which may include . . . a basic training course . . . a minimum period of pre-assignment training . . . refresher training . . . further training, including management training; and . . . professional qualifications approved by the Council.

The Council may recognise as satisfactory and efficient training programmes, including training programmes established by or under the auspices of registered firms or associations of registered firms or persons engaged in the private security industry.

The Secretary of State may designate as efficient such courses, offered by academic institutions, which appear to him to provide appropriate training, or to lead to appropriate qualifications, including National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ)."

Things have moved on since then.

Each sector of the industry will have its own specific training requirements. Obviously, it will take longer to train a locksmith than a security guard, so I hope that the Home Office will instruct the SIA to work with the industry to lay down the standards for each sector.

They should be sufficiently challenging to ensure that the people who emerge from the training programme, at the end of an examination, can do the job.

I recall my assistant applying for a job with a reputable American company, now Swedish owned. The two-day training programme that he undertook had no examination at the end of it and was not part of the company's training programme. If he successfully completed the two-day training programme—that is, if he was still alive, had not expired and still wished to be a security guard—he would be offered a job. That is not the way to proceed.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman is criticising the British Security Industry Association. I am sure that he is aware that the BSIA covers about 70 per cent. of the existing security operations in this country. It covers closed circuit television, access control, manned security, grilles, safes, secure transport, and alarm manufacture, distribution and installation. The association therefore covers a very wide field in its ISO 9000 qualification, and in that qualification it regularly works with representatives in Europe to ensure that its standards are compatible. Is he saying that he criticises the BSIA for those standards, or does he think that the Bill should build on them?

Mr. George: I have no objections to the BSIA as a trade association. My objections to the BSIA are limited to when it purports to be a regulatory authority, because I do not believe that a trade association should have undertaken the task of regulation.

As a result of criticism from people like me, the BSIA took its inspectorate out of its Worcester building and sent it 25 miles down the road. To my mind, that mileage did not separate its licensing authority—its inspectorate—from the industry.

There must be a proper inspectorate. I mentioned several countries with great legislation, but great legislation is a waste of time unless there is a decent inspectorate. One of the nonsenses in the House of Lords a couple of days ago was the statement that the inspectorate may inspect during reasonable hours only.

The time to catch people cheating is in unreasonable hours, and I do not know why the Under-Secretary, Lord Bassam, acquiesced in that nonsense.

The Security Industry Training Organisation, a very good organisation, may be part of the framework but must be extricated from its links with the BSIA. The inspectorate should use the expertise obtained in BSIA and its inspectorate, and in the National Approval Council for Security Systems—the intruder alarm inspectorate. Both those organisations are closely linked either to the security industry or to insurance.

I hope that the Minister, in his wisdom, will say that we need a strong inspectorate, that that inspectorate may take in people from the good existing inspectorates, wherever they may be, but that those people will be part of a Home Office inspectorate and it will not be a case of the Home Office subcontracting to an inspectorate closely linked to industry and telling it to get on with the job. The inspectorate and the legislation will seem compromised if it is seen that the big boys, who have obstructed regulation for 30 years, are to be the beneficiaries of something to which they objected so strongly.

Mr. Hayes: The Home Affairs Committee, in the report to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, explicitly concluded that the current standards, particularly standards of training, in much of the private security industry were unsatisfactory and

"below the level the public need and have a right to expect."

In the light of that, does he believe that the Bill goes far enough? I detect in his remarks an implication that he thinks that it does not.

Mr. George: The Bill as it stands is in part a mystery. It will depend on whom the Home Secretary appoints as chief executive, as chairman, and on who the members of the board are. I would not want them to be toadies directly responsible to the Home Secretary or the Minister of State, seeking permission from them before they blow their noses. Nor do I want the members of the board simply to come from the private security industry and from those companies that still object to regulation.

Can hon. Members believe that two large security companies would still love to see the Bill simply fade away? One of the crucial issues, therefore, is: who will be appointed to the board? I hope that the chairman will be not an establishment figure but an established figure, with a track record of impartiality, who does not come from the private security industry and is seen not as taking his or her orders from Worcester and the BSIA, but as basing the general framework of his or her operations on orders from the Home Office.

I hope that, in the days ahead, the Ministers of State will say, "We were a bit vague in the section on training. We will tell the SIA and its chief executive and chairman that the training must be serious." We do not want the current training to prevail; it must be more on the lines of that in Spain or Sweden, where the training is conducive to establishing a professional guard, not a half-trained or untrained guard.

Even if people with PhDs were instructed, it would be difficult to convey what is required. Spain has a good system that involves an examination, but the trainers will not even be regulated under the proposals. Proper training is important, and the trainers must be able to convince the Home Secretary that they, too, are competent to be licensed.

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mentioned the auditing process and analysis involved in ISO 9000. Is it not the case that, in the typical circumstances that exist in most other industries, part of that process involves the accreditation and careful assessment of trainers to ensure that they do their job properly? If the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that that will not obtain under the Bill, it represents a glaring omission.

Mr. George: The ISO standards series is voluntary and the percentage of people who have adopted it is, regrettably, too low. I want the training and standards to be compulsory. Perhaps we can use the various rules or models laid down for security storage, cash in transit or central stations. That is a good basis on which to find out how other people think security companies should operate.

Having gained that expertise and having consulted the industry, the SIA will, I hope, draft its own standards. I hope that the SIA will tell those who want to provide guarding services that they must meet certain requirements, that their men and women must undertake certain training and that, if they cannot do so, they will not be given a licence.

Mr. Bercow: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern about the fact that the authority should not be a prisoner of the private security industry, but that, of course, does not mean that it is incapable of learning from and being inspired by it. I do not know whether he was meeting the Secretary of State for Defence at the time, but I wonder whether I can refer to the point that I made earlier. I hope that he will agree that the Secretary of State's discretion should be properly circumscribed so that it is not unfettered and so that he does not have the opportunity simply to throw baubles at people as a reward for loyal service in unrelated fields. Does he agree that the authority's composition should draw in the expertise of the industry, the police force and others in related sectors?

Mr. George: From conversations that I have had with Ministers, I am sure that they have that in mind. My Private Security (Registration) Bill stated:

"The Council shall consist of twelve persons nominated by the Secretary of State . . . The Secretary of State in making nominations to the Council shall have due regard to the desirability of securing that the Council includes persons representative of or, as the case may be, who have experience of, armoured car and courier services, guard and patrol services, private investigation services, installers and manufacturers of locks, safes, alarms and other security equipment, the police service, the insurance industry, the consumer interest and the Home Department and of all parts of the United Kingdom."

I wanted a balance and, in fairness, I am satisfied that that will be achieved under the Bill. There will be sub-committees and sub-committees of sub-committees, and people who are not on the main board can serve on them. It is right that the private security industry is well represented, but that should not just mean the big boys and the major companies. The body should include members from the small and medium-sized companies—

[Mr. George]

the alarm installers and contract guards—but a significant number on the body should come from outside the industry.

Initially, I thought that there should be a balance between the two, but I now think that the majority should be made up of those from outside the industry. The chairman should also come from outside the industry and should not be linked to a private security company. That will ensure the legitimacy of—and the respect for—the organisation.

I again offer my profuse apologies for the length of my speech, but with one book and three more on the way, 150 articles and hundreds and hundreds of meetings, mostly involving bashing my head against a brick wall, I know that the industry has a potential that has not been remotely realised. Regulation by itself will not be a panacea. The industry will still require ingenuity, good investment, good people and the use of universities and teaching courses in security. Regulation can, however, make a significant contribution despite the Bill's imperfections and omissions.

The hon. Member for Buckingham thinks that the Bill's timing is malevolent; as I said, it should have been introduced 25 years ago. Unless the general election is in November, there is no way the Bill will receive the proper scrutiny that amendments deserve. However, I hope that the Bill will receive its Second Reading and that Ministers will say that the permissive powers provide us with a clue as to what they have in mind. I hope that it is not the minimalist approach of hardly any training, or the maximalist approach either, because I would not want to destroy the security industry by imposing the idea that a guard should receive 150 hours training. However, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his colleagues will give us a greater clue as to what will be available.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The right hon. Gentleman is far more knowledgeable about the subject than me and many others, and I bow to his knowledge. This is a serious question, but given the political situation that we are in, does he advise that we should have a canter round the course now, but not seek to rush the Bill through before a possible early election? Or is it better to have the debate on Second Reading, benefit from the deliberations of the Lords and then return to the Bill in the early days of the next Parliament, whoever are in government? Liberal Democrats certainly make the commitment that we shall expedite its passage as long as it receives proper scrutiny in the next Parliament.

Mr. George: The hon. Gentleman missed most of my speech, but he has hit the bull's eye. In an ideal world, I hope that we would give the matter the adequate scrutiny that would allow a better Bill to emerge than the one that is before us.

The security industry faces the same choice as I do. After 1,000 years—or the 25 years I have wanted to do something about the issue—we have a Bill. Will we accept it with its imperfections, or will we say that it is not good enough and ask the Government to introduce a better Bill in the next Parliament? The latter is an attractive option. However, most of us are realists. There is no guarantee that when the Prime Minister and his Cabinet decide on the legislative programme, they will say, "Ah well, old Bruce George was hoping there would be a new security Bill, so let's have one." I merely hope that the Bill is flexible enough to deal with most of the industry's anxieties and expectations.

I shall not rattle off the organisations and companies that have called for stronger legislation. I hope that the consultative process has made the Minister realise that the Bill is pitched at a level that is lower than the industry would accept. However, if he is able, without imposing outrageous costs and standards, to advise the chairman of the new authority about the parameters within which he wants him to operate in the short term, it will have been worth it. The Bill could almost be as good as the best legislation. However, if that opportunity is not taken and the Bill satisfies the better regulation taskforce and the minimalists, I will look back at the past few weeks with despair.

Mr. Hughes: I am seeking the right hon. Gentleman's advice as much as anything. If there is no chance to amend the Bill, is it worth having as it stands?

Mr. George: I was not here for half the Minister's speech, so I do not know what promises he gave. If he sets out how we are to proceed with training, which is not mentioned in the Bill, that will help. He said that the chairman will be independent, so I am satisfied on that count. I will be happy if he assures us that the Bill's flexibility will allow this Government and their successor to say to the new authority, "You don't have carte blanche. Parliament has supported the Bill and it wants something a little stronger."

Mr. Bercow: I do not wish to dampen or quell the right hon. Gentleman's optimism, but I have a constitutional point to make. He must be aware that no Government are in a position to bind their successors. No Minister of State, no matter how senior, important, respected, or influential, and no matter how full his diary is—as in the case of the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke)—is in a position to say what his successor would do. The right hon. Gentleman should not be bought off too easily.

Mr. George: People do not always proceed according to what is constitutionally available. I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point, but I hope that the Home Secretary or the Minister will put some flesh on the Bill in a speech over the next week or two. I realise that whoever becomes Home Secretary or Minister of State may not be constitutionally bound to accept this Government's policies. Perhaps the Home Secretary will take over the role of Foreign Secretary and the Minister will deservedly be promoted to the Cabinet, perhaps as Minister of Defence. However, a word in the ear of the Minister of the day, with an offer that cannot be refused, would transmit the views of this Administration to the next.

This is not a great Bill, but it is a potentially good one. If the gaps are filled in, I suspect that most of the industry and most hon. Members present would be reasonably satisfied. After the election, we shall see what Administration we have, and hopefully the words of the Minister of State will influence his successor so that when the regulatory authority is established, the guidelines will

be stronger and will not give the new SIA carte blanche to allow the old nonsense that has bedevilled the industry for the past 25 years to continue.

We do not want the SIA simply to be a gatekeeper, regulating who comes into the industry. We want it to be a catalyst for progressive change in an industry that has underperformed over the years. We are now setting the framework for an industry of which we can be proud, not to, of, or about which we can be hostile, critical and ambivalent. I will support the Bill, in the hope that it will deliver more than a rather negative view of it might lead us to conclude it will.

8.51 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am delighted to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am even more delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), one of the leading experts on the subject in the country, if not the world. His speech was one of the most effective that I have heard in my nine years as a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: If the Minister is patient, I shall give way in a minute. I want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Walsall, South because his speech was statesmanlike. I hope that in the light of the right hon. Gentleman's great experience on the subject, the Minister listened carefully to what he had to say.

I want to quote from the right hon. Gentleman's book, which he wrote last year with Mark Button, because he summed up the private security industry admirably. He said:

"The term 'private security industry' is a generic term used to describe an amalgam of distinct industries and professions bound together by a number of functions, including crime prevention, order maintenance, loss reduction and protection; but these functions are neither common nor exclusive to all the activities of the private security industry, though the more that apply to a particular activity the more clearly it can be considered as private security."

I agree with that definition entirely. I now give way to the Minister.

Mr. Clarke: Why did the hon. Gentleman wait five hours before seeking to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Why was he not here for the first four hours of the debate?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: That is a rather churlish point. The Minister knows perfectly well that hon. Members have other duties in the House. Any Member is entitled to attend a debate and to speak in the House, provided that we can catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and hopefully to achieve some benefit by doing so. The House may conceivably derive some benefit from the speech.

Mr. Bercow: May I put it on the record that my hon. Friend and I have previously discussed this matter, that I thought it entirely possible that he might wish to speak on the important issues appertaining to the private security industry and that I, for one, am delighted that he is now contributing to the debate? Will my hon. Friend take it from me that I am delighted to be here to wind up the debate, and to wait right up to the last speech before the Minister's, in the approach to 10 o'clock if necessary? *[Interruption.]* The Minister is chuntering inanely from a sedentary position, expressing his disapproval of anybody else's entitlement to speak.

Does my hon. Friend accept that the Minister's attitude is simply due to the fact that he is gradually becoming a bit too big for his boots? He thinks that he is important and superior, and that he should be somewhere else; he cannot really be bothered and he does not want to listen. That is arrogance, and he deserves to be kicked out of office as soon as possible.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right—the Minister has a bullying, hectoring style. He is part of an overbearing Executive who would rather put legislation through the House with no debate at all, so of course he does not want Members to speak on the matter, to debate it thoroughly and to explore all the points that need to be made.

Mr. Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Clifton-Brown: If the Minister is going to make the sort of intervention that he made before, I shall not give way, but if it is to be a sensible, constructive intervention, I will. Does he wish to intervene?

Mr. Clarke *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Clifton-Brown: No, he does not, so his intervention was not to be sensible and constructive. That says volumes about the Minister of State.

Let us return to the real debate before you call us all to order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Member for Walsall, South helpfully listed the sorts of activity that are covered by the private security industry. It is worth examining their scope, as the industry covers an extremely wide field. It covers manned security services, including static guarding, cash in transit, door supervision, stewardship, close protection, detention services, security storage and shredding; professional security services, including security consultants and professional investigators; and security products, including intruder alarms, closed circuit television, access control, electronic article surveillance equipment, detection equipment, locks, safes, vaults, security storage, barriers, shutters, fences, security glass windows and armoured vehicles. It can be seen that the industry's scope is very wide.

The Minister of State asked why I wanted to participate in the debate. Had he been a little more patient and listened to my speech a little longer before intervening, he would have learned that it so happens that the offices of the Group 4 security firm are located in my constituency.

Mr. Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I shall in a little while, but only if the Minister's intervention is going to be sensible and constructive.

During my years as a Member of Parliament, the director of Group 4, David Dickinson, has become a good friend. He is an extremely sensible person whom I last met when I went to see the potential asylum seekers from

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the hijacked Afghan aircraft, who were temporarily housed at the fire service college in my constituency. He was personally supervising the guarding operation for them and we renewed our friendship on that occasion. He has said of the Bill:

"Self-regulation has failed. There are too many horror stories around and too many people who are engaging in criminality under the cloak of the private security industry."

Most of us would say amen to that.

Mr. Clarke: I wondered whether the hon. Gentleman was aware that the fact that he represents part of that company has already been discussed at some length by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), who also made many of the points that the hon. Gentleman is now making. However, as he was not present, he would not know that.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I have spoken to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) and discussed with him the points that he made. I do not think that he made the points that I have already made, and I believe that in the rest of my speech I shall not make precisely the same points as he made. Again, the Minister of State's intervention has been churlish and not very constructive, so I shall now continue with my speech and hope not to have to give way to him too many more times. However, I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes).

Mr. Hayes: I simply wanted to say that the Minister is doing his reputation no good with those foolish interventions. He would do well to remember the words of Mark Twain, who said that it was better to remain seated in silence and be suspected of being stupid than to rise to one's feet and speak, and remove all doubt.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I shall not pursue my hon. Friend's line. He has made his point in his own way. Suffice it to say that the Minister is extremely able on occasion, and he demeans himself when he makes the sort of intervention that he has made during my speech. I hope that we can now proceed in a constructive manner.

The chairman of the Association of Security Consultants, who has also welcomed the Bill, said:

"I am pleased to see that 'Regulation' will be in a Bill before Parliament in the next session".

On the whole, the Bill has received a welcome in general terms. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for Walsall, South that it does not go far enough and that it is insufficiently comprehensive, so I issue a small challenge: if the Bill is not passed before the general election, perhaps there will be time during the recess for him to compose some useful amendments and addendums to the Bill. The Minister of State then might—in a constructive manner, I hope—consider those amendments and addendums before reintroducing the Bill in the new Parliament, if that is the intention. We would all benefit from that advice and information.

The Bill has had a quite a long genesis. I do not want to go into its full history; suffice it to say that much of that genesis occurred under the previous Conservative Government. A consultation paper was issued in December 1986, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who was then a Home Office Minister, said:

"We want to get at the one man and his dog, the cowboy, the guy who has stayed out of Wormwood Scrubs and is trying to work as a security guard the next day."

That is precisely the type of person whom we want to eliminate. It has recently been estimated that 2,600 crimes a year are committed by people hiding behind the apparent legitimacy of a security guard's uniform. As I said, such people should be banned from employment.

I made a few points in response to the right hon. Member for Walsall, South, including the fact that it is essential—this should be covered in primary legislation—that the public have legitimate means of knowing who security guards are and whether they are licensed by the Security Industry Authority or are employed by firms licensed by the SIA. I hope that the Minister will deal with that in his winding-up speech.

The British Security Industry Association is the main professional trade association for the security industry. As I said in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Walsall, South, 70 per cent. of the security business in the United Kingdom is covered by its members. Although it has largely welcomed the Bill, in line with the right hon. Gentleman's criticisms it has issued a number of strictures and reservations about it. It is worth briefly going through the aspects with which it is unhappy, including the lack of mandatory inspection for security companies. We would probably all like that to be covered by the Bill. If there is no mandatory inspection, how can we be sure that the inspection regime is operating properly?

The association has reservations about the absence of licensing for in-house officers. If officers running such firms are not properly licensed, how do we know that they are running them properly? The association also mentions in-house CCTV monitoring personnel and alarm installers. There is a very good CCTV scheme in Cirencester in my constituency. It was one of the first in the country, was grant-aided by the previous Conservative Government and works incredibly effectively, covering the centre of Cirencester and a wider area—some security cameras are on a high building and can scan a long way. When it was first introduced, there were civil liberties concerns but, as time has passed, people have got used to it and feel safer in the centre of Cirencester. A number of serious criminals have been apprehended through the CCTV scheme. Although it is often manned by civilians, there are strict rules on how long the pictures can be stored for recall. Basically, they can be stored for more than 24 hours if there is a suspicion of a crime. It is precisely those issues that need to be discussed; the private security industry must follow similarly strict guidelines.

The association also says that a fair and efficient system of retrospective licensing is needed so that companies are not disadvantaged. Clearly, there needs to be a reasonable period after the Bill comes into operation to allow security firms—not just the big two or three firms, but the little firms that want to do a good job—to meet its requirements. Little firms are not all cowboys. Many of them want to do a decent job and to be employed by bigger companies to carry out guarding activities. We should allow them to come up to the standards of training and efficiency that the Bill requires, so there should be a reasonable phase-in period.

The BSIA seeks clarification as to whether cash-in-transit personnel are included in the provisions. I endorse that. Operations involving cash in transit run by Group 4 have been well run, but there is scope for all sorts of things to go wrong for firms that are not quite up to the mark in this respect.

Finally, there is the high estimated cost of the licence—an old theme of mine. When a non-departmental public body is created, it should be cost-effective. It should charge the minimum necessary to cover its costs, and it should not be riddled with excessive bureaucracy.

I know that others want to speak, so I shall deal with just one or two of the more important matters that I intended to discuss tonight. Training is an important aspect of the Bill. As I mentioned to the right hon. Member for Walsall, South in an intervention, the BSIA carries out training, and has long experience of doing that. By training up to the standard of ISO 9000 and co-operating with and consulting various European security organisations, it has acquired huge knowledge of the subject. Although it should not be the sole provider of training, that bank of knowledge about how to train security guards and firms should be used. I hope that the Minister will comment on that.

On the licensing regime, I have said that it should not cost any more or be more bureaucratic than is strictly necessary. As a non-departmental body, it will still be subject to ministerial direction and subject to audit, as though it were a Government Department. I urge the Minister to ensure that it is not excessively expensive or bureaucratic.

It is important that there is a proper appeals mechanism for firms and individuals who are not granted a licence. No one wants to allow cowboys to operate, but regulation could become draconian. We could end up with a cosy little club, with only the elite in the security industry getting a licence. We need to be fair to smaller operations.

A licence will be required for a firm to engage in manned guarding, including overseeing property and premises. That impinges on the wheelclamping issue. We have all heard horror stories about innocent people being beaten up after straying on to private premises. We have heard of cowboys wheelclamping cars that were parked on private premises by mistake, not releasing those cars for several days and demanding huge ransoms before the wheelclamps are removed. Such activity should not be tolerated in a free society. Yes, under proper licence, wheelclamping is an effective deterrent to illegal parking on private property, but there should be good reason for it.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Can he confirm, for the benefit of the House, that no cowboy wheelclamping takes place on his estate?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I can confirm that absolutely. Not only does wheelclamping not take place, but I have never employed a wheelclamper, be he cowboy or any other type, in my life. I hope that I shall never need to do so. In Norfolk, we are a relatively law-abiding community. Although fly tipping and the dumping of old cars are an increasing local menace, I hope that they will never necessitate wheelclamping.

A licence will also be required for the work done by a private investigator in undertaking surveillance and investigations to obtain information about another person. Those are especially sensitive matters. We all know about private investigators. Before my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) bobs up to ask me whether I have ever employed one, I assure him that I have never done so. Indeed, I hope that I shall never need to do so, but we all know that some individuals need to employ investigators for various commercial and personal reasons. That is understandable, but investigators must be required to adhere to a carefully defined legislative licence regime. Nobody wants private investigators to go around breaking the law.

The House of Lords agreed to an amendment that exempted all private domestic dwellings from the remit of security firms operating under the terms of the Bill. That must be right. Nobody wants to encourage anybody, whether or not he or she is a private investigator, to break into a private dwelling without the permission of its owner or occupier. Of course, the giving of advice about security devices and precautions will also have to be subject to licensing. Many people use bugging and surveillance devices, especially when they work in investigation, but such devices should be covered by strict rules and a licensing procedure.

Finally, in respect of keyholders, I assume that the Bill covers only professional firms. I have a private friend who acts as a keyholder for the alarm system on my house, so I hope that he will not be categorised as doing the job specified in the Bill. The Bill should, however, cover the professional security firm that installed and maintained my alarm, as it is also a keyholder.

Other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall conclude my remarks. I broadly welcome the Bill and I hope that the Government will give it the serious consideration that it deserves. If they call a premature election on 3 May, it might be one of the casualties of the final sort-out. I have no idea whether that will happen, as I will not be a party to the relevant negotiations. If the Bill is dropped, however, it will have to be reintroduced in the next Parliament. If that happens, I hope that the Government will think carefully about what has been said tonight. I hope especially that they will take the advice of the right hon. Member for Walsall, South, but I ask them to listen also to all the other comments that have been made. For once, let us see whether we can produce through genuine parliamentary debate a better Bill than the one first published by the Government.

9.13 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this debate. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), who always brings to our deliberations the energy of a terrier and the charm of a spaniel. I am pleased also to follow the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), whose experience in these matters is legendary. Any even cursory examination of the subject with which the Bill deals leaves one with the impression that deliberations on such matters have been peppered for more than 15 years with references to him and to his comments.

The history of private security is a long one. Indeed, it might be said that it extends back into pre history. In bed last night, I was reading "The Golden Bough" by Frazer, and I was reminded of the kingdom in the part of southern Europe that is now Italy where murder was the normal

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means of succession for the monarch, as the person who murdered him took his place. Consequently, monarchs spent most of their time running around a tree, looking for potential murderers and jumping at shadows. I suppose that that was an example of personal private security. If we trace law enforcement and personal security through the ages, we find that it has largely been conducted privately. Public security is a relatively modern phenomenon, and the notion of putting law enforcement into the hands of a publicly funded police force is recent.

Should there be regulation? The case has been well made in tonight's discussions, but it is worth considering the conclusions of the 1995 report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs on the private security industry. Several hon. Members have already referred to it. The right hon. Member for Walsall, South will be familiar with it because he gave evidence to that inquiry. The conclusions did not concur with his recommendations, but they paid tribute to the pertinence of his contribution. The report concluded:

"We conclude that current standards, particularly standards of training, in much of the private security industry are unsatisfactory and below the level the public need and have a right to expect. We note that it is in the manned guarding sector of the industry that most of the worst examples are to be found. We are particularly concerned about the evidence that there is a growing problem of totally unregulated private local patrolling operations, often preying on the fears of vulnerable people, and we conclude that this needs to be tackled firmly."

The subject of private patrolling organisations will permeate much of my speech. We must strike a balance between law enforcement in the private and public sectors. The right hon. Member for Walsall, South referred to that. Such a balance is vital to maintain public confidence in the proper enforcement of law; it could be jeopardised unless we take the right action in the Bill and elsewhere.

Because I want to dwell briefly on the constitutional issues that are associated with the relationship between the public and law enforcement, as would be expected, I immediately searched for my copy of "The English Police—A Political and Social History" by Clive Emsley. Chapter 5 refers to a case in 1893 when the Home Secretary was asked about an English woman, a member of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, who was allegedly treated with "rudeness and even violence" by a member of the Metropolitan police. The police denied the charge and Mr. Asquith, who was Home Secretary at the time, said:

"I do not see any reason for doubting the accuracy of the police statement."

Mr. Emsley concludes:

"The Bobby was now firmly established as a part of the model British Constitution."

The publicly funded police forces of the United Kingdom are indeed perceived as an intrinsic part of the constitution. We need to consider the balance between private and public law enforcement in that context.

I want to refer to a second study, which covers public perception of the constitutional aspect of policing. "The Force Inside the Police", by Robert Chesshyre, firmly makes the case for the positive perception of the police force. The public has a different perception of and relationship with the private security industry. In that respect, I slightly disagreed with the right hon. Member for Walsall, South, as he may have inferred from my intervention.

We discussed people who wear badges, uniforms and caps and whether they were the equivalent of policemen. Mr. Robert Chesshyre states in his book that when a policeman turns up, he is merely a policeman and has a degree of anonymity. Chapter 7 states:

"But that anonymity does not mean that we are neutral towards the unknown officer, as we are towards others who wear uniforms, such as postmen, ticket collectors or gasmen, civilians like ourselves merely masquerading in fancy dress while they go about their business. Every policeman is a representative of the force: the sight of him may move us to feelings of relief, security and trust; or fear, hatred and contempt. He is the 'law', he is authority."

That authority vested in the police force is critical to the public perception of the police, and we must tread carefully and warily when we advocate the use of private security forces if we believe that they will in any way jeopardise or impinge on that relationship, that perception and that understanding of the police force by the public.

I would like to speak for a great deal longer, as I have a great deal more to say. However, I shall end by talking about the ethical dimensions of law enforcement. I want to refer to "Power and Restraint, the Moral Dimension of Police Work" by Cohen and Feldberg. I shall list the things that seem important in that respect, and then I shall sit down.

Mr. Cohen and Mr. Feldberg tell us:

"There are five ethical standards against which police work can be judged."

I think that, to some degree, this applies also to the private security industry. They go on to list those standards.

"Standard I: Fair Access. As a social resource, police must provide fair access to their services.

Standard II: Public Trust. Citizens, having limited their right to enforce their own rights, have made police work a public trust."

That also applies to the private security industry.

"Standard III: Safety and Security. Police must undertake law enforcement within the framework of maintaining safety and security.

Standard IV: Teamwork. Police are part of a system that includes legislators, other law enforcers,"—

this is the partnership that I am talking about—

"prosecutors and judges, so their behaviour must meet the tests of teamwork: coordination, communication and cooperation.

"Standard V: Objectivity. Police work is a social role that often requires the officer to set personality and feelings aside, and demonstrate objectivity."

Those studies are useful and apposite in considering the matters before us tonight. Unless the private security industry can, through the Bill and other measures that the House might introduce, conform to the constitutional role of the police that I have described, maintain the public trust that I have illustrated, and—vitally—ensure that those ethical standards for law enforcement are maintained, I believe that we are heading towards a dangerous abyss, into which no Member of the House, of whatever party, would wish us to tumble.

9.22 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): This has been an excellent debate, to which, thus far, no fewer than 14 right hon. and hon. Members have contributed. The level of interest in the subject reflects its importance.

The Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), set out the context of our debate on Second Reading at the outset of his speech. There are approximately 8,000 firms in the private security industry sector. Estimates differ as to the number of people whom they employ, but it seems that the most recent is about 350,000. The industry enjoys a turnover of about £2 billion a year.

The Minister was right to say that the industry is, on the whole, successful. It has a good track record and is delivering much that we can celebrate. I could not help but be a trifle amused by the entirely appropriate chiding of the Minister by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), who pointed out that the Minister's cheery acknowledgement of the success of the industry was in marked and hasty contrast to what he and his right hon. and hon. Friends had been saying in opposition. At that time, they were happy to conjure up an impression of a largely ineffectual, thoroughly corrupt and almost totally discredited industry. None of those charges is true. I am grateful that the Minister has now experienced an apostolic conversion and is prepared to concede that the sector contributes much that we can welcome.

The Minister was a little weak on some of the facts. I was surprised at that, because I have often drawn attention to his seriousness and, in particular, to the seriousness with which he regards himself. He is an ambitious fellow. He is very busy, very influential, very senior, very respected, and very important. He has many ambitions, many commitments, and certainly a very full diary. I was a little disappointed, in the circumstances, that he did not seem to appreciate the significance of the point about small businesses in the sector, and the proportion of the totality of the sector for which those businesses account.

I think that I am right in saying that approximately 80 per cent. of the sector is represented by companies employing fewer than 50 people. That fact, which is critical to our exchanges, is fundamental to the issue of regulation, the extent of that regulation, the costs that it will necessarily impose and, therefore, the need to be judicious and as restrained as possible in the new but justifiable impositions. At any rate, the Minister believes that we now need a statutory framework. He is able to adduce evidence from the private sector that that is what many companies—probably most—want to achieve. Although he skated over the improvements that have been made thus far through more effective self-regulation, he was entitled to point out that the vast majority of European Union member states have a statutory regulatory system.

I simply make the point that in our perhaps understandable impatience to legislate to remedy or mitigate an identifiable evil, it is important to take care not to over-egg the pudding. I am entitled to say to the Minister, who has an army of civil servants to advise him, that we need to take account of what the record shows in other countries. Okay, they have regulatory systems, and those systems have statutory force. They entail, among other things, imposing charges and levying fees. What, in practical terms, do they achieve to reduce or diminish the incidence of crime, and at what cost?

Of course, there is always a balance to be considered, and an opportunity cost is involved as well. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) referred to small companies and the burdens that they might face. It is important to emphasise that not all small companies want permanently to remain small. If they are to have the opportunity to grow legitimately and constructively, it is important that we minimise the legislative and regulatory burden on them.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend has referred to the financial aspects of the need to keep bureaucracy low so that the costs of licensing are low and reasonable for small firms. Does he also accept that the regime itself needs to be reasonable? It would be possible to promote a regime so exacting that it would be difficult for small firms to continue. They would be frozen out and that would produce a cosy club of big security firms.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is right. The affordability of the regulatory system and the extent to which it impacts on the bottom line is not the only issue—the psychological impact of the decision to legislate and to regulate is also important. I have often made the point, not least when I introduced a ten-minute Bill on 27 April 1999 about regulations on small firms, that, too often, they give up the unequal struggle against the regulatory leviathan. That is depressing, and it is our fault. Small firms do not necessarily go bankrupt; they simply decide that it is no longer worth the candle. I am grateful to him for pointing that out.

The debate was opened from these Benches in characteristically robust and eloquent fashion by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), who covered the broad canvas of issues that are relevant to the Bill. In particular, and like other Members to whom I shall refer in a moment, he mentioned the frankly evil practices of a great many of the cowboy wheelclampers across the country. I am glad that he did so, and the theme was echoed throughout the debate.

My hon. Friend also made a point about the scope of the Bill and the importance of ensuring that we know exactly to whom it applies. I share his concern that, for example, computer specialists engaged in sensitive work on behalf of their employers or, on a contractual basis, for clients, could find themselves inadvertently drawn into the embrace of the Bill. Ministers give us the impression that that would not be so, but we cannot be sure and we would welcome assurance on the point.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), who, sadly, is not in his place, traced the evolution of the Bill. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is returning to his seat. He had much that was worthwhile and informative to say. I was, however, a little taken aback by one aspect of his speech. In the first part, he was at pains to emphasise that he was not keen on extensive and zealous regulation; in the second part, however, he lamented the inadequacy of the Bill's scope, and said that he wanted further regulation. Never mind: we shall try to square that circle at some stage. He speaks with experience and some authority, and the House accordingly listened to him with respect.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) welcomed the Bill in general, but drew attention to two important points. The first related to the independence of the Security Industry Authority, or what might more accurately be described as the current concern that it will not be as independent as it should be. She rightly dwelt on the power of appointment, and seemed to be keen—as

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we are—for ministerial discussion to be if not eliminated, at any rate properly circumscribed. She also—again, rightly—referred to the powers of entry and inspection. She will, I think, be aware that a number of us have made similar observations in relation to other recent legislation. It should be said, in fairness, that comments by Conservative Members on such matters were echoed by Liberal Democrats during, for example, our recent debates on the Vehicles (Crime) Bill. I therefore identify strongly with what she said today.

The hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) brought to bear the perspective of one representing a seaside constituency. He also spoke, with many examples in mind, of the adverse impact of wheelclampers.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield delivered a tour de force in what may prove to be his valedictory address to the House, more than 30 years after he first entered it. He rightly reminded us of the ten-minute Bill—the Security Industry Licensing Bill—that he presented in 1973. He was, if I may say so, relatively relaxed and insouciant about the fact that it had taken 28 years for his wise words and policy recommendations to be translated into practice.

My right hon. Friend made another important point. He said that in no sense should the gradual increase in the numbers and powers of private security industry employees be allowed effectively—perhaps even surreptitiously—to substitute for the legitimate, historic and proper role of the public service called the police. He made the practical point that the genesis of the police force that we now enjoy and wish to preserve was, in fact, the ending of private patrols. It was precisely because of the inadequacy of that system that we developed a more satisfactory arrangement.

The Minister has sought to assuage our concerns by indicating that the Government have no intention of substituting the private security industry for the police force. I hope that he will accept—if he does not, I am afraid reality will prove that he will be obliged to do so—that deeds matter more than words. It is important for us to ensure, in practice as well as in rhetoric, that there is a role for the private security industry, but that it does not seek to supplant or nudge out of the way the public service called the police force.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does it not concern my hon. Friend that that is precisely what is happening? The police are expecting more and more people to employ private security firms and to use alarm systems, because, unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer police on the beat to guarantee the safe towns and safe countryside that people have taken for granted in the past.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is right. He knows the truth from bitter experience, not least in his Macclesfield constituency—but that experience is replicated, almost without exception, throughout the United Kingdom. Under this Government, who said that they would support the police, we have fewer police. They bear greater burdens, they are given less support, and they are constantly told that they must do more with less. My hon. Friend has encapsulated that point in his characteristically eloquent fashion.

The hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) made an excellent speech—it was witty, it was engaging, and it marked the culmination of a long-standing campaign by her to take proper action against wheelclampers. I am well aware that she has asked four parliamentary questions on the subject in this Parliament, between, I think, 7 July 1997—a date of particular significance to me—and 4 February 2000. I think that I was in the Chamber on the occasions on which she asked those questions. I therefore know the feeling with which she speaks on the subject, and I hope that she feels that she had a proper outing today.

The hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) lamented the phenomenon of the cowboy clampers. However, I suggest to him that, in a sense, what we are talking about are the "Del Boy" clampers. They are the clampers who give legitimate clampers a bad name.

The hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy)—only part of whose speech I was able to hear—apparently told the House of his experience as a security guard in, I think, 1991. He made the wider point that he saw quite a few students working part-time in a security capacity while also studying for their exams. I think that he underlined the importance of partnership between the private security industry and the police. However, the relationship must be one of partnership and not one of substitution.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) gave us many examples from his own area. He seemed to be an enthusiastic, if belated advocate of the Bill's contents.

The right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) made one of the finest speeches that I have heard in this place since I was elected in May 1997. He had an effortless command of his subject and I listened to him attentively throughout. I hope that he is not too disappointed that the Government have not paid as much notice to what he has been saying as he had hoped. I am still a little suspicious of him in this matter because, at heart, he is a socialist and I am a Conservative. He believes in regulation and I am rather suspicious of it. Nevertheless, I listened to what he had to say with interest and respect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold drew attention to a number of representations from the industry about the Bill's deficiencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) treated us to a combination of historical reminiscence and constitutional exegesis of a type to which we are fast becoming accustomed from him. It was high-calibre stuff and I much enjoyed it.

The truth of the matter is that the Government have made a case for the creation of the authority, the issue of licences and establishment of the new offence of operating without a licence or offering security services without a licence. However, it is very important indeed that we should have a proper debate on the Bill's contents.

The reality is that, ultimately, in the other place 23 amendments were made—three in Committee and a further 20 on Report, covering such diverse but important issues as licensing, the Bill's scope, exemptions from the Bill and the appeals procedure. As we know, there is scope within the Bill for the modification, revocation or suspension of a licence. It must be right to have, for example, the balancing mechanism of an appeals system that is credible and fair and that is seen to be credible and fair. In that relatively brief—I do not say cursory, because

my noble Friend Lord Cope of Berkeley did the job extremely well—consideration of the issues in the other place, a goodly number of amendments were made to the Bill. It is important that we should have the chance to make amendments.

We have to be sure of the independence of the Security Industry Authority. We have to be certain that, in practice, the Bill's provisions will not be a queue for or staging post en route to the substitution of the private security industry for the legitimate and historically accepted functions of the police force. We have to guard against what Lord Cope rightly described in the other place as the "law of unintended consequences". That law operates in such a manner that sectors, companies and individuals who did not think that they fell within the Bill's ambit might subsequently discover that they do, with damage to their businesses, unanticipated costs and implications for employment.

There is also the very important issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath raised in his opening speech of the list of licensed persons. I hope that the Minister will have something to say today on that issue. There may be a good reply on the issue, but it is important that people should be aware of what the issue is. There is intended to be a publicly available list of licensed operators. My hon. Friend raised the legitimate concern that if the list is available, names and addresses will be known. That means that people operating in the sector could be subject to vengeful attacks by people who had fallen foul of them and who bore a grudge.

Little has been said of the related issue of the costs that flow from the Bill, which is accompanied by a frankly pitiful regulatory impact assessment. The summary of the assessment consists of about two paragraphs of breathtaking complacency from the Government. From time to time, the most extraordinary parameters for possible costs are given. For example, we are told that costs for the voluntary scheme arising from the Bill could range from £1 million to £9 million a year. Another cost is put at £110,000—methinks it a trifle unlikely that that cost will be sustained.

One does not need to look into the crystal ball when one can read the book. We talk about fees and charges, but the Government have already increased their estimate of the licence cost from £22 to £40. That is dramatically above the inflation level, and the rise has happened in a very short space of time. Unless there is a more robust, credible and fully explained regulatory impact assessment, the concern must be that eventual costs will substantially outstrip those currently portended.

Important matters remain to be debated and considered thoroughly. Much detail has to be studied. I emphasise to the Minister that I have an on-going concern for which I make no apology. It is that the Government intend to do a good deal of their work in this sector by means of secondary legislation. I referred in an earlier intervention to some of the regulations that we will face. We should subject any regulations that the Government introduce to the affirmative procedure, so that a proper debate can be held. In the absence of such a procedure—for which the Minister has not given a proper justification—we should at least be granted the courtesy of advance sight of a draft copy of the intended regulations.

We need to be assured also by the Minister that a proper period of consultation—of not less than three months—will be devoted to the regulations, and that there will be a similar period of notice of their required implementation. The Government's motives are sound, but we have to be clear that the detail will match the rhetoric.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) made an outstanding speech, in which he pointed out all the weaknesses in the Bill as it stands. He is a formidable performer and could happily have gone on for another hour if we had indulged him, and he only touched on—or skated over—some of his concerns about the measure.

I want to be reassured by the Minister. I hope that he will make a genuine attempt to do that. I own up to the fact that I err on the side of opposition and caution when it comes to regulation. I make no apology for that. I happen to believe that, on the whole, Walter Lipmann was right: in a free society the state does not administer the affairs of men and women, but rather it administers justice among men and women who conduct their own affairs.

We must be sure that we do not over-regulate. The Chancellor of the Exchequer wrote the foreword to "Equipping Britain for our Long-Term Future", Labour's business manifesto issued in April 1997. He stated that a Labour Government would not impose burdensome regulations on business because the Labour party understood that successful businesses had to keep costs down.

I am sorry to say that that pledge has not been honoured. There has been an explosion of regulation. The sea of regulation now facing businesses is greater than any with which they have had to contend previously. We must make sure that the regulations imposed by the Bill are necessary, proportionate and effective. They must be no more burdensome than is necessary.

9.44 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: Until after the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the debate was first class. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) opened excellently for the Opposition; he set out their position clearly and made a number of points to which I tried to respond. I shall deal with those to which I could not give an adequate response; for example, I shall try to give a constructive reply to his point on the computer industry.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) made an exceptionally informed speech, based on his experience as a GMB organiser. He knows about the industry and knows what is involved; he enlightened the debate. The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) put the position of her party clearly and articulately; her contribution added to the debate. She made raised a couple of important points to which I shall respond in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) made an excellent speech on a slightly more profound aspect of the Bill—the attempt to change the culture in parts of the country such as his constituency—and noted that a properly regulated industry could lead to a better state of affairs in society. He made an extremely interesting and provocative speech.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

I agree with the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) made an outstanding speech, from his own experience and his campaigns on such matters. I shall address some of his points shortly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) went through the arguments on wheelclamping with tremendous clarity and passion. I hope that the passage of the Bill will be a commendation for and vindication of the personal campaign that she has mounted, along with motoring organisations and others.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) for having had to miss part of his speech. He put an excellent and constructive set of arguments based on his experience in industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) came dangerously close to creeping socialism as he put his argument for greater municipalisation; his remarks were powerful and important. My hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) and for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) spoke extremely appropriately and from some personal experience of the importance of the position of the individual and of what might be done in that regard. They made excellent contributions.

The speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South was an outstanding tour d'horizon. He went through the whole issue. The first of my specific responses will deal with the points that he raised. His outstanding personal experience shone through his contribution and his conduct of the debate.

At the end of the debate, the hon. Member for Buckingham made an excellent statement of his party's position. He participated fully in the debate.

A couple of contributions were made towards the end of the debate by hon. Members who were dragged in to lose time, having missed the first four or five hours of our proceedings. I shall give no time to them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South referred to the Swedish example—interestingly, as a Swedish manager has just ensured our important 3-1 win in Tirana. I tried to work closely with my right hon. Friend before and during preparations for the Bill, precisely because of his tremendous experience in the field. My opening speech addressed some of the points that he made, although I appreciate that he was unable to hear it because he was chairing the Select Committee on Defence.

I shall go quickly through the points made by my right hon. Friend. He referred to the nature of the Security Industry Authority. As I said earlier, we attach tremendous importance to the independence of the SIA. It must be genuinely independent and strong. That is why—to respond to a point raised by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath—we are not in favour, at present, of specifying exactly the range of interest groups that should be included on the body.

We want a genuinely independent, strong regulatory body—not one that is the lapdog of either the Home Secretary of the day or the industry—that will develop and use the powers set out in the Bill and thereby give my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South the assurance that he seeks: that the SIA will not be a quiet body that makes only a small shift from the status quo, but a serious organisation that will drive forward reform of the industry in the various sectors to which he referred. For that reason, its independence is important.

As my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members rightly said, it is also important that the SIA has a strong relationship and links with the industry: it must not be distant. I hope that I have given my right hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks.

On in-house provisions, which were also referred to by other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North, I emphasise my earlier point that our minds are not closed to the arguments in favour of regulating in-house staff; we shall bear them closely in mind. The authority has been given a general duty to keep operation of the industry under full review. We shall hold a formal review of all the arrangements after the authority has been in force for three years. The Bill is flexible, and the Government can add or delete sectors of the industry by regulation. We will pay very close attention to any recommendation from the authority that in-house manned guards should be brought within the scope of regulation. I acknowledge that that argument is being advanced not only by my right hon. Friend but by several organisations in the industry. It is likely, therefore, that that argument could have a good hearing at that point. I believe that the Bill allows for that.

On the "voluntary versus compulsory" point that my right hon. Friend and a number of other hon. Members have made, the Bill contains explicit provisions to convert the voluntary scheme into a compulsory one if the authority and the Government are convinced that that is the right thing to do. Once again, we will listen carefully to what the SIA tells us about the operation of the voluntary schemes and the extent to which they have or have not failed to deal with the issues that my right hon. Friend raised in his intervention. The Government are entirely open to that approach.

There was no conspiracy among the security industry on the "voluntary versus compulsory" point. The better regulation taskforce scrutinised the Bill very closely to check for burdens on industry—a serious issue that we took seriously. There was no plot within part of the security industry; we were concerned with the ideological position, if I may put it like that—the role of regulation in modern society and where it goes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield raised the issue of width and alarm installers. We are very much open to arguments in that regard. As my right hon. Friend said, the Bill already gives the SIA a major task and we do not want further to front-load its waiting list of people to license.

Our aim is to get the authority up and running with the duties set out in the Bill as drafted, and then listen to the voice of experience. That applies very much to alarm installation. The key reason why alarm installers are not covered by the Bill is that when we went into detail about the criminality that could be demonstrated in relation to that industry, as opposed to the criminality that can patently be demonstrated in relation to, for example, the manned guarding industry, the evidence of such criminality from the police and others was significantly less, which was a significant factor. Of course, the evidence may change as new forms of criminality become

evident, and such evidence would be decisive in getting both the authority and the Secretary of State of the day to address the issue very directly.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South and several of my hon. Friends spoke about the important matter of training; my right hon. Friend did so with particular force. I want to reinforce the provisions of the Bill. Under clause 1(2), it is a function of the authority

"to set or approve standards of conduct, training and levels of supervision for adoption by—"

those involved in the industry, and

"to make recommendations and proposals for the maintenance and improvement of standards in the . . . industry".

Those are very real statutory functions.

I agree, and have said so publicly many times, that getting the training right—I am not subscribing to a list of particular functions—is a key element in raising the standard of the service. I can confirm that I have talked to many of the private sector industries that we are debating, and the associations, the trade unions and the current educational bodies, all of which are committed to raising training standards. The Government are absolutely committed to raising training standards. We believe that the power that I have set out for the SIA provides the way to address that, and to do so explicitly.

In some of the remarks that I am making, I am repeating what I said in my opening speech. I am now trying to say as strongly as I can that if we have the option of an SIA that is relatively flimsy and does not bring us very far from where we are now, or an SIA that independently and authoritatively goes about the job of driving up standards in the industry, it is the latter that we shall go for.

Many other points were made in interventions. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North mentioned shadowy directors who may not need to be licensed under the Bill but who use employees for criminal purposes. The directors will need licences. If "Mr. Bigs" remain in the shadows, pulling the strings for criminal purposes, that is beyond the SIA's remit; it is a matter for the police. As discussed extensively in the other place, the Department of Trade and Industry has very extensive powers under the Companies Acts to close down companies that act inappropriately. The power to deal with the criminality of the Mr. Bigs that we are discussing lies with the police and company regulation.

The hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire made a point about home addresses being made available on a public register, and it was reaffirmed by the hon. Member for Buckingham. The Bill will require the publication of addresses, but not necessarily home addresses. The publication of business addresses will be useful in regulating the industries. Some home addresses may be published if security operatives choose to operate their businesses from home, but in general the address given will be a matter for the individual concerned.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does not the Minister accept that Northern Ireland is a specific case, where it might not be advisable to publish even the names, because punishment beatings are continuing just as much as they did even before the Belfast agreement?

Mr. Clarke: I accept that Northern Ireland may be a specific case where that issue might be directly relevant, and we are certainly prepared to consider it in that context. Precisely that issue was considered in detail when we discussed the addresses of the directors of animal research companies during recent debates on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill.

The hon. Member for Taunton referred to the exemption from licensing for accountancy firms. She expressed concern about whether that exemption would lead to an uneven playing field. The Government accepted arguments in the other place that members of accountancy bodies, such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants, may be exempted from licensing. The relevant accountancy bodies are listed in clause 25. The Government did not, however, accept the arguments that employees of those accountancy companies should be exempt. The companies might be exempt, but not their employees, because we fully accept that that would lead to an uneven playing field, about which she expressed concern, where large accountancy firms have diversified into designated activities under the Bill. That provides the reassurance that she seeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South referred to child protection and amusement arcades, and he gave other reasonable examples. Under the Bill, anyone providing security services who is licensable will be given a Criminal Records Bureau check. Therefore, those who act as security guards in areas open to children will be checked. Outwith the Bill, any member of staff with access to children is eligible for CRB checks as set out under the various processes that have been discussed.

On wheelclamping, in-house employees or people providing the service will need to be licensed, but not volunteers. If the dentist to whom reference was made were to engage in do-it-yourself wheelclamping, he would need to qualify for a licence.

I shall not embark on the police numbers debate. We have been right around the houses about that in the debate, but we have just announced the largest increase in police numbers for 12 years, and they are increasing across the country.

A serious point was made, first, by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, and then by other hon. Members. He asked whether we intended to replace police with private security guards. We had an exchange on that, but I want to take this opportunity to say as clearly as I can that that is not the Government's policy. The Government's policy is, first, to increase police numbers in the way that we have set out, so that we shall have a record number of police in the history of this country by March 2003.

Secondly, our policy is to ensure that the office of constable, which police officers hold, is respected and operated throughout. Thirdly, it is to develop not competition but partnerships between the police and the private security industry so that they work together in all the ways that we have described. Absolutely no part of our policy involves replacing the police with private security companies, but we can argue about how such partnerships can be implemented.

Finally, in a spirit of inquiry, I asked the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield why he thought that previous Conservative Governments had not regulated the industry during their 18 years in power. The hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire put his finger on it when he said there was an issue about the merits of regulation versus

[Mr. Clarke]

the merits of deregulation. He implied that, on balance, previous Conservative Governments had decided that they would not introduce a regulatory burden of any kind.

The hon. Member for Buckingham said very honestly at the end of his speech that that burden was right at the top of his concerns and doubts. I tell the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield in particular that if the Conservatives were to form a Government after the general election, there is absolutely no guarantee that they would put such legislation into effect. That did not happen for 18 years, and it would not happen now. That is why the Bill deserves its Second Reading, and I hope that the House will agree to it tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Private Security Industry Bill *[Lords]* (Programme)

9.59 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Private Security Industry Bill *[Lords]*:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 1st May 2001.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

The motion proposes that the Committee stage should conclude by 1 May at the latest, with four days of double sittings. That seems to be an ample amount of time—eight sittings in all—to debate a medium-sized and uncontentious Bill such as this. Of course, the Programming Sub-Committee may decide that it is necessary for the Committee to sit more frequently than usual. Therefore, I give the assurance that I have given on previous occasions: if there is a need for more time, we are prepared to consider it through the process of the Programming Sub-Committee.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The Minister is a thoughtful and sensible Member of the House, but does he not think that it is a little pretentious of him to speak on behalf of the Government in presenting a Bill to the House and then presume to decide for himself how long the House of Commons may choose to take to consider his proposed legislation?

Mr. Clarke: The short answer is no, I do not think that. The procedure whereby the Government table a programme motion for debate is the right process. I know that the Programming Sub-Committee procedures are controversial and I know that there are arguments about them—I am sure that we shall have the familiar debate again—but all Members can participate in the process.

I have been through the process on several occasions this Session and I emphasise that the order of business to be debated by the Committee is, in the Government's view, in the gift of the Opposition. If the Opposition want to order the debates in a certain way because they think that certain subjects deserve priority, we are open to their suggestions, and our inclination will be to agree to their propositions.

On the amount of time for the Bill's consideration, we are prepared to extend the time available when that becomes necessary. However, as we have seen from the arguments on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill—I will not repeat them now—we are not sympathetic to those who wish to delay discussion rather than debate the substantive issues.

Mr. Luff: The Minister said that the programme motion allows for four days of double sittings. By my reckoning, he must mean the sittings on 10 April, 24 April, 26 April and 1 May. Are those dates correct?

Mr. Clarke: I think that those are the dates that we are thinking of, but I shall double check before I confirm that.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Is the Minister absolutely confident that we will be sitting on those dates and does he genuinely believe that the Committee will complete its consideration on 1 May? Will he give the House a straight answer?

Mr. Clarke: Earlier, I had an entertaining exchange with the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) about this very matter. He thought that he had set a bait that I had eaten. However, I am not responsible for determining the date of the general election; I am not privy to the Prime Minister's thoughts on that. I read the newspapers and, like the whole House, I am aware that there is massive speculation about the possibility of a general election on 3 May. Massive issues surround the date—the Conservatives are afraid of it and we are keen on it—and many arguments are being made. The Prime Minister will decide, as has been the case throughout our history. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) is a great constitutional expert and he knows that that is the case. I cannot prejudge what will happen, but I am confident that the House will give the Bill the full consideration that it deserves.

The Bill has already received full scrutiny in the other place, as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) generously acknowledged on Second Reading. The Government made 23 amendments to the Bill in 13 hours of full debate. He will correct me if I am being unfair, but I think that all the parties in the other place thought that the Bill had been scrutinised well and that the arguments had been fully heard. The Bill was improved by its passage through the other place. That is an important point.

The disagreement over the Bill's provisions generally relate to matters of comparative detail, and that became clear in the Second Reading debate. I do not suggest that they are unimportant points of detail, because it is appropriate to consider them. However, they are matters of comparative detail.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the Minister be kind enough to help the House by giving a proper interpretation of paragraph 7? As I understand it, if we pass the programme motion, that paragraph will prevent us from debating any messages from the other place. Thus, if it produces dissenting amendments, we will not have an opportunity to discuss them. Am I right?

Mr. Clarke: I am loth to give a formal interpretation on the hoof to a man of such legal distinction. I remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the Bill has been debated fully in the other place. It would be different if the Bill had been introduced in this place and became part of the tit for tat that can arise. However, I will take advice and clarify the matter if I can.

As for the dates mentioned by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), in case there is any doubt, we have in mind 10 April, 17 April, 24 April and 26 April—1 May is a stand-by date if we do not sit on 17 April.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am afraid that I am not as distinguished as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). I should be grateful if the Minister explained in simple language, so that I can understand, what paragraph 7 means.

Mr. Clarke: I can read the paragraph easily enough.

Mr. Blunt: I have done that.

Mr. Clarke: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has; he is a skilled reader. No doubt service in the Army helped him in that regard.

The paragraph ensures that in

"allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords",

the Question should be put forthwith. That is a simple process, but I shall respond to the hon. Gentleman in more detail.

Mr. Bercow: Given that the Government published their White Paper on the subject in March 1999—exactly two years ago—and signalled their intention to legislate, will the Minister confirm that the Government have an idea of the intended regulations to give effect to parts of the Bill? If not, why not? If they do, why can we not have sight of the draft regulations?

Hon. Members: There they are.

Mr. Clarke: I am sorry to say that these are not the intended regulations.

The issue has been fully discussed and we have followed the same process, which I believe is correct, for other Bills. Before formally drafting regulations, it is appropriate for Parliament to consider the Bill, decide the framework of secondary legislation and consult across the industry. The hon. Gentleman, in his usual courteous way, is right to say that we have a good idea what we are talking about because substantial consultation has taken

[Mr. Clarke]

place and the debate has been wide ranging. However, I do not think it is right to publish draft regulations before the House is clear about how it intends to legislate.

Sir Patrick Cormack: If the Government have a clear idea of what they intend to include in the regulations, would it not help the House in general and the Committee in particular to see them?

Mr. Clarke: I can give the hon. Gentleman the same commitment that I gave the hon. Member for Buckingham. I will do my best to ensure that draft regulations are available as early as possible. I am happy to do that because it is appropriate.

I understand that paragraph 7 uses the standard form of wording. The process is established. However, hon. Members on both sides of the House are aware of the issues that surround the way in which it operates and the concerns of the Programming Sub-Committee. I think we all agree that the Modernisation Committee will need to consider how it has worked. There are issues of principle concerning the idea of a guillotine and practical issues about whether it is used in the right way. I can say firmly on behalf of the Government that we are ready to listen to suggestions.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): The Minister is extremely courteous in giving way. In the same spirit, I say to him that there is no deep, fundamental argument about the Bill. It has been extremely well discussed in the other place. Is it not exactly the kind of Bill for which, in reasonable circumstances, the Government would not need to use a guillotine but would allow the House to take the necessary time? It is obviously not a Bill on which anybody would create difficulties, but there are points that hon. Members want to work on. Is this not precisely the occasion when the Government might have said to the House that they will not impose a guillotine?

Mr. Clarke: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but he knows very well the difficulty that the Government have had over the past few months. I do not seek to make an adversarial point, but we lack confidence in the Opposition's ability to undertake the rational consideration of Bills to which he referred. I think that such consideration is the right way to go about things, but some hon. Members have not been prepared to do that. They want to use the procedures of the House for reasons that have nothing to do with the substance of any particular Bill, but because of the overall process, to make general arguments about the allegedly dictatorial Government.

I am not making a point now about the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, about which there was some toing and froing earlier. *[Interruption.]* No, I will not dilate on that. I am often asked by the hon. Member for Buckingham to do things that I do not particularly want to do, but he will be glad to hear that I am strong-minded enough to resist his blandishments. I am sure that my very good friend, Mark Seddon, the editor of *Tribune*, will also be able to withstand his blandishments when he takes him on in any general election that is to come. He will knock the hon. Gentleman into a substantial cocked hat in Buckingham.

Mr. Luff: Following the Minister's generous comments earlier about my speech during the main debate, I shall put my point as charitably as I can. There may be a misunderstanding between him and Conservative Members about what paragraph 7 does. I think that he understands it, but he has not succeeded in explaining it to us. Will he do that now?

I think that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) is wrong in his assessment; I think that paragraph 7 refers only to the guillotine, or timetable motion, on Lords messages, and not the debate on the Lords messages themselves. Will the Minister confirm that it means only that any Question on a timetable motion for Lords messages will be put forthwith, and that then there will be a debate on those messages?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman has understood the situation correctly. I must plead guilty to some extent here because I had assumed, and was subsequently advised correctly, that that is the standard form of wording and it means exactly what he said. Earlier interventions led me down a path that I should perhaps not have taken.

The programme motion gives the Opposition ample time to focus on aspects of the Bill which may be of special concern to them, and I hope that the House will agree to it.

10.13 pm

Mr. Hawkins: When my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) was responding to an earlier programme motion tabled by the Government, on Monday, she commenced her excellent remarks with a comment about the sense of unreality with which the House was approaching programme motions in these circumstances. I would go further and say that we are in an "Alice in Wonderland" world tonight, where a word means what the Minister says it means, and does not have its ordinary and natural meaning. Given the fevered speculation about the Government's general election plans, it seems somewhat bizarre to be discussing debates in April and May for the programme motion.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) has just said, there is no justification for any guillotining or programming of such a Bill. Much earlier this afternoon, at the beginning of the Second Reading debate, the Minister gave the game away in answer to an intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), when he dropped the heaviest of hints that there was very little prospect of the Bill's reaching the statute book because of what he knows the Prime Minister is likely to do.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Hawkins: Before I give way to the Minister, let me say that if these were normal times and we were dealing with a normal Government and normal Ministers who believed in democracy, scrutiny and debate and who did not want to programme and guillotine every single measure, we might be able to accept the Minister's assurances; but I am afraid that, in the light of our recent experiences on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, when the Minister made statements at the Dispatch Box about when motions would be progressed and how many

Committee sittings there would be but those promises were repeatedly broken, the House and especially the Opposition cannot accept that Minister's assurances.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, entitled to say that. However, I want to place on the record the fact that I did not drop the heaviest of hints about the election date. I do not know the Prime Minister's mind. I responded directly to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), and any Opposition politician will know that, however senior they may have been, they did not know their Prime Minister's mind about election dates any better than anyone else. It would be good of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) to withdraw the suggestion that I dropped a hint about the election date, or that I know the Prime Minister's mind.

Mr. Hawkins: The record will show what the Minister said. However, the reaction of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield to the Minister's hint was quintessentially one of satisfaction: he said that he had made a bold cast and not expected to land such a big fish.

Mr. Gummer: Will my hon. Friend return to the guillotine motion and explain to the Government that our objection to the guillotine is that it stops Oppositions properly using the time and processes of the House to ensure that their voice is heard? Attacking the Opposition for doing what Oppositions have done in democratic Houses for the past 300 years is to misunderstand what the House is supposed to be about.

Mr. Hawkins: My right hon. Friend's extensive experience means that he knows that all too well. The current Government have already developed an extremely bad reputation for curtailing debate and ignoring democracy. They regularly behave as an elective dictatorship.

Let me give my right hon. Friend some recent examples of that behaviour. There were 118 amendments to the Bill that became the Freedom of Information Act 2000, 77 of which were not debated in the House. There were 268 amendments to the Bill that became the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, 47 of which were not debated here. There were 666 amendments to the Bill that became the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, 522 of which were not debated here. Then one comes to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, which is a substantial Bill—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is going wide of the programme motion. It is much more narrow than that.

Mr. Hawkins: I was responding to my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal, who rightly pointed out how it is necessary repeatedly to emphasise to the current Government that they are supposed to allow proper scrutiny, because on Bill after Bill since they introduced the ridiculous procedure of programming and guillotining everything, the House has not had the opportunity to do its proper job of scrutiny. Most recently and worst of all, the Criminal Justice and Police Bill—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I would allow the hon. Gentleman to say something in passing, but he seems to want to go into the detail of every Bill. That is not allowed in a debate on a programme motion.

Mr. Hawkins: I simply wanted to draw attention to the fact that we face the same problems on the current Bill as we have faced on all recent legislation. It was the Minister in his opening remarks who referred to the Criminal Justice and Police Bill and our debates on it.

Mr. Hogg: Perhaps I might help my hon. Friend. What I think he is saying is this: the Minister of State has given it as his opinion that we have sufficient time to debate the Bill, but that sort of observation has been made on previous occasions in respect of other Bills and we have not had time to consider those Bills. Is it not therefore right that we should not place any weight on what the Minister has just said?

Mr. Hawkins: My right hon. and learned Friend is right—that is precisely the point. The worst example of that was on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. The Private Security Industry Bill runs to 30 pages; it has 26 clauses and 10 pages of detailed schedules. The importance of the issues and the reason why the programme motion is wholly inappropriate were demonstrated by the Minister's right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who thought the Bill sufficiently important to speak for no less than one hour and 21 minutes. I do not know whether he will serve on the Committee; we shall have to wait and see. If, on Second Reading, he was sufficiently doubtful about whether the Bill was in a proper form to speak to the House for an hour and 21 minutes, may I strongly suggest that the artificial timetable proposed by the Minister is wholly inadequate?

On Second Reading, there was much discussion of the valuable contributions of the British Security Industry Association. However, less attention was paid to the concerns of the Joint Security Industry Council, which is the voice of the private security industry and represents a large number of professional bodies, ranging from the Association of British Insurers to the Defence Manufacturers Association, the Guild of Security Controllers, the Security Institute, the Master Locksmiths Association and the Security Industry Training Organisation mentioned in debate. The concerns of those constituent bodies, as well as of the JSIC and its chief executive Mr. Mike Welply—with whom I had a meeting yesterday—must be debated properly in Committee.

The Committee must also debate properly the concerns of the group of leading corporate investigation consultancies, which represents a number of significant companies, including Control Risks and the Armor Group. The right hon. Member for Walsall, South—speaking, I remind the Minister, from the Government Benches—concluded that the Bill was a mystery, reminding me that Winston Churchill said that Russia was

"a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

I hope that I have got that quotation right. When a senior Member of Parliament who is an undoubted expert on the industry is so dissatisfied with the Government's proposals as to say that the Bill is a mystery, we must have serious concerns about proposing so few Committee sittings under the guillotine. Conservative Members disapprove of guillotines and programme motions on principle.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Before my hon. Friend moves on, is he aware that consideration of the longest

[Mr. Michael Jack]

Finance Bill ever presented to the House was conducted by means of a thorough debate, with no programme motion? There were as many, if not more, submissions from representative bodies to consider as those which he has enumerated. All that was done in the old-fashioned way, but everything was considered thoroughly.

Mr. Hawkins: My right hon. Friend is right. He may remember that, when we were in government, we passed the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 during the last Parliament. It was the longest criminal justice measure then on the statute book, and we debated it for 240 hours in Committee under the old system whereby everything was scrutinised. Many Members of the then Opposition, who are now Government Members, wanted to have their say in full.

In conclusion, I feel strongly that the programme motion is entirely inappropriate. The Government should be ashamed of themselves; their own senior Members, such as the right hon. Member for Walsall, South, said that the Bill is not in an adequate form. Although we are in an artificial situation and in pre-election mode, we cannot allow the programme motion to be accepted by default.

10.24 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Brevity is the soul of wit. Whenever dissolution takes place, I hope that this will be the shortest speech of this Parliament. I refer Members to column 920 of yesterday's *Hansard* and just say, "Ditto".

10.25 pm

Mr. Doug Henderson: I have spoken to the House once or twice on procedural matters, and I do so tonight because I have an interest in the substantive issue. Previously, I have had an interest in my own timetable, rather than in the issue before the House. I support the timetable motion. We have a terrible tendency towards ritual in this place. We go through the same ritual night after night, after Second Readings. The House needs to re-examine our procedures, but I would be straying from the subject of the motion if I started to deal with that this evening.

The programme motion is a little artificial. Most of us do not know when the general election will take place. We can all speculate and work out whether there will be time between now and the general election to do justice to the Bill, which I hope will end up on the statute book. There are parts of the Bill that I would seek to modify, and I hope that the Government will take on board some of my suggestions on Second Reading. My hon. Friend the Minister is nodding; he knows the issues to which I refer. I am merely mouthing what many of the interest groups are saying, both on the employers' side and on the workers' side, and representing the police.

The alternative to the programme motion is to go through the nonsense that we have watched happening over the past two or three years. I do not blame the Opposition; we have all got ourselves into the mess. I do not accept that democracy is the issue, as was said from the Opposition Benches. Democracy is about putting proposals to the electorate and having a system of bringing about the execution of those proposals, with modification. I agree that that requires time for discussion, and the present issue is the efficiency of our debate. I do not condone my hon. Friends speaking longer than necessary, but until there is proper self-discipline, we need the protection of the timetable motion.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Although the issue may not be democracy in the terms in which he defines it, the debate is about scrutiny, which is surely one of the primary functions of a legislature.

Mr. Henderson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I want adequate time to be allocated for debate. I remember when I came to the conclusion that, because of the way in which Parliament had developed, we could not continue to operate as we have done in the 14 years I have been in Parliament. I reached that conclusion after we had spent hour after hour debating what ice cream salesmen do in St. James's park across the road, rather than debating real issues that affect the constituents of hon. Members on both sides of the House. I am not saying that that matter should not have been debated, but it did not warrant the extensive filibustering that took place. That convinced me that we needed to change our procedures. If we want the Bill to see the light of day—although events beyond our control may prevent that—we must support the Minister's proposal.

Mr. Hayes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but he seems to be labouring under an illusion. The people of this country elect a Parliament. It is for Parliament to scrutinise and pass Bills, and to ensure that they are effective and that the people's views are represented in the consideration of those Bills. We elect a Parliament, not just a Government. He should revise his perception of democracy.

Mr. Henderson: Of course I accept that. I do not know about the hon. Gentleman's constituents, but my constituents want things done that affect their lives. They want Parliament to act effectively. When they watch some of the goings-on in this place, they ridicule them. Unless we modernise our procedures in the way that is recommended by the programme motion—I wish that we did not need it—we will bring further discredit on this place. I ask Opposition Members to think about that. I have said my piece, and I am happy to allow others to follow in the debate.

10.29 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Not for the first time during my service in this House, I intend to express a personal point of view. I do so as a member of the Modernisation Committee, to which the Minister referred. I am optimistic that the Committee will provide further guidance to the House on dealing with programming and programme motions. I think that the Minister alluded to that guidance, and I hope that the report that contains it will help the House.

I am not unsupportive of the Government, although I may pass through the other Lobby at the end of the debate. Of course, that happens in the House from time to time. I think that the House has not heeded one of the Minister's assurances. He said that the Bill would come out of Standing Committee on 1 May. I think that he said also

that there would be eight sittings. However, he told us that if the Programming Sub-Committee thought it necessary to schedule additional sittings in the light of progress made in the Standing Committee, it could do so. I have sought such an assurance in previous debates on programme motions.

Mr. Hogg: I heard the Minister's assurance, but I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me for making a different point about it. The premise is that any decision will depend on whether the Minister thinks that more time is necessary. What matters, however, is whether the Committee and the House think, after speaking freely, that more time is needed. Whether or not the Government think that more time is needed does not address the fundamental problem.

Mr. Winterton: That was not my interpretation of what the Minister said. I believe that he said that if the Programming Sub-Committee felt that additional sittings were necessary, the Government would not oppose its decision. I say to the House and to my hon. Friends that I believe that we should take that assurance—perhaps I can also use the word "concession"—very seriously. It gives much reassurance to the Opposition that there will be more time for debate, if such time proves necessary.

Mr. Hawkins: I wish that I could share my hon. Friend's optimism. However, my experience and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) with regard to the Committee that considered the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, and our knowledge of the way in which the Programming Sub-Committee operated in respect of that Bill, tell us that one cannot accept the assurances given by this Government and by this Minister in particular. Such assurances were repeatedly given and repeatedly broken. In his capacity as a member of the Modernisation Committee, my hon. Friend should undoubtedly take that on board.

Mr. Winterton: I take my hon. Friend's strictures very seriously, but I have to say that I do not agree with them. I am prepared to take the Minister's assurance seriously. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said that he was not prepared to do so, but I can only say that hon. Members on both sides of the House have expressed concern about the fact that the programme motion has been considered so soon, immediately after Second Reading. I believe that this particular system will be altered.

Mr. Blunt: Like me, my hon. Friend has had an overt respect for the Minister and his word. The trouble is that the Minister told us during consideration of a programme motion on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill that there would be 16 Committee sittings. That number was then changed to 14. He told us that the motion would be tabled on a Monday, but it was then tabled on a Friday.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House is debating the programme motion on the Order Paper, not another one.

Mr. Winterton: Again, I take my hon. Friend's view extremely seriously, but I have been in this place for a few years and I believe that we must use our time well. I believe also that there must be an element of trust between the Government and the Opposition in this House. Perhaps I am alone among Conservative Members, but I have been here long enough.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) *rose—*

Mr. Tyler *rose—*

Mr. Winterton: I shall give way first to the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor), who is also a member of the Modernisation Committee.

Mr. Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the bequests that the Modernisation Committee wants to leave to the new Parliament is a refinement of the process that we discussed today? It will mean that such debates, which most people find futile, meandering and otiose, will no longer be a feature of the parliamentary scene.

Mr. Winterton: I am not prepared to divulge the contents of a report that has not yet been published. However, hon. Members, whatever their party, who represent the interests of the House are trying to create a system that is acceptable to the Government and to the Opposition.

To respond to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), the Programming Sub-Committee, under the chairmanship of a member of your Chairmen's Panel, Mr. Speaker, and not the Government will decide whether there will be one or more additional sittings in Committee. I believe that those who serve on the Chairmen's Panel are impartial and will try to represent the best interests of the House and all the parties in it.

Mr. Tyler: I hope that I will not embarrass the hon. Gentleman further by coming to his aid. Both he and I are in some difficulty because we cannot disclose the recommendations of the Modernisation Committee, but does he accept that the role of the Chairman of the Standing Committee and that of the Programming Sub-Committee will be critical to the success of our improvements? Ensuring that they work effectively gives new opportunities to Opposition parties to make sure that everything is properly discussed. One further point—

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Gentleman's intervention is longer than his speech.

Mr. Tyler: Indeed, it is. If the Government table many amendments, it will be open to the Programming Sub-Committee to recommend a later end date for consideration.

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is right. The new proposals will be a great opportunity for the House, and give considerable authority to the Opposition. I hope that when they come before the House, perhaps in the next Parliament, they will be welcomed.

Mr. Hogg: Not by me.

Mr. Winterton: My right hon. and learned Friend is a distinguished former Minister and respected Member of Parliament. However, I hope that he will give me credit

[Mr. Winterton]

for standing up for the independent voice in the years that I have been here, and that he will also acknowledge that I work in the best interests of the House. I say in front of you, Mr. Speaker, that I believe that the role of the Standing Committee Chairman will be important and influential, and can help the House to do a better job. He or she will be in an important position.

I want to express one reservation. I have said that I believe that the time allocated to the Standing Committee is adequate, but I remain anxious that the time for Report and Third Reading may prove insufficient. I repeat the argument that I have put before: Report is the only stage during which Back Benchers who were not able to speak on Second Reading and were not appointed to the Standing Committee can speak on behalf of constituents or organisations that have made representations to them. With that reservation, I thank the Minister for his concession, which I warmly welcome.

10.39 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): It is said that as we get older, the arteries harden. I wonder whether that has happened to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who seems to be overflowing with the milk of human kindness in his charitable regard for the Government. Whatever he says, the proposals that we have not yet had the opportunity to discuss are proposals that we do not know about. We are discussing a programme motion this evening that is tabled under motions that we know about.

If ever a Bill was tailor-made for a Special Standing Committee, followed by a proper Standing Committee, it is this one. It is not politically contentious in a partisan sense, but it is nevertheless fairly meaty. It deals with important subjects and affects the livelihoods of many people. We have already heard, in interventions, that a number of specialist groups and associations have made representations on the Bill.

If the Government intend to proceed—as the Minister honestly and genuinely does—on the assumption that this Parliament has some 14 months left to run, they should put forward a sensible and thorough proposal to ensure that the Bill is properly and thoroughly discussed. The Minister should have moved that the Bill be committed to a Special Standing Committee. That Standing Committee would have had the opportunity to take evidence and listen to witnesses. We should then have moved on to a proper, clause-by-clause discussion of the Bill and considered it on its merits. That is what the Minister should have proposed this evening.

Of all Bills, this is the last one that should be put in a parliamentary straitjacket. Over the past few months, because the Government appear to have worked out a foreshortened timetable for this Parliament, every Bill—I shall not dilate on any others, Mr. Speaker, because you would rightly call me to order—has been subject to a programme motion that has had little regard to its nature and complexity.

Mr. Gummer: Does my hon. Friend agree that the House is being afflicted by a dangerous disease called neatness? We are seeking to make neat the system of parliamentary scrutiny, whereas the Government ought to be concerned about having a bit of biodiversity. They should be determined to enable people to put forward the points that they wish to, rather than trying to box us in to a neat pattern.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I agree with my right hon. Friend, who is a great expert on biodiversity in all its aspects. Neatness and scrutiny make uncomfortable bedfellows. If we are to scrutinise a Bill, we should not be pulled up short by a timetable that pays no regard to its extent or complexity.

Speaking as someone who had 14 years' experience on the Chairmen's Panel, I think that it is perfectly possible that this Bill could be dealt with—after the Special Standing Committee procedure—in about eight sittings. It may well be that that is a reasonably realistic allocation of time. However, what is important is the quality of the legislation that comes out at the end. What is not important is precisely how many hours and minutes are taken to accomplish that task. As the Minister is nodding at what I am saying, he must feel a mite embarrassed, if not rather ashamed, that he has had to stand at the Dispatch Box and propose something that he knows—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order [7 November 2000].*

The House divided: Ayes 259, Noes 139.

Division No. 168] **[10.44 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline

Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard

Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Private Security Industry Bill [*Lords*]:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 1st May 2001.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords messages

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

PRIVATE SECURITY INDUSTRY BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a), (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Private Security Industry Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State for or in connection with the carrying out of his functions under that Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITION

Planning Application (Shrewsbury)

10.57 pm

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I present this petition with my wholehearted support as it is vital for the local economy and Shrewsbury Town football club that they have a new purpose-built, modern stadium with community sports facilities. In four years as an hon. Member, this is largest petition that I have presented to the House; it is signed by 2,281 people.

The petition states:

"To the House of Commons

The petition of

The people of Shrewsbury and beyond

Declares that

They totally support the proposed New Meadow scheme for Shrewsbury Town Football Club, which is urgently required to ensure the financial survival of the Club and to improve community sports facilities.

The petitioners therefore request

That the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council to back the planning application offering Shrewsbury Town FC a fresh vision for the millennium.

To lie upon the Table.

Travellers' Camps (Skegness)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

10.59 pm

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): I applied for this Adjournment debate because, after I had arranged an appointment with the Minister to receive a civic deputation from Lincolnshire, I received a message that the meeting was to be cancelled, as the Minister had something more important to do, or words to that effect. I regret that no offer of an alternative date was made.

I was put in some difficulty because, when I had to report the news to the deputation, I was asked, not unnaturally, what other date was going to be offered. I have known cancellations before, and of course all hon. Members understand that they happen—however, I will have been in the House for 40 years in October, and I have never encountered such treatment from a Minister before. I had to tell the deputation that the matter was unfortunate, and that I would have to seek some other way to make representations to the Minister on behalf of Lincolnshire. That is the reason for this Adjournment debate.

I understand that I am far from being the first Conservative Member in this Parliament to suffer a cancellation such as that. Indeed, the most recent occasion was only a few days ago: a deputation was on its way to the Minister and had to be cancelled while it was making the journey. If that is how we are to be treated, so be it, but I regret it very much.

The Minister knows the reason for the debate. East Lindsey district council, at the request of the Lincolnshire police, has applied for an exclusion order for Skegness for four days over Easter. Information has been received that there may be a return visit of the travellers who came to Skegness over the Christmas and new year holiday.

I do not know whether the Minister knows Skegness. I hope that he does: he does not live far away, although on the wrong side of the Wash. However, if he has not visited the town already, I hope that he will one day. He is not eligible to be counted as one of the elderly people who enjoy their holidays there, nor as one of the young families with children who come to the town.

Skegness caters especially for those two types of visitor, and it has a number of distinctive features. Apart from the bracing air, it has the largest and most popular of all the Butlins holiday camps. It also has the second largest and most popular theme park in the country. It has the largest concentration of caravans in Europe: indeed, were it not for the one in California that slightly outstrips it, it would have the largest caravan concentration in the world.

There are more than 20,000 caravans in the area. They are used for holidays and weekends and they cater specifically for young people. A further several thousand caravans are permanently sited as homes for people who have come to live in Skegness. Thousands of people, such as retired miners and steelworkers from Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and elsewhere, have come to Skegness to retire.

That is a short word picture of the type of people who come to Skegness. The area has many thousands of visitors at Christmas and the new year, and I hope that

[Sir Richard Body]

the Minister will understand the effect on the town when 600 travellers descended in a long cavalcade of caravans. They broke through the barriers to the car parks and immediately began a course of behaviour in the town such that the police had to go to all the licensed premises—the hotels, restaurants, cafes and other places of entertainment—to warn them that, with great regret, they could not guarantee people's safety.

Within a short time of their arrival, a group of about 10 travellers descended on a public house. Their obscenities and intimidating behaviour were such that the police were called; but, of course, the police could not attend all the incidents. It is not surprising that all those establishments closed from the Saturday evening before Christmas until after the new year.

The effect was to turn Skegness into a ghost town. The Embassy—a major entertainment centre—had to cancel all its events during that period. The caravans were so packed around the centre that the emergency services begged for the cancellation of the events. The centre did so without a qualm, because it would have been quite impossible for the emergency services to reach it. Sadly, because the hotels had to warn people about what had happened and had to close their doors and turn people away, they suffered considerably.

Over the years, Skegness has succeeded in becoming a place that people visit for short breaks throughout the year. That is important for employment. As the Minister may know, in other holiday resorts, hotels often close down at the end of the season; they dismiss their staff, perhaps re-engaging them in the spring. That is not the policy in Skegness. Hotels try to keep open so as to retain their staff and give them full-time work all year round. By doing so, they tend to lose money in the winter months. However, they can make good that loss—just—if they do a reasonable trade over Christmas and the new year. Sadly, a serious loss was incurred. They will have to reconsider their policy unless steps are taken to prevent a recurrence of those events.

As for the public houses, almost all of them closed on the advice of the police. The police obviously did not say that the public houses had to close, but they gave strong advice that was accepted by the licensed trade. The loss has yet to be quantified, but it runs to hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pounds—perhaps millions. That has a serious effect on a comparatively small town.

Furthermore, people living in the town were put in fear. People stayed at home. I hope that the Minister can understand that elderly people did not wish to go out, as they were fearful about what was happening. I am sure that he will understand that parents with young children did not wish to go out and encounter such behaviour, so they stayed at home. The holiday period was ruined for many, many thousands of people—not fewer than 50,000 and probably more—by appalling behaviour. In addition, East Lindsey district council had to pay out about £10,000 to clear up the mess from the caravans.

An application for an order has been made and I understand that the Minister will consider it on Monday or Tuesday—I hope that he will do so sympathetically.

I appreciate that this is an issue of civil liberties, and that it is a serious matter to say even to 600 people that their freedom of movement should be curtailed and they should not be allowed to visit the town of their choice. However, I hope that the Minister will understand that many other thousands of people have a freedom too, or should have a freedom—that some 50,000 people should have the freedom to visit the town of their choice and enjoy a holiday, that their children should not be put in fear, and that elderly people should be able to visit licensed premises without being intimidated.

I hope that when the Minister weighs in the balance the freedom of the 600 to descend on Skegness, he also bears in mind the freedom of all those many thousands—no fewer than 50,000—to enjoy their Easter holiday. If these travellers return and behave as they behaved when they came at Christmas, the effect on Skegness could be catastrophic.

The Minister knows, because he is a man of Norfolk, the effect that the travellers' visit had on Yarmouth. An order was made to protect Yarmouth for last Christmas. Indeed, it was because of that order that the travellers came to Skegness. I hope that he will not be prejudiced against Lincolnshire and say, "We have got them out of Norfolk; they can go to Lincolnshire again." I am sure that he will not take that view. I hope that he will consider the application sympathetically and appreciate that a serious financial loss has already been incurred, that a great deal of unhappiness has been caused and that there are great anxieties about what may happen to the town at Easter if, on Monday or Tuesday—which is when I understand a decision will be taken—he does not make an order to protect so many thousands of people.

11.12 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) on securing the debate and apologise to him for some of the matters that he raised at the beginning. I certainly did, as I thought, postpone the meeting that I was to have with him and his constituents, and I did so at late notice. My normal practice is to offer alternative dates, and I am sorry if that did not happen this time. I know, for example, that I have postponed a couple of meetings with a group of Members of Parliament for Dorset and the chief constable of Dorset to discuss the situation in Dorset, and I know that that meeting is in my diary for next week, so I am not quite sure what happened in this instance, but I apologise for any discourtesy and am very happy to debate the issue now.

It is my practice—I have observed it a great deal since I have been a Minister at the Department for Education and Employment and at the Home Office—to meet delegations led by Members of Parliament because I believe that to be an important part of a Minister's job. I am therefore particularly upset that what happened on this occasion caused distress.

Unfortunately, I have never been to Skegness—it is a shaming apology to have to make. I have been to the other side of the Wash on many occasions, but I have not been to Skegness. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that I have much experience of the consequences of such a traveller invasion, because over the new year 2000 a similar invasion happened in Yarmouth. It had exactly the effects that he described at Skegness. It led not only to expense—at one level that is trivial, but not in reality—but to fear and an extremely unpleasant and damaging atmosphere in the town.

Yarmouth district council and Norfolk police applied for orders, which were agreed by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, to prevent travellers from massing in Great Yarmouth over Easter and Christmas last year. I am in some difficulty tonight because we have heard today that East Lindsey district council has issued a press release, saying that because of intelligence indicating that a large number of travellers are coming to Skegness over Easter, an application for an order under section 14A of the Public Order Act 1986, prohibiting trespassory assemblies in that area, has been sent to the Home Office.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot prejudge my right hon. Friend's decision, but I can give an assurance that he will take that decision extremely rapidly so that action can be taken on the basis of it. I can also assure the hon. Gentleman—if he was making the remark in anything other than a mischievous spirit—that there is no suggestion of decanting travellers from Norfolk to other places on the east coast. The issue will be considered entirely on its merits, which is how it should be. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives information about my right hon. Friend's decision immediately after he takes it.

The powers are necessary for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. There is concern about large numbers of travellers descending on a town in the manner that he described. I understand that the encampment, although on the whole peaceful, produced a number of the results that he described, such as antisocial behaviour and other offences. The Government are clear that no criminal activity should be tolerated in respect of travellers and that they should be treated just like anyone else. There should be no sense that traveller communities are outside the law of the land; they are dealt with by the law in very precise ways. Indeed, the Home Office recently issued joint guidance with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, making it absolutely clear, beyond peradventure, that that was the case.

The law should be enforced for travellers as for all other sections of the community. It is for the police to ensure that any offence is properly investigated and that the law is enforced, but the police and local authorities have powers to direct trespassers to leave land when certain statutory conditions are met. It is an operational matter for the police to decide when and whether to use those powers. Perhaps it would be helpful in informing the debate if I were to explain some of the background.

Under section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, the police have the power to remove people who are trespassing with intent to take up residence, and who have been asked to leave by the landowner. That is a serious power, which can be used when certain conditions are met: when the trespassers have more than six vehicles on the land or when they have caused damage, or used threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour towards the landowner or person acting for him. The police and local authority powers to direct trespassers to leave land under the 1994 Act are discretionary.

The power included in the 1994 Act under section 14A of the Public Order Act 1986 has been used on a number of occasions. I have mentioned the Norfolk police examples, but Wiltshire police gained an order on several occasions to prohibit trespassory assemblies in the Stonehenge area during the summer solstice celebrations—a different type of event from that to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Kent police have gained an order prohibiting trespassory assemblies in Horsmonden to prevent a horse fair, and there are a few other examples of the police using such powers.

Section 14A of the 1986 Act can be used where the chief officer of police believes that an assembly is intended to be held in any district at a place on land to which the public have no right of access or only a limited right of access and that the assembly, first, is likely to be held without the permission of the occupier of the land, or to conduct itself in such a way as to exceed the limits of any permission that he has given or the limits of the public's right of access; and, secondly, may result in serious disruption to the life of the community—which may be the sort of issue to which the hon. Gentleman refers—or where the land, or a building or monument on it is of historical, architectural or scientific importance, if significant damage to the land, building or monument may result. Those are the basic conditions under which the provisions of 1986 Act can be operated.

I cannot prejudge my right hon. Friend's decision on the application, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall address the situation very effectively. I understand that Lincolnshire police have agreed with a number of other east coast forces to form a joint operation, which would pool resources and apply the same robust approach to incursions anywhere in the joint area using available legislation and intelligence, so that traveller movements can be better anticipated in future.

I wish to say a word about intelligence. It has been difficult to predict where groups of travellers will assemble on significant occasions, such as Easter and new year, and we are actively considering ways of improving our capacity to do that. The Lincolnshire police initiative is one example of that. I do not accept that the decision of Yarmouth and Norfolk police necessarily led to the travellers being decanted to Skegness in the way that has been suggested. However, an approach that simply leads to the problem moving from one place to another is not an appropriate way of proceeding. That is why we welcome the joint approach in which Lincolnshire police and other forces are engaged. We shall support that approach in whatever way we can.

I think that I have said what I can say about the issue tonight. I reaffirm that we shall take a decision as rapidly as we conceivably can and that we shall take full account of the context of the application made by the police and East Lindsey district council. We will also take account of the points that the hon. Gentleman has made in the debate and we will communicate with him as soon as we take a decision, whatever that decision may be.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I am not able to prejudge what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will decide when he receives the application, but I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that the matter will be dealt with expeditiously.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-one minutes past Eleven o'clock.

Deferred Divisions

Local Government

That the draft Local Authorities (Alternative Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 15th March, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 362, Noes 134.

Division No. 167]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McCrea, Dr William
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Paisley, Rev Ian
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill

Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walker, Cecil
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 29 March 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Thursday 5 April.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Euro

1. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will make a statement on the impact on the UK economy of the level of the single European currency. [154596]

11. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on the means by which he will evaluate compliance with his five economic tests for joining the euro. [154606]

12. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): What assessment he has made of the impact of the UK's adoption of the euro on the prospects for the competitiveness of UK manufacturing industry. [154607]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Despite the euro-sterling exchange rate, exports to Europe have increased by 5.2 per cent. in the past year. Overall, manufacturing exports have increased by 12.6 per cent. as manufacturing productivity has risen by 5 per cent. Our position on the five economic tests for the euro remains unchanged since the 1997 statement to the House. So that British business is prepared for the introduction of euro notes and coins in 2002, I am today in consultation with business, authorising an enhanced small business information campaign, which includes an updated website, and bringing Treasury expenditure on business preparations for this Parliament up to £9 million, thus helping British business to compete effectively in the single market, whether we are in or out of the euro. I hope that there will be all-party support for this extra help for business preparation. Total spending on preparation across government in this Parliament is around £24 million.

Sir Teddy Taylor: As the Government have been involved in direct intervention to prop up the euro and the Chancellor has instructed the Bank of England that 30 per cent. of the proceeds of its gold sales must be invested in euros, and as the Bank of England is now issuing substantial eurobonds, will the right hon. Gentleman give us some indication of the size of the mountain of euros now in our reserves? Does he think that that will be a good investment? Finally, in the light of what he said about the exchange rate mechanism, will he comment on the resolution passed at the Amsterdam summit, which states that

"member states with a derogation can be expected to join the exchange rate mechanism"

before membership?

Mr. Brown: First, we have no intention of rejoining the ERM. Secondly, on the question of the sales of gold, I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the National Audit Office report, which answers all his points and criticisms. Thirdly, on euro preparations—in other words, preparations for British firms to deal with the advent of notes and coins in 2002—I should have thought that the Conservative party would want to join business in making proper preparations. Am I to believe, however, that the whole Conservative party is not only against the euro in principle, but against assisting British business when it asks us for help in preparing for the advent of euro notes and coins?

Mr. Paterson: What are today's figures for the five economic tests?

Mr. Brown: The assessment of the five economic tests was made in 1997.

Mr. Paterson: Today's figures.

Mr. Brown: The assessment was made in 1997. We have said that we will make an assessment early in the next Parliament. We have said also that we will not provide a running commentary on the issue. The hon. Gentleman has a question that he must answer. He is opposed to any assessment and to considering the issue because his party has ruled out the single currency as a matter of dogma.

Mr. David Taylor: A decade ago, the disastrous Tory currency experiment with the ERM bankrupted 100,000 firms and doubled unemployment. What does my right hon. Friend say to those who believe that sustainable British convergence with the euroland economies is a chimera? Will he confirm that a one-size-fits-all interest rate policy would assuredly bring about the boom and bust that he has so successfully banished?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend knows that it is precisely to deal with the questions that have been asked about the effect on employment, investment, financial services and the flexibility of the economy, and about the durability of convergence, that we have set the five economic tests. It is precisely to answer those questions that we will make an assessment of the five economic tests in the next Parliament. I have already said that we have no intention of repeating the Conservative experiment with the exchange rate mechanism, for which the Conservative party must accept full responsibility as it formed the previous Government. At the same time, given that we

announced measures that will help business to prepare for the advent of euro notes and coins, it is now for the Conservative party to tell us whether it will move against business by refusing to support even those measures.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the strangest features of the current Parliament is the official Opposition's refusal to join the cross-party group on the euro, which I chair? The group meets regularly, monitors preparations and checks that no money is spent on promoting the euro. What sort of Opposition is it who bury their heads in the sand and refuse to take the empty chair in the preparations group of this House?

Mr. Brown: Mr. Speaker will know that we invited every political party in the House of Commons to join the group that would consider preparations for the euro. Every political party—including the Liberals, the nationalist parties and the Irish parties—accepted, except one: the Conservative party. It is hardly surprising that the deputy director general of the Confederation of British Industry said:

> "The Tory party's more Euro-sceptic view is not one that most CBI members would feel comfortable with. It's not in our commercial interests to have a Euro-sceptic government."

Most businesses would take their hat off to the Government for getting Britain's message across better and for building alliances across Europe. The Conservative party is not only anti-Europe, but anti-business.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Chancellor seems to have forgotten some facts: since 1997, a third of a million jobs have been lost in manufacturing and 60,000 jobs have been lost in farming. The CBI and the National Farmers Union agree that much of the blame for that lies with the current overvaluation of the pound, and with Britain losing its share of international investment and trade and experiencing a rapidly increasing deficit. Yet the Chancellor does not include the exchange rate in his conditions for entry. Liberal Democrats say that on top of his conditions, there must be a more competitive exchange rate—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I call the Chancellor.

Mr. Brown: Some people would never join the euro because of dogma; others would join without considering the tests that we have set out. We will make a proper assessment of the tests. When I listened to the hon. Gentleman's description of the economy, I thought that he was referring to what happened in the Conservative years. Manufacturing productivity and output have increased; there are 1 million more jobs; and interest rates that were 15 per cent. under the Conservatives are now half that rate, with mortgages £1,200 a year lower. It is not surprising that business perceives the Conservative party as not only anti Europe but anti-business.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): While I welcome my right hon. Friend's assistance to British business and support our entry into the eurozone, will he consider that, besides the fives tests that he has set out, there is a possible sixth test: entry into the eurozone at a competitive rate? What are his views on that?

Mr. Brown: We have set five economic tests, which will be applied. We will assess them and report the results to Parliament. If Parliament so decided, there would be a referendum whereby the British people could make their assessment. We are not in the business of speculating about the exchange rate.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): Will the Chancellor give a straight answer to a question that is on many people's minds? The Government will not want the euro to be an issue at the general election because they know that the moderate majority of people are opposed to their determination to scrap the pound. If the Chancellor continues to refuse to debate the issue between now and the general election, despite the fact that it is the most important question that confronts this country, will he promise that a Labour Government will put a fair and straightforward question in a referendum? What will that question be?

Mr. Brown: Of course we shall put a fair question. *[Interruption.]* The problem with Conservative Members asking about a referendum is that they totally oppose it—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Con man!

Mr. Speaker: Order. I heard the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) make an unparliamentary remark. Will he withdraw it?

Mr. Bercow: Of course, Mr. Speaker. I withdraw it immediately.

Mr. Brown: The Conservative party asking a question about a referendum does not make sense to the British people. The shadow Chancellor said that a single currency would mean giving up government of the United Kingdom and that no British Government could do that. He is therefore against the single currency for reason of dogma. He would never accept a referendum or its result. He is against it on the ground not of economic interest but of ideology. I challenge him to confirm his statement.

Mr. Portillo: I think that people will draw their own conclusions from the Chancellor's refusal to state what the question in a referendum would be. It is clear that the Labour party would not give people a fair and straightforward opportunity to vote on whether to scrap the pound.

Will the Chancellor answer a second question? As the Government will not want to discuss the euro during the general election campaign, I presume that they will argue that people will have a chance in a referendum to have a fair say on the matter. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Government have rigged the financing of the referendum so that the parties that wish to scrap the pound will be allowed to spend twice as much as the Conservative party will be allowed to spend on defending the currency?

Will the Chancellor now repeat in this House what the Government said in the House of Lords—that they made no pretence of creating a level playing field?

Mr. Brown: Following those remarks, I am happy for the general election campaign, whenever it comes, to be fought with a considerable amount of debate on the issue of the euro. The Conservative party has shown today not only that it is against the single currency as a matter of dogma, and not only that it is against any assessment of it while expecting us to call a referendum, but that it will not even support our business preparations to enable British businesses in or out of the euro to deal with the question of trading in the single currency area.

I ask the shadow Chancellor this: does he now support our preparations to help British businesses cope with the euro, will he say that he is against dealing with the European issue as a matter of complete dogma?

Mr. Portillo: I believe that many people will conclude that the Chancellor is behaving disgracefully in not even attempting to answer the perfectly fair and perfectly serious questions that I have put to him. I cannot understand why he refuses to debate the real issues. I cannot understand why a man like the Chancellor has so little intellectual pride that he is willing, if he possibly can, to hoodwink the British people into giving up their own currency.

Does the Chancellor agree that the position is as follows? His five so-called tests are entirely bogus. If Labour were to win the election, there would be no consideration of the constitutional and political issues. There would be no protection against an ill-judged decision from the so-called tests, because they are purely subjective and purely a matter of opinion.

Will the Chancellor confirm that if there were a referendum, the question would be slanted and tendentious, and the funding would be rigged? Does not that itself merely confirm that those in this country—the vast majority: the moderate majority—who want to keep the pound will have to vote Conservative at the general election?

Mr. Brown: I am even more happy to continue this debate on the issue of the euro, because ours is a reasonable position that we are presenting to the British people. First, we do not rule out the euro on the basis of issues of dogma. Secondly, we will conduct a series of tests—the five economic assessments—and we will report to the British people within two years of a general election and the start of a new Parliament. Thirdly, the tests will be applied rigorously, in such a way that people can see the effect on employment, investment, flexibility and financial services. What we will not do is rule out the euro on ground of dogma or of ideology.

We will take no lectures from the shadow Chancellor, who was in the Treasury during the period when Britain faced an ignominious exit from the exchange rate mechanism, and who was responsible for 15 per cent. interest rates, 22 tax rises and the biggest borrowing requirement. When it comes to what the British people will believe about the economy, we should bear in mind that even the shadow Chancellor has said that the Conservatives must be apologetic to the British people about the way in which they mismanaged the economy.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): My right hon. Friend will know that in the last few days the euro has again begun to slide in value against the dollar to levels that it reached last autumn, when the G7 central bankers had to intervene to prop it up. Can he tell us whether the G7 bankers have any plans to do that again?

Mr. Brown: My right hon. Friend was a Minister in the Treasury—[HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] He was a Treasury Minister in the 1970s, and he knows perfectly well that no Treasury Minister answers questions about speculation on such issues. What we do, as the G7 Ministers said in their statement at Palermo, is to continue to review these matters.

What I will tell my right hon. Friend is that the European economy is growing by some 2.5 to 3 per cent. this year. That is a higher growth rate than that of the American economy. We expect the British economy to grow by between $2\frac{1}{4}$ and $2\frac{3}{4}$ per cent. In other words, there is growth in investment taking place in the European area. Employment is rising both in Europe and, of course, in the British economy itself. My right hon. Friend's prognostications about the European economy being in such a parlous state are not ones that he would want to follow up with detail.

Competitiveness

2. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): What recent representations he has received on Government policy in relation to trends in UK competitiveness; and if he will make a statement. [154597]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): We are promoting UK competitiveness in partnership with business and trade unions through policies for stability, skills, investment and enterprise, all dedicated to closing the productivity gap with our competitors.

Mr. Brooke: Does the Chief Secretary agree that a constructive resolution of the long-running Whitehall farce over the London underground, which has had an effect not just today but over the past four years, would do more for the competitiveness of this great city than any other single act?

Mr. Smith: It is in everybody's interests—long-suffering travellers in London, the economy of London and the wider economy of the UK—that we achieve the modernisation in the London underground that is so clearly needed and that was so neglected when the previous Government were in office. The best way to do that cost-effectively, to time, to standard and with the high safety standards that we must secure is through the public-private partnership and through safety remaining in the public sector.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Does the Chief Secretary accept that one industry in which international competitiveness is key is tourism? Does he also accept that Britain's international position is being undermined by the impression overseas that Britain is in crisis?

Does he agree that one of the best ways to give the impression that everything is back to normal in Britain is to have a general election now?

Mr. Smith: The timing of the general election, as we all know, is a matter for the Prime Minister. I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of the British tourism industry, the enormous contribution that it makes to the economy and the damage being inflicted on it by overseas perceptions of the foot and mouth crisis. The best way we can help the tourism industry and the agriculture industry is to eradicate foot and mouth through all the measures that we are taking to tackle it.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Why has the rate of productivity gone down since the Government took office?

Mr. Smith: The rate of productivity is rising and, moreover, it is rising at twice the level that it was when the Conservative Administration left office. We are acting to raise the rate of productivity growth. After all, the Government introduced the 10p corporation tax starting rate for small firms, cut the main and small rates of corporation tax by 3p and introduced the research and development tax credit for small firms, which has been widely welcomed by the CBI and business. We are considering extending it to large firms. We also announced in the Budget wide-ranging reforms of VAT, which, again, were widely welcomed because of the simplification and the benefit achieved for business. Of course, there is more to do, but through our policies of stability, investment and promoting skills, we have set the platform on which productivity can further increase.

Children's Tax Credit

3. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): How many families are entitled to the children's tax credit. [154598]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Some 800,000 people have responded to our recent advertising campaign. An additional 500,000 have already claimed, making 3.4 million employees—and, with the self-employed, 4.4 million—already expected to benefit. To make sure that all eligible families can benefit as soon as possible, I shall write to MPs on both sides of the House enclosing material that they can send to organisations that serve parents in their constituencies, such as local schools, parent-teacher associations, child care providers and local charities.

The Government are adding to the bounty pack given to 750,000 mothers each year information about applying for the children's tax credit. In total, we shall be investing £2.3 billion a year in the children's tax credit by 2003. As a result of increases over this Parliament, the Government will be spending an extra £1.1 billion a year on child benefit in this coming year.

Mr. Browne: I welcome the initiative that my right hon. Friend is taking to disseminate information about the children's tax credit. It occurs to me that, if the pack that he mentioned is to be used with credibility by Conservative Members, it might need to include a statement as to why they now support a policy that they previously described as a gimmick. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the pack contains explicit material to show that ordinary working families will be substantially better off as a result of this tax credit? Will he also confirm that no child benefit book will go out from now on unless it contains a page that spells out the eligibility for children's tax credit?

Mr. Brown: Every available source of information will be used to get the message across that the children's tax credit is up and running from the beginning of April. Many people will receive the credit in their pay packet at the end of April. The additional rate—the £8.50 rising to £10—will be made available in the May pay packet. I will take on board the suggestions that my hon. Friend made about the information that should be provided in the pack. He is absolutely right to say that the Conservatives called the children's tax credit a gimmick. They are completely wrong.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Has the Chancellor had a chance to view the work of the Childcare Commission, which is chaired by the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and on which I had the honour to serve? Will the Chancellor address his attention to one particular problem? A family where both parents earn £30,000 a year is entitled to children's tax credit. However, there is no such entitlement for a family where the mother, say, wants to stay at home to look after the children and the father earns £45,000 a year. Surely that is unfair. We should not dictate through the tax system how people run their lives. There should be an equitable decision between partners as to how they run their lives in their own way.

Mr. Brown: That is exactly why we are integrating the children's benefits into the new integrated child credit in 2003, when the issue that the hon. Gentleman raised will be dealt with. I applaud the work of the Childcare Commission and the hon. Gentleman's service on it. However, he should look at why the problem has arisen. It is a function of the independent taxation introduced by the previous Government, and of the way in which it was introduced. The problem will be dealt with in 2003. Until then, nearly 5 million families will benefit from the children's tax credit, and I hope that his party will stop calling it a gimmick and start recognising that it is vital to improving the standard of living of millions of families.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): How many of the 600,000 families eligible for children's tax credit in the north-west does my right hon. Friend think will receive it? Is he satisfied about the progress of his general policy, which combines measures to make work pay with investing in local economies? Will he give us a progress report on his efforts to secure regional investment funds, in the discussions that he is having in Europe?

Mr. Brown: Every family with children in my hon. Friend's constituency will receive child benefit. Almost every family that is eligible will receive the children's tax credit, and those who have not yet applied can still do so. That is why the information packs are going out. On the general question about the standard of living among families, the key to that is to create employment

opportunities in my hon. Friend's constituency and region that were denied for so long. I think that she will agree that the north-west is benefiting from the increase in employment and will benefit from the Budget measures that target public expenditure and tax assistance to regenerate some of the high unemployment areas of this country. There should be consensus on the need for helping family prosperity in the way that we propose and on the need for increased work, including the new deal. It is unfortunate that the Conservatives want to abolish the new deal and the working families tax credit.

Personal Service Companies

4. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will make a statement on his policy on the taxation of personal service companies. [154599]

5. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): If he will make a statement on his policy on the taxation of personal service companies. [154600]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): We want to make the United Kingdom the most competitive environment for business in the world. Our policy on the taxation of personal service companies helps to do this by making sure that the tax measures intended to support genuine businesses can be properly targeted at those businesses and do not, instead, go to those that are essentially no different from employees.

Mr. Brady: Is the Minister not ashamed of having introduced a stealth tax on enterprise? Is she not ashamed of having introduced a tax that will drive skilled information technology professionals overseas? What is her estimate of the number of those professionals who have already been driven out of the country by her proposals?

Dawn Primarolo: The legislation is fair, proportionate and compatible with the United Kingdom's obligations under EU legislation. There is no evidence to support the allegation that there is a flood of IT specialists leaving the UK. The hon. Gentleman should look at some of the various publications; for example, an article called "Contractor UK" by David Houston of Glow International Ltd. He warns IT specialists that despite the widespread press speculation concentrating on UK contractors post-IR35, it is a fallacy that they would be better off overseas. He reminds them that in western European countries where there are vacancies for freelance professionals, in every case taxation is higher than in the UK. The hon. Gentleman's allegation that thousands are leaving is not the case, and his suggestion that the tax proposals are unfair is not the case. He should bear in mind that the measure is to deal with an avoidance mechanism in the tax system whereby those working through personal services companies were paying tax and national insurance at the rate of 21 per cent., whereas an employee earning the same amount in the same circumstances was paying, on average, 35 per cent.

Mr. Wilkinson: Nobody in this House, and certainly no independent IT specialist or anyone running a consultancy company outside this House, will be impressed by the verbose filibuster of the Paymaster General in response to the sensible question from my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady). Does she deny that the Government are looking into changing the immigration rules to attract IT specialists and other high technology personnel, who could inject entrepreneurship in the UK? Is not it high time that this cretinous imposte was removed? Is it not thoroughly welcome that the Conservative party is proposing to do just that in its election manifesto?

Dawn Primarolo *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Minister replies, may I appeal for a shorter answer?

Dawn Primarolo: I will, of course, do your bidding in this Chamber, Mr. Speaker.

It is true that the Government, along with the Governments of other European countries, are looking at visa applications. The people concerned are coming to this country knowing our tax regulations, and knowing full well that they will be very well off.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on plugging this tax loophole? Does not the Opposition's attitude to this matter reveal them to be, as always, the tax dodger's friend?

Dawn Primarolo: The proposals contained within IR35 are intended to close a tax loophole that meant that a huge amount of resources was being lost to the UK Exchequer. Opposition Members who so gladly say that they will abolish the measure need to explain to the House where they would find nearly £1 billion of expenditure, which would result from their actions.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): My right hon. Friend will be aware that IT contracting has gone through ups and downs, particularly when the Tories changed the tax rules several times in the 1980s. The key area for those companies is investment in skills and continual reskilling. Will she give an assurance that she will look to provide investment in those areas for such companies?

Dawn Primarolo: The suggestion that IR35 is targeted only on IT consultancies is not true. It is to deal with a mechanism for service companies where those involved were essentially employees. A legitimate business that is not caught by the regulations in IR35 can continue to be able to invest in training, as it could before IR35.

Savings

6. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will make a statement on his policy regarding the savings ratio. [154601]

10. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): What recent representations he has received on the taxation of savings. [154605]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): The Government's strategy involves creating the right environment for saving—sound money and low

inflation—the right incentives for people to save and ensuring that people have the right information to make good saving choices.

Mr. Robathan: But the Chief Secretary obviously does not know that in 1995 the Chancellor wrote:

"We will never raise the level of investment in our economy if we do not encourage savings".

yet in the past four years the savings ratio has been almost halved, so does the Chief Secretary think that the Government's policies are encouraging savings? They certainly do not seem to be.

Mr. Smith: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that of course investment is increasing; it is now almost 15 per cent. of GDP. As for the savings ratio, that is increasing as well. The hon. Gentleman obviously did not see the latest figures which were released on Monday and showed that the savings ratio is up to 5.5 per cent.

Mr. Winterton: Will the Chief Secretary admit that, despite what he has just said, and as figures that I have show, the savings ratio is as low now as it has ever been since records began and that the Treasury itself admits that any further weakening of savings would pose a serious risk to the United Kingdom economic outlook? Does he think that taking £200 annually, in the form of the Government's pension tax, from the average 30-year-old encourages or discourages savings? Surely we want to encourage savings, and that is what the Conservative party is going to do.

Mr. Smith: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not checked his facts more carefully. As I said and as the figures published on Monday showed, the savings ratio has increased to 5.5 per cent. Moreover, in every quarter under this Government, the ratio has been higher than the depths that it reached, in 1988, under the previous Tory Administration. Furthermore, since the previous general election, personal sector net financial wealth is up by 31 per cent. We also have robust levels of long-term saving in the economy. The debt-to-wealth ratio is less than half of what it was in the 1990s, and individual savings accounts are attracting one third more in savings than TESSAs and PEPs were even in their most successful year.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): But is it not a paradox that, although the United States is the zone with a negative savings ratio and Europe is the zone with a positive savings ratio—the European ratio is more positive than ours—Conservative Members are fanatically anti-European? Is not one of the best ways of encouraging saving to allow employees to have a stake in their company through employee share ownership? After the general election, when he and every other Labour Member have been returned, will my right hon. Friend meet a delegation to take forward the idea of employee share ownership? A stakeholding, partnership economy is the one that we want—not the confrontational, anti-European one being offered by Conservative Members.

Mr. Smith: Of course my hon. Friend is right. This Government have introduced the most ambitious and successful programme for employee share ownership that the United Kingdom has ever seen. I shall be very happy to meet a delegation at any time to discuss how we can build on that successful programme.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, prior to 1997, great numbers of people in the United Kingdom were excommunicated from savings? Will he comment on the viability of credit unions and the contribution that the Government have made to establishing those programmes in our communities?

Mr. Smith: Yes, given the damage of boom and bust and instability and the 3 million unemployed, Conservative Members should be ashamed of their record when they were in government. As my hon. Friend said, that Government threw people on the scrap heap and did not give them an opportunity to save. As for credit unions, they make an invaluable contribution, and we are pleased to see the credit union movement growing. We are simplifying the regulation of credit unions and enabling them to expand their activities. That is greatly to the benefit not only of saving, but of people in our most disadvantaged communities because it gets them out of the hands of the loan sharks.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Does the Chief Secretary accept that the halving of savings—which is the halving of the savings rate, of which the Government are well aware—has been the result of Government policies and presents a serious threat to the economy? As Ministers know, there has been a substantial increase in personal borrowings because disposable incomes have increased by only 1.6 per cent. annually whereas, in the previous decade, they increased by 2.75 per cent. annually.

Do the Government not see, in the present climate of stock market weakness, that there is a serious risk of a volatile rise in savings, leading to a fall in consumption and the very bust that they seek to avoid? We are dangerously poised, as a result of the—

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must have brief questions, as well as brief answers.

Mr. Smith: I find it extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman is predicting a rise in the savings ratio, when Conservative Members have been complaining endlessly that it was too low. The truth is that the best prospects for savings, as for the strength of the economy as a whole, is to maintain the platform of stability that the Government have put in place and avoid the £16 billion worth of cuts and the boom and bust threatened by Conservative policies.

NHS Investment

7. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): If he will make a statement on his plans for future investment in the health service. [154602]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): The Government are providing by far the biggest, most sustained growth in NHS resources in the history of the service. Taken together, the Chancellor's Budget and spending review plans provide for real-terms growth in

NHS expenditure of 6.4 per cent, 5.2 per cent. and 5.4 per cent. over the next three years, compared with an average of 3.3 per cent. average annual real growth since the foundation of the NHS and only 3 per cent. annual real growth between 1978-79 and 1996-97.

Angela Smith: At Basildon hospital, we are now seeing the effects of that, with three new wards, new theatres and a new breast cancer unit currently being built. However, we still face long delays for treatment after admission through accident and emergency. Those problems occurred in the past because of lack of investment in the future. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that we will have long-term sustained investment, because only if the public sector and the health service have confidence in the Government's continuing support can they plan their investment for the future?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. It is because of that record increase in resources that the Chancellor has been able to announce that we are to modernise every accident and emergency unit in the country that needs it. Moreover, thanks to the resources that we are providing, the staff will be there to meet the patients care needs, with the recruitment over the next three years of 7,500 extra consultants, 2,000 extra GPs, 20,000 nurses and 6,500 therapists and other health professionals.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Yesterday, in a shameless piece of cynical electioneering, the Health Secretary suspended the transfer of accident and emergency and paediatric services from Crawley hospital to East Surrey hospital in Redhill in my constituency, at the request of the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt)—a decision that he would not have been able to make in a week's time if we were in an election campaign, because it is politically controversial. The decision will cost the local health care trust money because of the delayed accrual of savings from the concentration of services. Will the Chief Secretary undertake to repay that money?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman will know that, as a consequence of the Chancellor's Budget announcements, extra money is going directly to every acute trust in the country. That will benefit his constituents as much as anyone else's.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the investment will be in primary care as well as acute care? We all recognise the need for investment in hospitals, but it is vital also to invest in GPs and care-at-home services in the community. Can he also settle the debate that has been raging on these Back Benches over the past half hour: is the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) Mr. Boom or Mr. Bust?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is quite right about the importance of primary care and the contribution it makes both to the quality of service to patients and to achieving better health outcomes. That is why, as the Prime Minister recently announced, 3,000 GP premises are to be modernised over the next three years and 500 new one-stop primary care centres are to be completed by 2004. With the recruitment of 2,000 extra GPs and other health professionals, that will enable us to continue the progress that we are already making in substantially raising standards of care, increasing the rapidity of treatment and cutting waiting lists.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the Chief Secretary now admit that, whatever his future plans for NHS investment may be, in this Parliament his record is even worse than the Conservatives' record in the previous Parliament? Does he not realise that that poor record on NHS spending means that in my constituency there are severe shortages of nurses, bio-medical staff and doctors, and we have long and rising out-patient waiting lists? Will he not admit that, as a proportion of national income, average spending on the NHS in this Parliament is even lower than in the previous Parliament?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman's figures are nonsense. [HON. MEMBERS: "They are your figures."] He would do well to remember that at the last general election the Liberal Democrats promised to increase health spending by a total of £3.5 billion across the Parliament, whereas this Government are increasing health spending by more than £5 billion, year on year. As for shares of GDP, when the previous Administration left office 5.7 per cent. of GDP was spent on health; this year the figure is 6.2 per cent.

Office for National Statistics

8. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If he will make a statement on the work of the Office for National Statistics. [154603]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): This month is the fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Office for National Statistics, and we are now making major advances in statistics. We have a new index of services, and we are the first country to update our national accounts to meet the new European system of accounts. We also have new data capture initiatives and initiatives to make small area data available for social statistics. In line with last year's White Paper, we have also launched "National Statistics".

Mr. Mackinlay: As my hon. Friend is the Minister in charge of the veracity of Government statistics, I want to draw to her attention the fact that in countless hospitals throughout England and Wales, death certificates are not being completed in a proper and frank manner. Is she aware that for the past 20-odd years, although death certificates may mention pneumonia or septicaemia, there is often a cover-up of the fact that at least some contribution to death was made by MRSA. I shall attempt to pronounce that: methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus—*[Laughter.]* This is not a matter for levity—not hundreds but thousands of people die in our hospitals because of it, and the hospitals are contriving not to tell the truth. They are covering up because of political considerations, resource considerations, possible litigation—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister knows what the hon. Gentleman is asking.

Miss Johnson: I will not try to emulate my hon. Friend's pronunciation; I will stick to the term MRSA.

This is a serious matter, and I appreciate his raising it. Doctors are required to complete certificates showing the cause of death to the best of their knowledge and belief. Guidance is included at the front of every book of death certificates. Indeed, they are not available without it, and it stresses the need to complete the sequence of conditions that led to death, so death certificates are being correctly completed. However, I am sure my hon. Friend will be interested to know that the Department of Health has decided to make all invasive forms of MRSA infection reportable by NHS trusts to the Department of Health, from April.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will people be able to describe themselves as English in the coming census?

Miss Johnson: People will be able to describe their place of birth by whatever means they wish, including ticking a box or writing in the word "English".

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): Will my hon. Friend recognise the important work that my constituents do in the statistical office in Runcorn, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall)? She will know that, because of the review that has taken place, they are concerned about their future. Will she be in a position to make a decision about the office in the not-too-distant future, and will she take into account the representations that the unions want to make to her soon?

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; I know that he takes a keen interest in the concerns of his constituents who work in Runcorn. As he knows, I have been considering the matter for a little while and I need to give it further thought. However, as soon as I make a decision, I shall alert him.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Was not the Economic Secretary right in her first answer that the Government have taken more initiatives on statistics than any previous Government? Is she not concerned about the growing number of statistics that provide clear evidence of declining confidence in the economy? Is not the only statistic about which we can be confident under a Labour Government the one showing that taxes will go up? Will the Economic Secretary please tell us whether national statistics show that the tax burden is higher or lower than it was when the Government came to office in 1997?

Miss Johnson: We have published endless details of the tax burden. As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, it is lower than it was under the previous Government's plans. On his point about the figures, through the framework for national statistics, we have set out new arrangements that guarantee the independence of statistics that are produced. That is in contrast to the previous Government, who fiddled the figures on unemployment statistics on numerous occasions—dozens of revisions were made to unemployment figures to present a picture to the country that was different from the reality of unemployment under the Tories.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): As the Government target more resources on disadvantaged areas, will my hon. Friend urge the Office for National Statistics to produce more statistical information at constituency and ward level so that we can better assess the difference that that investment is making?

Miss Johnson: I welcome my hon. Friend's interest in the subject, which is shared by the Government. In response to PAT 18—the policy action team report—we have put in place an initiative with additional funding to produce local area statistics on a ward-by-ward and, indeed, other area basis. I am sure that all hon. Members will find that extremely useful.

Energy Taxation

9. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley): If he will make a statement on his policy towards energy taxation. [154604]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The climate change levy, which comes into effect next week, will help to deliver the reductions in carbon emissions needed for the United Kingdom to meet its Kyoto and domestic targets. I am delighted to inform the House that European state aid clearance was given yesterday for the package of negotiated agreements for energy-intensive users, including the full 10-year duration that we sought, and for exemptions for renewable energy and combined heat and power.

Mr. Evans: Following the announcement yesterday by the President of the United States that he will not proceed to ratify the Kyoto protocol because it is not in the best interests of American industry, will the Financial Secretary put British industry first? Will he look again at the enormous cost of the climate change levy, regardless of the package that he has just announced? Throughout the country, including the north-west, the levy will do enormous damage to manufacturing industry which, in any event, is in general decline. The President of the United States is putting American industry first; is not it about time that the Chancellor started to put British industry first and scrapped the levy?

Mr. Timms: It is in the interests of every inhabitant of the globe that the Kyoto process proceeds and that the problem of climate change is addressed. It was disappointing that The Hague conference failed to reach agreement, but our aim is to work with the US Administration to advance the process. The climate change levy is a key element in meeting our Kyoto obligations and is revenue-neutral. All the proceeds will be recycled back to business, and the whole levy has been designed to protect the competitiveness of UK firms.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does my hon. Friend agree that the message of President Bush's deplorable decision to turn the Kyoto agreement on its head is that no Government anywhere should ever let themselves be compelled by vested interests and that our Government are right to put the environment first?

Mr. Timms: I have certainly seen the press reports this morning. Our aim is to work with the United States Administration to take this very important process forward. It is in the interests of every citizen of the globe that we do so.

VAT (Residential Conversions)

13. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When the lower rate of value added tax on residential conversion works will be introduced. [154608]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): From the date of Royal Assent to the Finance Bill.

Mr. Russell: Does the Paymaster General agree that the higher rate of VAT on existing buildings is a disincentive for urban renewal and that the nil VAT on new building encourages greenfield development? That being the case, why has it taken the Government four years to get around to sorting out this mess?

Dawn Primarolo: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The package that was introduced in this year's Budget by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on VAT on contaminated land and on development in disadvantaged areas builds on Lord Rogers' report. It is specifically targeted at the regeneration of contaminated sites in inner-city areas and has been widely welcomed as the right way forward for developing these policies. Indeed, the empty homes initiative welcomed those proposals as the Government recognise how to deal with these problems.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Will my hon. Friend comment on the fact that a charity in Ilkley in my constituency may well have to pay a levy of £10,000 over and above the cost of building a bandstand because Customs and Excise does not regard a bandstand as a building? If a bandstand is not a building, what is it?

Dawn Primarolo: I will not speculate on whether or not a bandstand is a building. However, I have noted my hon. Friend's comments, and I will certainly look closely at her point about the problems that her constituents seem to be experiencing with Customs and Excise.

Unemployment (Kettering)

14. **Mr. Phil Sawford** (Kettering): What impact his policies have had on unemployment levels in Kettering since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [154610]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): In Kettering, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, we are continuing to deliver a platform of economic stability that will help us attain our objective of high and stable levels of employment. Since the previous election, claimant unemployment in the Kettering constituency has fallen by 35 per cent, long-term unemployment by 81 per cent. and youth unemployment by 83 per cent.

Mr. Sawford: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that more than 398 young people have taken part in the new deal in my constituency and that more than 200 of those have found full-time employment? Will he join me in congratulating these young people, the gateway provider and the jobcentre staff for the excellent work that they are doing? Does he have a message for young people in the Kettering constituency who were abandoned by the previous Government?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. I am pleased to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the young people concerned and to record the House's appreciation of all the efforts made by the personal advisers, the providers and, of course, the employers who have given them work opportunities. The message is very clear—the greatest threat to the progress that we have made in tackling youth unemployment and to the future of those young people would be the return of a Conservative Administration who would want to abolish the new deal.

Pension Funds

17. **Mr. Eric Illsley** (Barnsley, Central): What representations he has received regarding the fall in the value of pension funds. [154614]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): Pensions, by their very nature, are investments for the long term. Investors should not be deterred from making sensible provisions for their retirement by short-term volatility in the investment markets.

Mr. Illsley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Can she give any assistance to pension schemes such as that of the William Cook group, which is based in Sheffield? Its pension fund had a shortfall of some £4 million when valued in October last year, causing the pension scheme to ask its members either to increase their contributions or to change to a money purchase scheme, which will be to the detriment of those workers. Can my hon. Friend offer any advice to such pension funds?

Miss Johnson: My hon. Friend was perhaps not aware of the previous difficulties. I am concerned to hear what he has to say, and I shall be delighted to meet him and discuss the matter further.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Has the hon. Lady received any recent representations from the pension funds about the cost of the withdrawal of payable tax credits? Does it amount to more than £5 billion a year, and is she proud of that record?

Miss Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows well, the reason for making the change was to increase and maintain investment in funds, rather than to encourage artificial withdrawal of money. At the same time as the change has taken place, stock market values have gone up and the values of the funds have increased.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House please give the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for the coming week will be as follows:

MONDAY 2 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Criminal Defence Service (Advice and Assistance) Bill *[Lords]*.

Consideration in Committee followed by remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill.

Proceedings on the Election Publications Bill *[Lords]*.

Motion on the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (Amnesty Period) Order 2001.

TUESDAY 3 APRIL—Second Reading of the International Criminal Court Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 4 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]*.

THURSDAY 5 APRIL—Remaining stages of the International Development Bill.

FRIDAY 6 APRIL—Private Member's Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 9 APRIL—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 10 APRIL—Motion on the Easter recess Adjournment debate

The House will wish to be reminded that on Wednesday 4 April, there will be a debate relating to community postal services in European Standing Committee C.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

Wednesday 4 April: European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union document: 10544/00, Community Postal Services. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee reports: HC 28-iv (2000-01) and HC 23-xxviii (1999-2000).]

The House will wish to know that, subject as ever to the progress of business, I expect that the House will rise for the Easter recess at the end of business on Tuesday 10 April and return on Monday 23 April.

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House for all that information. After last week, it is a great relief to know that the Government have not cancelled Easter this year.

As business is clearly moving at a satisfactory pace, may we have a statement from the Deputy Prime Minister early next week about the tube? The public-private partnership completion deadline was March 1999. Today's tube strike, with the resultant gridlock in surface transport, shows clearly the urgent need for the House to be kept informed of the Government's proposals.

Transport for London was set up by the Government. It is not clear what it is meant to do if it is not to run the tube. We have seen the Deputy Prime Minister on the Treasury Bench this week. It would be a courtesy as well as a matter of urgency for him to allow the House to question him on that important subject.

On the assumption that the county council elections will proceed, and given the problems around the country with foot and mouth, will the Leader of the House say whether the Government intend to make a statement before the Easter recess about arrangements for the elections? Will there be any consideration of the expenses of candidates who are farmers? I have three county council candidates in my constituency who are farmers restricted to their farms. They will want to contact the electorate by telephone, which will have a read-across into election expenses. Will arrangements be made for electoral returning officers to take it on themselves to distribute postal votes, perhaps even on a parish-by-parish basis? That is a matter of concern for the right of candidates to contact their electorate.

Now that the Leader of the House has kindly outlined when we can expect the Easter recess, will there be a statement on how Members of Parliament can be kept informed and have access to Ministers, especially at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, during the recess? The present national emergency is likely to be still with us during the Easter recess, and it is most important that hon. Members can continue to deal with constituency casework relating to foot and mouth on a day-by-day basis. Proper arrangements need to be made, and they should include officials at MAFF being aware of contact numbers for hon. Members if new outbreaks occur in their constituencies during the recess. That matter should be put in hand, and I hope that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will tell the House early next week about the contingency arrangements that the Government have put in place.

Will the Leader of the House say whether it is the Government's intention to offer a full debate—not a statement—on foot and mouth in Government time before the House rises for the Easter recess? The two debates that have been held in the Chamber have been in Opposition time. We welcome statements from the Minister, but each day new problems and issues arise that hon. Members of all parties want to raise. It would be appropriate if the Government were to find time in their agenda for a much more detailed debate before the House rises for the recess.

Mrs. Beckett: I shall try to remember all of that. First, the hon. Lady asked for a statement on the London underground, and I shall draw her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. She will know that the Government have been striving heartily to get agreement about the future of the underground, but unfortunately it has not yet proved possible to resolve all the problems. Obviously, however, my right hon. Friend will continue to work on the matter.

The hon. Lady then asked, on the assumption that the county council elections will proceed, about the many arrangements that need to be made. I shall draw her remarks to the attention of the relevant Ministers. I hope that she is aware that electoral returning officers already have considerable powers, and that, even before there was any question of a foot and mouth outbreak, they had been advised to draw to people's attention the greater availability of postal voting. They are doing what they can in practical terms to make that option more genuinely available. In that sense, therefore, there is little need for further steps to be taken.

I turn now to the general question of how the county council elections should be handled. It seems that the Conservative party has had its own thoughts on that, and made its own arrangements. Although it has called for the cancellation of the county council elections, the Conservative party has called no fewer than three county council by-elections—in Cumbria, Essex and Wiltshire—since the outbreak began.

Mrs. Browning: In the towns.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady screams that the by-elections will be held in the towns, but if I recall correctly the Opposition called for the suspension of all county council elections in Cumbria. They are displaying a somewhat selective memory in that respect, but I simply say that it is clear that Opposition Members will have given thought to the matter when they decided to call those unnecessarily early by-elections.

The hon. Lady asked me about access to Ministers, and about statements and information given to the House. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture is considering the planning needed to keep hon. Members informed.

I understand the hon. Lady's point about casework, and it is right and proper for hon. Members to want to keep informed about problems in their constituencies, and to draw them to the attention of MAFF if they feel that messages are not getting through. However, although it is officials on the ground, such as vets, who primarily need to keep in touch with the situation, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture is doing everything that he can to keep hon. Members informed.

I shall consider what the hon. Lady said about a debate on foot and mouth. She will be conscious, as I am, of the regular statements that Ministers have made, but I appreciate her point that debates and statements are not the same. However, the country will expect the Government to keep the House informed and information to flow freely between hon. Members and the Government. The Government are keeping the House informed, and I am not trying to make a party point when I say that I think that people also want Ministers to strike a balance between the proper discharge of their responsibilities to the House and their responsibilities in the country as a whole. We strive to keep those matters in balance.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Is not it strange that the Opposition want the Government to plough on, but raise no objection when told that Parliament is to be away for the lengthy period of 13 days?

My question relates to the possibility of a general election. If one takes place on 3 May, Parliament will be dissolved about this time next week. Many of us have in the pipeline important correspondence with Government Departments that requires a response. If a general election is called, will special action be taken to ensure that we all receive replies by next Thursday, given that after then we shall no longer be Members of Parliament? I thought that, as a bald man with a funny accent, I had better ask a serious question.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot quarrel with my hon. Friend about his hair, but I do not think that there is anything funny about his accent. He is a very serious and effective Member of Parliament, as hon. Members on both sides will confirm.

My hon. Friend drew attention to the length of the recess. One of the reasons that lay behind my response last week to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) about the timing of what was then a potential recess was that the Government had been asked whether the recess and the school holidays would coincide. He might know that, yet again, there is quite a disparity in respect of when school holidays fall in different parts of the country. We came under pressure—not least in the upper House—to start the Easter recess earlier, because otherwise children might be on holiday when the House was sitting. The arrangements, in part, reflect that request.

My hon. Friend asked about correspondence in the pipeline. He has fought many elections successfully and will, no doubt, fight many more with equal success, so he will know that that situation arises whenever a general election is called. There is always correspondence and material in the pipeline and most Departments and Ministers do their best to ensure that Members receive responses, but it is not always possible to provide 100 per cent. of responses.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does the Leader of the House recall that four weeks ago, I raised questions about the practicality of getting information from candidates to electors in areas such as Cornwall? The correspondence that she has kindly made available to me shows that she has not been able to do anything about the problem facing county council candidates, who, in contrast to general election candidates, do not get free mail to their constituents. Is it still possible to examine that issue?

Will the right hon. Lady reconsider the answer that she gave me last week regarding the statement that was to be made in the other place by the Minister for Transport, Lord Macdonald, on the National Air Traffic Services Ltd. public-private partnerships? I understand that that statement is being made today, but we have had no statement in this House, let alone an opportunity to debate it.

I endorse the request made by the Conservative spokeswoman for a debate on the London underground. I always walk to the House and I am conscious that many other people in London had to do so this morning. A statement would not only be useful, but might provide guidance to some Members of Parliament about the healthiest way in which to get to the House. The right hon. Lady will have noticed that, by an admirable coincidence, a medical research report published this morning suggests that walking to work is much healthier than working out in the gym.

Will the right hon. Lady consider advising her Government colleagues to dispense with their ministerial limousines for the next six weeks or so and walk to work instead? Might that not be a good way to ensure that the Government are healthy? Would she care to make the same suggestion to the Leader of the Opposition, who is also provided with a limousine at public expense?

Mrs. Beckett: On the hon. Gentleman's first question, I shall draw his remarks to the attention of the relevant

[Mrs. Beckett]

Ministers. Although I understand his point, I am not persuaded that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is likely to think that he can undertake to provide free mail for local elections.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the statement on NATS in the Lords. He will recall that during debates there, an undertaking was given that there would be a further statement in that House, and it is in response to that undertaking that the statement he mentions is being made.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned people walking to work and dispensing with ministerial and other limos. Of course, the leader of the Liberal party is provided with an official car, as I recall.

Mr. Tyler: No. Absolutely not.

Mrs. Beckett: If I am incorrect, I withdraw the allegation unreservedly and apologise for making it, although it was certainly my impression that a car was somehow provided for the leader of the Liberal party. Perhaps we will not go into that.

The hon. Gentleman drew attention to the report that suggested that it is healthy for people to walk to work. I observed to my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, that while that might in general be good advice, I was not sure that it was in London with all the traffic fumes. That remains my view.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the growing public concern about deep vein thrombosis and long-haul air travel? She will be aware that next Friday will be the Second Reading of my private Member's Bill, the Air Travellers (Provision of Health Information) Bill. If it should fail at Second Reading, will she ask her right hon. Friends to consider legislation to place a legal requirement on airlines to provide up-to-date information on the risks associated with long-distance flights?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend has taken this subject seriously and takes a close and detailed interest in it. Indeed, I believe that he initiated a debate in Westminster Hall on it. I wish him well with his Bill. I undertake to draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. However, my hon. Friend will recognise that there are many calls for Government legislation on a range of issues. The public awareness campaign that is being run by people such as him will be just as effective as legislation.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Next week's business does not include any provision for suspending the county council elections. Can we assume, therefore, that it is the Government's view that those elections should go ahead?

Mrs. Beckett: Certainly, it has been the Government's view for some time that to suspend the county council elections would give a strong and negative signal. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware, as I have pointed this out to the House before, that the tourism industry—other industries are affected but it is primarily the tourism industry—has expressed strong reservations about that course. Obviously, all those issues remain under consideration.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend encourage the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to make a statement to the House? The continuing uncertainty about the underground is not helpful and people want a clear statement of how it is to proceed. It is important to realise that Bob Kiley is a most talented and remarkable man. His advice should be taken because it is in the interests of the passengers.

On a different subject, could someone urgently consider conference calls for candidates who are excluded from county council elections because they are in exclusion zones? There is no reason why we should not use modern technology to enable candidates who are trapped inside their farms to offer their views to the public. They could do so if they were given the necessary support.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point and I will draw it to the attention of the relevant authorities. While I completely understand that people will wish to take seriously all the precautions that they can, I understand that if people do take those proper precautions they can move from their farms. It is not the case that people are confined to their farms, although I recognise the strong wish that people will have to avoid doing anything that might exacerbate any difficulties.

My hon. Friend mentioned the London underground and I personally undertake to draw her remarks and those of other hon. Members to the attention of the Secretary of State. However, I assure her that no one is more anxious to draw the issues to a conclusion than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Can the Leader of the House explain why, when there is an exhibition in the Upper Gallery of bronzes of long defunct—but all male—servants of this House, we have no comparable memorials in this place to any of the women who have served the House? I acknowledge that one cannot have such a memento until one is past this life. Will she explain two things? What happened to the plaque of Lady Astor which was commissioned by her family and was originally placed in one of the voting Lobbies? It has disappeared to some obscure place in the House of which I am unaware. Will the Leader of the House, using her influence with the usual channels, seriously contemplate memorials of some kind—this is a non-partisan issue—to those women who served the House and whose very election to the House was a major achievement on their part? When I take my guests around the Commons, I am ashamed to tell them that there is not one comparable memorial in the House to a woman, or even to a suffragette who fought for the enfranchisement of women.

Mrs. Beckett: There is an indirect memorial, at least, to one of the suffragettes in the broken sword in St. Stephen's Hall, which had to be broken in order to remove someone who had chained herself to it. However, I take the hon. Lady's point. I am afraid that I have not the faintest idea what happened to the plaque commemorating, very properly, the election of Lady Astor, or why it was moved. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock

(Mr. Mackinlay) suggests that he believes that it is sited near the Admission Order Office, where more visitors might see it than would see it in the Division Lobby, where it was previously. I assure the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) that none of these decisions are matters for me. I certainly understand her remark, and I suspect that part of the reason is that it is over such a comparatively short period that women have been able to be Members of the House. There may also be less inclination to raise resources to fund more permanent memorials to any of the women Members or women who have participated here. I share her view that that is regrettable, but no doubt it will be remedied over time.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Will my right hon. Friend make time available for a debate on pensioners? Will she join me, as I am sure the whole House will, in sending our best wishes to Baroness Castle, who has been admitted to St. Thomas's hospital after a fall? We need a debate on pensioners so that we can assess the Government's good start, and address pensioners' continuing concerns, especially about ageism in the NHS, transport and crime?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He will be aware of the recent publication by the Government and one of the Select Committees on the subject of ageism. I understand his concern that we should have a wide-ranging debate such as he identifies. I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate on the Floor in the near future, but he may like to consider the advantages of Westminster Hall. I share his view and I am sure that the whole House would want to send its strong best wishes and affection to such a distinguished servant of the House as Baroness Castle.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Many haemophiliacs have been infected with hepatitis C as a result of NHS blood products. So far, despite hon. Members on both sides of the House calling for some form of compensation, the Government have rejected that. Earlier this week, there was a case in the High Court in which, on consumer legislation, a number of people won their case. May we have a statement from Health Ministers on the Government's current attitude? Do they intend to appeal that decision or to accept it and perhaps negotiate with others who seek compensation, to make the position of those people and their families far more comfortable as they contend with a very nasty disease?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and he is right that the issue has been raised by hon. Members across the House. He will know that that pressure has hitherto been resisted by Governments of his party as well as of ours. I understand the concern of the individuals and families who have been affected in the way that he describes, although as he knows, major steps have been taken, particularly since 1991, to test all donations of blood for hepatitis C. To some extent, therefore, we hope that the problem has been stemmed. I will draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, but I cannot give an undertaking that he will wish to make a statement so speedily, although no doubt he is considering the impact of the court case. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is questions to the Department of Health on Tuesday, and he may find an opportunity to raise the matter then.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that if the current situation were the same as that in March 1979, there would be no Tory call for postponement of the general election, foot and mouth or no foot and mouth? Have not the Opposition completely lost confidence in their ability to win the next election?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend may be right to attribute motives to the observations that are made by the Opposition. The Government are, as ever, seeking to take the right decisions and to balance the many pressures that are being brought to bear and the large amount of advice that we are being given with regard to the timing of the local elections or any general election.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): First, as I am, improbably, going to be in Cuba next week, and as even I realise that this might therefore be my last business questions, may I thank the Leader of the House for her unfailing and well-informed courtesy to me in all such sessions? Secondly, I should like to join the all-party consensus on the London underground. Although I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister is straining every sinew to make a statement, I am concerned that gridlock in government during the past four years is paralleled today by gridlock on the streets of London. Londoners deserve to be informed of the Government's eventual conclusions on the underground before they cast their votes.

Mrs. Beckett: I shall add the right hon. Gentleman's name to the others. I am conscious of the concerns about the London underground, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been a most assiduous servant of his constituents in the House, not least by sometimes opposing his own Government. For example, I seem to recall that he and I were on the same side regarding the potential closure of Bart's. For a variety of reasons, I hope that this is not his last business questions and thank him for his courtesy and kind remarks. I am not sure what is going on with regard to his first point, as the other day I heard from one of our most distinguished servants, a senior Clerk, that he will also be in Havana shortly, after which he expects to retire. It appears that some sort of retirement expedition is going on. If that is so, perhaps the rest of us should be informed.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Can my right hon. Friend find time in the next few days for the House to discuss one of this week's most important news items? Tuesday's decision to appoint contractors to build the A650 Bingley relief road is fantastic news for my constituents because it will significantly reduce congestion. The previous Conservative Administration could never get the project off the ground.

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of the enormous effort that my hon. Friend has put into lobbying for such improvements in his constituency. I am sure that his constituents will recognise that effort, on which I congratulate him, and be grateful for it. I understand that they might feel that the project is an important issue that should be considered by the House. I fear, however, that it is one of many similar matters that press for time, so I cannot undertake to schedule a debate on it in the near future.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Will the Leader of the House advise us on whether any arrangements have

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

been made for a statement on—or any move made about—advancing the Northern Ireland local government elections, which are due on 16 May, to bring them into line with the local government elections here? Although many of us will welcome the announcement about the Easter recess, we are not too sure whether we will be able to spend it with our families.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sure that families will be seeing a little more of each other, whatever the circumstances. I recognise the serious point that the hon. Gentleman makes. I am not aware of any immediate proposals to make a statement, but I recognise that important concerns have been expressed in Northern Ireland and I believe that the matter is being considered.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): As it is obviously business as usual, can I book Monday 23 April for the Standards and Privileges Committee, so that the House can debate our report, which includes our latest recommendations on the code of conduct? Such a debate would give us the opportunity to correct the many misunderstandings in the national media about what happens in the Committee and about the fact that we are bound by rules that are set in resolutions made by the House of Commons.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point, at least on the misunderstanding about, if not misrepresentation of, the work of the Standards and Privileges Committee. I pay tribute to its members for the time and effort they have to put in. However, with all the good will in the world towards my hon. Friend, for whom I have the greatest respect, I fear that I cannot allow any hon. Member to book a day.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the right hon. Lady make time for a debate on the recently published Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report, which reveals that the British system of education is the worst in Europe? That is not the fault of our teachers, who do good work every day of the year and deserve our thanks and praise. The OECD makes it clear that a pivotal reason for the decline in teachers' morale is the excessive bureaucracy and red tape that the Government have imposed on them. We need a debate on that to expose the Government's frailties and failures well before a general election.

Mrs. Beckett: Oh dear—I am glad that the hon. Gentleman asked that question, but he may not be so glad. The OECD report does not state what he claims. Indeed, the organisation has regretted publicly the distortion of its report.

The hon. Gentleman calls for a debate to expose the Government's frailties and terrible record. I fear that the information in the OECD report was based on a survey that was carried out in 1996, when we were not the Government.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on employment in the United Kingdom? Employment is currently at an all-time high and unemployment has dropped below 1 million. Would not a debate on that be most instructive, to point up the contrast with the previous Administration's record?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. It is so difficult to get good news into the normal media outlets that it is understandable that hon. Members want to air it here. Although I sympathise with that wish, I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future. However, there will be other opportunities, perhaps in Westminster Hall, to raise the matter.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The right hon. Lady represents a Derbyshire constituency and will therefore know that the Staffordshire county show is one of the biggest in the midlands. However, does she realise that it has been cancelled for the first time in its 200-year existence because of the growing outbreak of foot and mouth in Staffordshire? If Parliament is dissolved, what mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that Members of Parliament who seek re-election continue to be informed of outbreaks in their constituencies? The Ministry of Agriculture currently provides such information.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman has fought more than one election, and he knows that if a general election is called, hon. Members become candidates rather than Members of Parliament. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has insisted throughout that the mechanisms for keeping farmers, vets and others on the ground informed must be most robust. That is extremely important.

I am aware that the county show has been cancelled. Such cancellations have happened in several parts of the country as people take precautions. Shows mean a specific concentration of movement in circumstances where precautions are wise.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Does my right hon. Friend agree that hon. Members should encourage their constituents to claim their legal entitlement? Did she hear the Chancellor state earlier that he would encourage hon. Members to work with schools so that families can claim the children's tax credit next month? Will she therefore read early-day motion 473, relating to the action of Plaid Cymru-controlled Caerphilly borough council, which condemned my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) for doing precisely that?

[*That this House notes that the honourable Member for Islwyn sent a letter on House of Commons notepaper to all the schools in the constituency of Islwyn detailing the Government's planned children's tax credit; further notes with dismay that such unsolicited letters were accompanied by a request for the same to be copied and distributed to all schoolchildren for delivery to their parents; questions the propriety of this action within close proximity to calling a general election; deprecates such behaviour as using already cash-strapped resources of schools for overtly political ends; and condemns the use of schoolchildren in this way to deliver details of a policy change which had already been in the public domain since last autumn.*]

Could we have a debate on the children's tax credit and the other measures that the Government have introduced to help working families?

Mrs. Beckett: I am astonished that anyone should think it wrong of a Member of Parliament to keep constituents

informed of matters that are to their advantage. Indeed, we have had an exchange across the Floor of the House about precisely that issue—the need to circulate information that is beneficial to people. I have no doubt, however, that my hon. Friend and others will do what they can to ensure that information is spread through the proper channels.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): May I reinforce the question asked by the shadow Leader of the House, and remind the Leader of the House that so far there have been three debates on foot and mouth disease, all of them instigated by the Opposition? The right hon. Lady continues today to reflect the Government's attitude, which grossly underestimates the grotesque damage being done to the rural economy, beyond farming. It was clear from what was said yesterday, when the Minister for the Environment appeared before the Select Committee on Agriculture, that there had been a huge underestimate of the damage that has been caused—and caused disproportionately in rural areas.

It is good to hear that the Minister of Agriculture will make a statement, but can we have a full day's debate on the damage caused by the foot and mouth crisis to the whole economy?

Mrs. Beckett: There is no truth whatever in the suggestion that the Government underestimate the gravity of the crisis. Of course it is perfectly right and proper for my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to draw attention to the wider implications for the economy as a whole, not least—as I have said—the implications to the tourism industry. The Government must continue to take those issues into account.

We are very conscious of the damage that is being done to the lives and livelihoods of many people in all parts of the country, but we are equally conscious of the fact that two things must be done if we are to begin to stem the worst of that damage. First, we must do all that can be done to tackle the outbreak; secondly, we must do all that we can to support and encourage our tourism industry to prosper where that can happen without any effect on the crisis.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Government give urgent consideration to introducing a one-clause amendment to the Election Publications Bill to provide for delivery of one free election address for each candidate to each household, exclusively for the May local government elections? I thought that the Opposition would ask that question; I am sorry that I have had to do it for them.

Mr. Tyler: I did.

Mr. Mackinlay: I gather that the hon. Gentleman did. Anyway, it is important for all candidates to be able to send one communication to one household. I understand that the cost would be a maximum of £5 million. We do not need this in Tilbury, but it is needed in many parts of the country.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I will draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I understand, however, that apart from any other implications that my hon. Friend's proposal may have, it may well be outwith the scope of the Bill that he mentioned, which is very narrowly drawn.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Has the Leader of the House no shame about the fact that during the three months of the foot and mouth crisis, the Government have not found time for a single debate on the Floor of the House?

Mr. Tyler: Three months?

Mr. McLoughlin: The Leader of the House has announced business to be dealt with until almost the end of April, which will be three months after the beginning of the outbreak. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not understand that.

As the right hon. Lady will know, the Peak district attracts at least 20 million visitors a year, and as she will also know, the consequences of the outbreak are devastating for many businesses in the area. So far, we have heard just one statement in the House about that. Many people whom I meet—including members of the Hartington and Newhaven development association whom I met on Saturday morning—feel that the measures that the Government have announced so far are wholly inadequate. The Minister of Agriculture says that he will make more announcements, but my constituents, and those businesses, desperately need to know when the Government will come up with concrete measures.

Mrs. Beckett: I rather deplore the Conservative party's desperate attempts to create the impression that the Government are at fault, and that we are not doing all we can to tackle the many ramifications of the issues being raised.

I take the point that the debates that have taken place hitherto have been in Opposition time, but we have had those debates, and we have had repeated statements. The Government have fallen over backwards to keep the House informed, not least—as the hon. Gentleman will know—through exceptional measures such as the MPs' hotline and regular updates in the Library.

Let me say, with respect to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents, that the best way of bringing about a resurgence in the tourism industry and other aspects of the local economy is to continue to keep the issue under control, while also encouraging people not to stay away from the countryside but to go sensibly into it. That would be far more helpful than any loan scheme, or any of the other ideas that people are proposing to help industries. A revival of custom is what those industries need, and, with respect to the hon. Gentleman, a debate in the House may not always be the best way of achieving that.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Is my right hon. Friend aware that Carlisle is at the very centre of the Cumbria and Dumfries and Galloway foot and mouth cluster? If anywhere in the country is suffering from the impacts of the disease, it is that area and Carlisle in particular. Is she therefore not a little surprised to discover that the Conservatives have called a local council by-election not for 3 May, but for 19 April? Is not she further surprised that the seat is not Conservative, but Liberal? The Conservatives are so keen to hold a

[Mr. Ian Davidson]

by-election in the centre of the area affected by foot and mouth that they have taken extraordinary steps. Does she agree that what we are smelling from the Opposition is frit?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is out of order.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does the right hon. Lady recall the vehemence with which the Prime Minister, during the Ayr by-election for the Scottish Parliament, denounced the practice of homosexual role play in school sex education classes? Hon. Members will be receiving reports from the Christian Institute giving documentary evidence as to how widespread that practice now is. May we have a debate so that the Prime Minister can tell us precisely what he plans to do to deliver his pledge and stamp out that practice, particularly as press reports today suggest that he is making a pitch for the religious vote?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I do not recall the precise exchange to which the hon. Gentleman refers. He knows, however, that how such education is conducted is a matter for school governors. I presume that they will take on board the remarks that are being made.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the figures released last week showing the largest increase in police numbers for a decade, and my area commander has already described how the north Bucks villages in my constituency will get extra resources. She will also be aware of a problem in the south-east with recruiting key public sector workers. May we have time for a debate on that and on police numbers and recruitment in the south-east?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I understand that it is the first time in a decade that police numbers have risen in the Milton Keynes area. That must be a great source of gratification to both my hon. Friends who represent that locality. I understand, of course, both the pressure that he and other colleagues have applied to try to obtain that increase and his concern to have those other issues aired. I fear, however, that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for such a debate, but perhaps I may draw my hon. Friend's attention to the fact that I believe it may be Home Office questions on 9 April. He might find an opportunity to raise those matters then.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): It appears likely that a general election is imminent and every Member of the House standing for re-election may be prepared for it, but can the Leader of the House find time for a debate before any election is announced to discuss why a general election might be called? This Parliament has at least a year to run and my constituents in rural areas are stuck in their farms, in real crisis, and businesses are going bust or are under real threat. My constituents ask me, "Why on earth should we have an election now?" What possible reason is there for holding one, except some perceived advantage to the Government?

Mrs. Beckett: The only scheduled elections that I am aware of are the local elections. As to whether any other election will be called, that, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is not a matter for me, nor is it one on which the House desperately needs a debate. I understand his wish to raise those issues, but I can only say that it continues to cultivate the impression that the Conservative party has something to fear.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will the Leader of the House look at the business for next week and tell us whether we can have an urgent debate on foot and mouth in Government time, perhaps with the Minister of Agriculture and the rural taskforce Minister—the Minister for the Environment? I spoke to a farmer in my constituency yesterday who has not received any money for five weeks. Had it not been for an agricultural charity giving her some money, she and her family would have had no income whatsoever. Many farmers owe money to small businesses that have also been affected by the rural crisis. If money can be got through to the farmers, they can start to pay bills, which will start to get the rural economy going.

Will the right hon. Lady consider next week's business, because that debate is urgently needed? Those families have no money coming in now. Unless they can get some urgent action from the Government, they will not be able to continue in business.

Mrs. Beckett: I of course understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. It is a very serious point, and I understand the concerns of his constituents. I shall certainly give consideration to the point, but I cannot undertake necessarily to change the business for next week. However, I can—and will—undertake to draw his remarks urgently to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment.

Mr. Davidson *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot call the hon. Gentleman again—he was bad enough the first time. I call Mr. Brady.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Can we have an urgent statement or a debate in Government time on the Government's decision to reduce the number of transplant centres in the country? Those proposals will mean the closure of two of the three centres in Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham. I was fortunate to secure a short debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday this week, during which the Minister for Public Health gave out the dreadful news that the decision would be delayed, possibly for several months. That is causing real anxiety in the South Manchester University Hospitals NHS trust and in the other centres. It is essential that we have an answer quickly and the Government must explain when they are going to make a decision, to set minds at rest in all three of those places.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on that issue, especially as the hon. Gentleman has so recently had a debate on it. However, I can certainly undertake to draw his concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My knee muscles are getting stronger by the day, Mr. Speaker.

Can we please have an urgent debate on fawning sycophancy, shameful grovelling, unctuous toadying, ritual subservience and the Liberal Democrats? Does the right hon. Lady agree that, in the light of the proportional representation pact and of the overall record of that party, such a debate would allow many right hon. and hon. Members to explain that, in large parts of the country, the Liberal Democrats are a left-wing party scavenging for right-wing votes? Does she also agree that people who want to get rid of this ghastly, sickening, depressing, miserable, pitiful failure of a Labour Government should not vote for that bunch of opportunist misfits, but should instead, throughout the country, vote Conservative, Conservative, Conservative?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman has not just triggered his election expenses. Given the mixture of what seems to be genuine discontent and, perhaps, a lack of tact—if I remember recent remarks by his hon. Friends—perhaps the Conservatives could do with a bit more fawning sycophancy in their party.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Leader of the House will have been aware for longer than the rest of us of the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body on Members' pay and allowances. Given that many of those recommendations, particularly on allowances for new Members, are predicated on those allowances beginning in a new Parliament, would it not be appropriate for them to be put before the House, to give us the opportunity to debate and vote on them before the general election? Failing that, there will be complete chaos in the Fees Office, given the very large number of new Members that there will be in the House.

Mrs. Beckett: I note the hon. Gentleman's optimism about the large number of new Members—or perhaps it is pessimism? The last time there was a large number of new Members here, they were on this side. Of course, I understand the interest taken by the hon. Gentleman and all Members in the report, which proposes quite substantial changes in the handling of staff terms and conditions, and in the provisions for information technology in the House. The Government are mindful of those issues, but the hon. Gentleman will also know that they raise a number of substantial questions. At some point they will come before the House, but at present I cannot tell him when.

Personal Statement

1.20 pm

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I rise to make an apology to the House. In its report published earlier today, the Standards and Privileges Committee has upheld a finding by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards that I failed to register my interest in some land and property in my constituency and that I had failed to declare that interest on several occasions. I unreservedly apologise to you, Mr. Speaker, and to the House for these failures on my part, which I deeply regret.

My breaches of the rules of the House arose because I received no income from these interests and did not realise that it was necessary to register and declare them. I have not sought in any way to profit from my position as a Member of Parliament; I have sought to protect jobs in my constituency. I have not sought to conceal my interests from the House. This was an oversight on my part, for which I accept full responsibility.

I am grateful to the commissioner and to the Committee for the speed with which the matter has been resolved. I am grateful to the Committee for its recognition that I have co-operated fully with the commissioner's inquiry.

Points of Order

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Leader of the House made a delphic announcement earlier that something called the Election Publications Bill would have its proceedings on Monday. This is rather unusual, because normally we would have the Second Reading of the Bill—giving an opportunity for Members to consider the Bill—and then a Committee stage. I hope that there is no suggestion of an attempt to ram the Bill through the House on Monday evening. Were that to be the case, could you confirm to Members what arrangements there will be for tabling amendments to the Bill—as many of us may wish to do—so that it is properly aired, debated, considered and, if necessary, amended?

I hope you will act, as ever you do, in the interests of the House and of its Members, Mr. Speaker. I hope that there is no attempt at a ghastly conspiracy or, even worse, an attempt by the Government to use a Bill such as this to repair their previous cock-up without the House being able to examine it properly.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware that the House accepted without any dissent a procedural motion yesterday. There is no accuracy in the suggestion that anything underhand is being done; the House has taken a decision to deal with the matter, and did so on the basis that the proposal was accepted as being in the interests of all parts of the House.

Mr. Speaker: To answer the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth): the Leader of the House is quite right. Amendments can be tabled before Second Reading. I hope that that is of assistance to him.

Intelligence Agencies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

1.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): These debates on the work of our intelligence and security agencies are one of the innovations of this Parliament and a welcome addition to the scrutiny of those agencies by this Parliament. I would like to think that they have also been a viable means of promoting an understanding in the wider public of the real role of the security and intelligence agencies.

I am conscious that the structure of the debate suffers from one flaw that I would suggest we review in the next Parliament. By convention, I open the debate and only subsequently does the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee address the House to present the annual report. I do not know whether this idea would cause apoplexy among the House authorities, but it is for consideration that, in future debates, we might invite the Chairman to open the debate and lay the report so the rest of us can comment on it. This would enable the Chairman to have the first word and enable the rest of us to respond.

I have great regret that his retirement from the House will prevent the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) from initiating that innovation next year. He has made a real and permanent contribution to the scrutiny of the agencies in his years as the first Chairman of the Committee. His service as a Cabinet Minister in two of the most sensitive Departments gives him a depth of experience that has been a great asset to the Committee. He has been diligent in overseeing its work and, as I can confirm to the House from my personal experience, assiduous in defending its rights of scrutiny. He has also demonstrated great responsibility in his public comments, which have often restored a balance in the media that might otherwise have been missing. He can retire with the respect of the whole House for the way which he has performed his duties.

I am not sure whether four years is a sufficiently long period to qualify for the establishment of a tradition, but it has become a tradition of these debates that they are pursued in a tone that is free from the partisan spirit of other exchanges in the House. I am conscious that this particular debate occurs at an interesting point in the political cycle, which may test that principle to the point of destruction. Nevertheless, I hope that we can maintain an approach in the debate that rises above party politics. The intelligence and security agencies are not an appropriate matter for partisan exchanges. They need a consensus in the House that recognises their contribution not only to Government policy, but to the national interest.

For the past four years, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have been accountable to the House for the work of the agencies. It is impossible for me to do justice in the House to the immense value of the agencies which I have seen for myself in that time. It is impossible because to disclose it all would be to prevent the agencies from being able to continue to deliver a service that must necessarily remain secret. However, I shall try today to put on the public record what I can about their success in defending national security and promoting the national interest.

We should not imagine that the traditional challenges vanished with the Berlin wall. I regret to say that the dramatic end of the cold war has not produced the same dramatic reduction in the threat of espionage. The proportion of the agencies total effort in countering that threat to our security may have declined in the past decade, but the importance of that work has not lessened. However, the end of a bipolar world has multiplied the security challenges that we face.

Access to hard facts is crucial to taking the right policy decisions. We need hard facts now about the position in Iraq, the resources of Balkan extremists, and the intentions of rebels in Africa. Gaining access to those hard facts is every bit as challenging as it ever was to produce intelligence on our old rivals in the Warsaw pact. Yet, hard facts secured against the odds by the Secret Intelligence Service and Government communications headquarters have made a real contribution to the progress that we have made in foreign policy.

The House will know, for example, of the malign role of the illegal trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone through Liberia and of the reverse flow of weapons through Liberia to the rebels in Sierra Leone. We have just secured a Security Council resolution that brings sanctions and pressure to bear on Liberia to halt both forms of trade. We could not have built that consensus in the Security Council if we had not been able to share with the United Nations hard facts and reliable intelligence about the situation on the ground.

The Intelligence and Security Committee has already acknowledged the immense role played by the intelligence agencies in the success of the Kosovo campaign. They have since played a valuable role in restoring stability in the region.

Another sphere in which our diplomacy depends on the input of the agencies is in defeating weapons proliferation. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is one of the greatest menaces to global peace. The task of defeating proliferation becomes technically more challenging as the technology spreads and the cost declines. Nor is the problem confined only to warhead technology. The spread of missile technology has introduced a new threat of more sophisticated delivery systems.

Policy making on proliferation depends to an unusually large degree on secret intelligence. I sometimes find a common assumption that, in the age of satellite surveillance, we can acquire all the information that is necessary by technical means. Sadly, that faith in high technology is misplaced. Human intelligence is essential in identifying a threat of proliferation, especially of biological and chemical weapons, the production of which can so easily be disguised as industrial process. Without human agents, we could not take effective measures to disrupt or prevent proliferation.

There is one other way in which the product of our intelligence agencies is crucial to our foreign policy. We have a unique intelligence partnership with the United States. It would be hard to find any example in history of two sovereign nations that have co-operated so closely or so frankly in the intelligence field. As the Committee report notes, on one recent occasion, the US intelligence agencies were served for three days directly from GCHQ, after the National Security Agency equipment failed. Respect for the scope of our agencies and the reliability of their information is a powerful element in a relationship that makes Britain and the United States closest allies and strongest friends.

If we are to retain that respect and secure the best quality of intelligence, our agencies must be at the cutting edge of the new technologies, and that requires investment. GCHQ's new accommodation programme is the largest private finance initiative project. It will bring GCHQ together on one site rather than two. When complete, it will provide a modern, purpose-built environment for a signals intelligence agency fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

The Intelligence and Security Committee has strongly supported the programme, but has rightly drawn attention to the risks involved in such a large and complex undertaking. I can assure the House that the management team at GCHQ has been strengthened and is making increasing use of external specialists to help with the project management. I have asked for, and receive, quarterly reports on the project. I have meetings with the director of GCHQ—most recently, on Monday—to discuss progress.

I am pleased to tell the House that spending on the project in the current financial year is on track. Better still, construction on the new building is currently 12 weeks ahead of schedule. If that is sustained, it will provide valuable extra time for the transition to the new building, the complexity of which has rightly exercised the Committee.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Is my right hon. Friend satisfied that the project will be delivered on time and on budget?

Mr. Cook: We are currently on track in this financial year. It is of course a private finance initiative project, so any overrun in the cost of construction will be borne by the contractor and the provider of the funds, not by the Government. I assure my hon. Friend that we are being vigilant and maintaining a close guard on the cost. That is precisely why I have asked for and receive the quarterly reports. I am pleased to say that, so far, the stream of reports has been reassuring. Clearly, we will respond if there are any signs that there is going to be an overrun, but at present I have no reason to suspect that.

I have spoken of the foreign challenges, and I will now deal with the domestic challenges with which the agencies deal. The threats to our national security do not come only from other Governments. The danger to the life and safety of British citizens is more likely, in practice, to come from terrorist groups.

Terrorist outrages command massive media coverage when they happen. Successes in preventing such outrages get nothing like the same coverage, but that does not make the crucial role of the agencies in preventing terrorism any less valuable. Since the Committee's report was published, the security services have twice participated in operations that led to the arrest of individuals who have since been charged with terrorist offences or conspiracy to cause explosions.

Some of the domestic challenges are new. They reflect the nature of the modern world. The revolution in communications technology is creating new opportunities on an exponential scale.

[Mr. Cook]

This week, 360,000 e-mails will be sent in Britain every second—one fifth more than in January, and double the number sent last June. Computers now manage most of our critical national infrastructure for water, power and transport. With those new opportunities comes the risk of new threats: a computer-based attack on the national infrastructure could cripple the nation more quickly than a military strike. The intelligence and security agencies play a key role in our national infrastructure security co-ordination centre—an unforgettable mouthful to pronounce.

The Committee's report criticises the speed with which that centre reacted to the "love bug" virus last May, so the Committee will be pleased to hear that when the "Kournikova" virus struck in February, a national alert was issued within one hour. In the modern world, that speed of response can make the difference between stability and chaos. Other threats to our domestic security are the product of the dramatic increase in trade which is a feature of the globalised economy. Free and growing trade has been an immense stimulus to economic growth throughout the world, particularly for Britain, which is a major trading nation.

However, increased contacts and accelerating mobility throughout the world also provide cover for the enemies of our society, such as drugs traders. I have sat through totally pointless international debates on whether it is more important to disrupt the drugs trade at the point of supply or the point of demand. The truth is that we have no hope of success unless we attack the drugs trade at every point of the chain—at its production centres in distant countries such as Afghanistan or Colombia, when drugs are in transit through the Caribbean or the Balkans, and on delivery on the streets of our cities. That requires a joined-up approach by both the intelligence and the law enforcement agencies. I am glad that the Intelligence and Security Committee has paid tribute to the secondments in both directions that have produced operational teams with a wide range of skills and a culture of working together.

That has produced real successes. The agencies have helped to disrupt the networks that bring drugs into this country. They have contributed to the seizure of major shipments of both heroin and cocaine, as well as to the arrest of the drugs traders involved and the seizure of their assets. British agencies contributed to a recent operation in the Caribbean which resulted in a haul of drugs with a value of £70 million, from just one raid.

As the Committee has noted, all three agencies are closely involved in countering other forms of smuggling, such as the lucrative trade in cigarettes, which costs the British taxpayer £2.5 billion a year in lost duty.

I have tried to put on the record what I can about the valuable contribution of the agencies both to our foreign policy and to our domestic security. It is important that Parliament and the public should know the clear objectives of the intelligence and security agencies; but it is also right that we should explain to the public that the success of the agencies can be secured only by conditions of secrecy.

The penalty of disclosure of operational details for any of the agencies is the failure of the operation—but the penalty for loss of secrecy in the Secret Intelligence Service or the Security Service can be loss of life. We have given an undertaking to its agents that we will never reveal their identity or their role. We cannot compromise on that guarantee without losing the trust on which we rely for the recruitment of future agents. That requires us to be vigilant in resisting any threat to operational secrecy, whether it comes from foreign espionage or domestic cheque-book journalism. However, the secrecy of operational detail does not prevent the rigorous oversight of the policy and priorities of the agencies that is essential in a parliamentary democracy. All members of the Intelligence and Security Committee share the credit for the rigorous scrutiny that it undertakes.

As I see that the members of the Committee make up a large proportion of my audience in the House today, I shall add that the prospect of an appearance before the Committee keeps us all on our toes.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Yes.

Mr. Cook: I think that I carry my right hon. Friend with me on that point.

As the report details, in the preceding year the Committee held a formidable list of hearings, taking evidence on more than 50 occasions, with some of the witnesses, including my right hon. Friend and myself, appearing more than once. I would not want the members of the Committee to be under any illusion about the invigorating effect on both their witness and the machine of an approaching rendezvous with them in their spartan Committee room in the Cabinet Office.

I would not want the House to imagine that the relationship between the Committee and the Government is adversarial. We both share an appreciation of the importance of the agencies, we both share the same objective of safeguarding the national interest, and we both want the Agencies to work even more effectively. It is therefore not surprising that the Government share many of the Committee's conclusions and often find its recommendations helpful. There are many points in the report on which we find ourselves in full accord with the Committee. We share its view that Sir Edmund Burton could play an important continuing role in the new accommodation project—GCHQ has appointed him as a non-executive director.

We welcome the Committee investigator's report on the security of laptops and have already implemented the broad thrust of his recommendations. We agree with the stress that the Committee places on a co-ordinated approach to information technology and have created the post of an information technology champion within the Cabinet Office. We value the positive verdict of the Committee on the work of the agencies on serious crime. I am pleased to tell the House that we expect the intelligence gathered by the agencies on that threat to increase substantially over the next two years.

I welcome the Committee's sustained interest in the creation of a special employment tribunal for staff of the agencies. The Committee has waged something of a campaign on the need for progress on that issue. I hope that it will call a truce in that campaign, as the necessary regulations and rules of procedure were laid before the

House by the Department of Trade and Industry this week. We have also taken to heart the Committee's stern comments on the time taken—

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): What a coincidence.

Mr. Cook: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman should undervalue the effect of debate on stimulating activity. If it has had a beneficial effect we should welcome it rather than decry it.

We have taken to heart the Committee's stern comments on the time that the Government took to respond to its previous Report. I hope that it will welcome the improvement shown by the Government in responding to their current report within a month of its publication.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I get the feeling that the right hon. Gentleman has come to the end of his responses to particular points raised by the Committee. I notice that he did not comment on the fact that the Ministerial Committee on the Intelligence Services, which is chaired by the Prime Minister and has overall responsibility for the intelligence agencies, has still not met. If there is an early dissolution of Parliament, the prospect is that it will never meet in this Parliament.

Mr. Cook: I am conscious of the paragraph to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. I can assure him that the matter is very much before us. He will understand that it is not easy to arrange a diary engagement that can be attended by many people, including the Prime Minister, especially in present circumstances. However, all members of the Ministerial Committee are fully informed of the work of the security and intelligence agencies, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are in constant contact with them. I regularly see the directors of both of those for which I am responsible, and I know that my right hon. Friend acts similarly. I would not want the House or the public to imagine that there is a lack of oversight or engagement by the members of the Committee, even if they do not sit down in the same room at the same time.

Mr. Beith: Going back to what the right hon. Gentleman said about the importance of secrecy, there are some matters about which the public could know more. The agencies have recognised that by increasing disclosure. That could be carried further in, for example, the area of broad budgetary figures to give an indication of how money is spent. Given that many things cannot be revealed, it is vital that some parliamentarians, as members of the Committee, are within the ring of secrecy, so that others can rely on them to see all the information necessary to make a judgment that all is well on a particular matter. The degree of co-operation from the Home Secretary on the Mitrokhin case illustrates that if the Committee is given the information, it can make a judgment and provide reassurance in areas where general disclosure is impossible.

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman touches on a central and unavoidable question. It is not surprising that there will be different judgments on the bounds of secrecy between the intelligence community and the members of the Scrutiny Committee. It would be rather odd if that were not the case. I think that the frank dialogue between us has been helpful in trying to achieve the right balance, although we must recognise that we will never wholly agree on where that balance should be struck.

On the specific issue of the agencies' separate budgets, the Committee made a recommendation that we should publish one year's set of budgets by agency, but that we should not produce annual sets of figures because the revealing trend could be compromising to the work of the agencies. I have considered that very carefully. The Government did not see it as politically feasible to produce one year's figures without impossible pressure in future years to produce the annual figures. That would lead us back to the problem that the Committee correctly identified—that of the danger of revealing trends. Of course, we can continue to keep these matters under review, but I share the Committee's anxiety that an annualised set of figures would be too damaging. I find it hard to see how any Government could get away with producing one year's figures and then say for the next five years, "Sorry, we are not doing it again."

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Has an instruction been given to civil servants at any stage in this Parliament to try and convene a meeting of the Ministerial Committee, or has not even that instruction been given?

Mr. Cook: I assure my hon. Friend that attempts have been made to do that. The civil servants who wrestle with the task are the diary secretaries in several very busy offices. It is no criticism of them that they have been unable to crack that task.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I will give way, but if the House will allow me, it will be the last time because I am conscious that there are many experts in the House who have much to say.

Mr. Anderson: My right hon. Friend very properly paid tribute to the close and long-standing intelligence relationship with the United States. He has not mentioned the European Union dimension. However, that may well loom larger as a result of the common foreign and security policy and the European security and defence policy. What can he tell us about that? Are there any reservations about the new building in Brussels or the European Parliament's role? What problems does my right hon. Friend envisage the Committee tackling as these new policies develop?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to assure the House that the European Parliament will have no role in the European security and defence policy. There is a very urgent need to ensure that we have a satisfactory building, from a security angle, for those who will be dealing with the European security and defence policy. It is very important that they should have a separate building so that they can maintain a culture of secrecy in that building. I do not think that that would be readily achievable in the general Commission building, where there is naturally quite the reverse of a culture of secrecy. That may not necessarily be consistent with the security that we want to see in place. I assure the House that we shall be very careful in

[Mr. Cook]

our approach to the spread of intelligence. We have been quite explicit that there is no presumption that intelligence held by Britain will necessarily be available to partners.

I have paid tribute to the work of the Committee, and on that I hope that I carried its members with me. However, I hope that I carry the whole House with me in paying tribute to the role of the men and women who work in the agencies. They serve their country well. The success of the agencies is possible only because of their professionalism and their belief in their job.

GCHQ employs some of the best minds in computer technology in Britain. Indeed, it could muster a team of experts to match the staff of many university computer departments. Many of them could command much higher monetary reward in the private sector, and we are fortunate that they are attracted to GCHQ by the intellectual challenge of the work and the value of their jobs.

Some of those who work in the agencies accept a risk to personal safety that I suspect many of us would not. Those who undertake work against terrorists or drugs traders are dealing with an enemy every bit as ruthless, if not more so, than their old opponents of the cold war. The rocket attack on the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service last September was a stark reminder of that ever-present threat.

The staff of the agencies do not get much opportunity for public recognition. It is part of their contract that they cannot claim public credit for secret work. The debate gives us an opportunity to put that right. I hope that the whole House will use that opportunity to recognise the skills and courageous work of the staff of the agencies and the immense debt owed by Parliament and the public to them.

1.50 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): May I begin by apologising to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House for the fact that I have to leave soon after the Front-Bench speeches for an engagement of long standing that proved immovable?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Is it a secret?

Mr. Maude: It is very much a secret. I would be prepared to account for it to the Intelligence and Security Committee, but unless we are prepared to go into secret session at this stage, it would be inappropriate to go further.

I should like to add a tribute from the Opposition Benches to the men and women who work in our intelligence and security services. The Foreign Secretary rightly observed that it is in the nature of their job that they work behind the scenes and by and large without public recognition. Their work is frequently dangerous. Unable, as we hope they are, to talk to others about what they do or to take the credit that they so frequently deserve for what they do, their burden must be and often is a lonely one.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee and especially its Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). Last year, this debate took place rather later in the year so I was induced to believe that it might be the last such debate in this Parliament. I am delighted that the debate has been brought forward so that the report is slightly fresher, but owing to my misapprehension, I paid an elaborate tribute to my right hon. Friend last year. I am happy that last year's debate was not his swan song, but he has been kind enough to say that he is happy for me to pay tribute to him again, which I am delighted to do.

My right hon. Friend really will be missed by the House. That is not just a conventional tribute. I learned much of my politics—I was going to say at his knee, but that would be overstating the case—around his ministerial table in the early 1980s. A Committee such as the Intelligence and Security Committee absolutely depends on the personal qualities of its members and especially those of its Chairman. The Foreign Secretary mentioned my right hon. Friend's relevant experience as a Minister, which gave him a unique insight into the work of the agencies. Beyond that, the Chairman needs to be absolutely trustworthy, able to command consensus in the way that my right hon. Friend has, and able to carry serious and effortless authority.

Under my right hon. Friend's chairmanship, the Committee has won and retained the confidence of the services, to a great extent as a result of the sensitivity and discretion with which the Committee conducts its scrutiny and the obvious commitment of its members to the work of the services. The whole House will want to express its warm appreciation of my right hon. Friend's work and its warm wishes for his cheerful and extremely busy retirement, as I suspect it will turn out to be.

I also said a word last year about the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who has been a member of the Committee from its outset—

Mr. Campbell-Savours *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Maude: Well, for a good part of its time. I think that I said last year, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take it as a compliment, that he is one of the least comfortable Members of the House of Commons. The House should not contain comfortable people; it should contain people who go in for the task of scrutiny and holding Ministers and others to account. That is what we are here for. He has always been an honourable, upright and absolutely tenacious Member, and we shall miss him.

The creation of the Intelligence and Security Committee was the parliamentary manifestation of the programme to place all of the agencies on a statutory footing, to make proper assessment of the work that they do, and to introduce a measure of accountability. Bringing the agencies out of the hidden places that they occupied previously into the light of day has been a gradual process. We must, of course, be vigilant about the agencies' roles, but we should always exercise that vigilance against the background of our understanding that they exist and operate as the servants of liberty, not as its enemy.

In last year's debate, the Foreign Secretary referred to the intention of the Department of Trade and Industry to consult on the introduction of draft regulations. The Committee expressed in its November report its disappointment that that had not happened. Given that the

absence of an employment tribunal was a major gripe of Richard Tomlinson, the disgraced former Secret Intelligence Service officer, it is an unhappy circumstance and a pity that it took the imminence of this debate to prompt the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to lay the regulations. We are delighted to hear that he has now done so, but it would have been better if he had done so quite a lot earlier.

The report also expresses concerns that the process of making the services more transparent, which began under the previous Government, may be beginning to slow down. The Committee has again asked the Prime Minister to publish confidential annexes to the intelligence services commissioner's report. The commission is an important innovation to improve public confidence in the accountability of the services, and it may be that it is in the public interest that conclusions are made known more widely. I am sure that the sensible discretion of the Committee is a sufficient safeguard.

I was interested in the Foreign Secretary's explanation of why it had apparently proved impossible to convene the Ministerial Committee. He contended that it was impossible to get all the Ministers in the same place at the same time. I concede that that is very difficult to do, but his contention is about as plausible as the argument put forward this week that the Minister for Europe had not visited the Balkans because there were no suitable flights available.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the previous Government were not very assiduous about holding the meetings either?

Mr. Maude: I can take no responsibility for that, as I was not even in Parliament then, let alone in that Government.

Today's debate provides a welcome opportunity for me to commend in particular the work of the SIS and of Government communications headquarters, the agencies that fall within the portfolio that I shadow. We should recognise that the excellence of the SIS's work, and the height of its reputation, is one of that unique set of international assets—and not the least among them—that gives Britain a global reach, and which should give Britain a disproportionate influence in the world.

My dealings with those agencies as a Minister gave me a profound admiration for those who formed the service, and who demonstrate dedication, public service, resourcefulness and simple raw courage. Part of what the agencies give the country is the ability to help other, friendly countries with the intelligence input that they would otherwise lack. That gives us a greater influence that other countries simply do not have.

The agencies need proper resourcing, and proper commitment to their capability. Continuity is crucial, as they operate in a world that is not notably safer since the end of the cold war. There was a dreadful stability during the cold war, but the world was more predictable than it is today. Today's greater unpredictability, instability and turbulence means that there are greater opportunities for prosperity and peace, and great threats and risks. The Committee's interim report and the report published last November both give a glimpse of the types of threats and challenges that the services continue to face today.

The Committee noted that the observation by the Director-General of the Security Service that there is still a significant Russian intelligence activity in the UK. That is of particular pertinence, given the recent US expulsions of Russian diplomats following the arrest of Alan Hanssen in Washington.

During his first year in office, Mr. Putin—a former KGB operative—is said to have been keen to place more emphasis on the gathering of foreign intelligence. Several of his closest associates, including the head of the Security Council of the United Nations, are also KGB veterans and favour a very hard-headed approach to the west. We must maintain our vigilance and not threaten that which already works well. As the Committee says, it is appropriate that the Secret Intelligence Service has

"continued to devote significant resources to Russia and the Balkans."

The November report raised, and the interim report returned to, the important question of the co-ordination of our intelligence efforts through the Joint Intelligence Committee and other forums. In times when international crime and terrorism are increasingly global and complex, the need for better co-ordination is stronger than ever.

Any notion that we do not need the services in a post-cold war world should be dispelled by the reports and by the Home Secretary's recent publication of a list of proscribed organisations to be included in schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000. The information on and assessment of those groups is the visible tip of an iceberg of painstaking secret work that is largely and properly hidden from our view. The quickest skim through that list reveals the complexity of the climate facing all our intelligence services as they work together.

Britain has always had a reputation for tolerance and as a refuge for those who have, down the centuries, faced persecution elsewhere. After all, most of us contain a large admixture of immigrant and refugee blood. The Opposition are glad to see that that warm welcome does not mean that this country can become a bolt hole for those who use violence and terror to achieve their ends, whatever those may be.

In recent months, London has been struck several times, apparently by a splinter group of Irish republicans who, although a tiny minority, want to disrupt the efforts of those who want peace. The Foreign Secretary mentioned last autumn's attack on SIS headquarters, and the recent car bomb outside BBC Television headquarters, both of which suggest an approach that is coldly discriminating in the perpetrators' search for publicity, but wickedly indiscriminate in the methods that they are prepared to use. We should all condemn those outrages, which can only strengthen our determination to banish that scourge for ever and to ensure that its perpetrators are tried and imprisoned.

The Committee expressed concern about the rise of cheque-book journalism in the agencies. The services appear to be adopting its recommendation that best practice solutions be adopted to screen out those who might be most likely to have recourse to telling their story in public. However, that task is made all the harder when, on the horizon, they see the impending publication of the memoirs of the former Director-General of the Security Service.

All members of the agencies accept on entry that their own knowledge of the value of their work has to compensate for the periodic frustration of not being able to talk about their job or their achievements. That self-discipline is a crucial virtue that underpins the

[Mr. Maude]

effectiveness of the agencies. For years, retired officers of MI5 and MI6, as the agencies once were, have taken it for granted that catharsis in print is simply not an option, not least because it will almost certainly prejudice the work and safety of their former colleagues and make intelligence gathering harder. After all, who will want to help his country, sometimes at great personal risk, if he fears that his identity might be revealed in a subsequent memoir?

It is hardly surprising that senior members of all the agencies are concerned that the book will have a negative effect on their ability to function safely and productively. I hope that Dame Stella Rimington and the Government will bear that in mind before publication. As I told the Foreign Secretary last year, any action that the Government choose to take to prevent publication will have our unqualified support.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, given the proliferation of those who want to sell their memoirs, it is surprising that the programme of work of the Committee does not include recruitment policies, which have in the past apparently proved incapable of identifying those who subsequently sell state secrets?

Mr. Maude: That is a fair point. However, if the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that one should try to spot impending memoir writers at the outset, that is a selection process that might even defeat the fine minds of the agencies. I think that I pointed out that we should pay attention to that matter and I suspect that the Committee may well want to return to it.

All those threats, together with the many others to which the Foreign Secretary referred, are clear warnings that Britain must not drop its guard. We need our intelligence networks to maintain our first-class capacity to acquire and assess information from all over the world. Britain cannot work alone.

The greatest intensity of the special relationship between Britain and America lies in intelligence. That relationship has been built up over many years. Trust can be lost in a single day, but it takes decades to restore. In that regard, the relationship between GCHQ and the United States National Security Agency at Fort Meade is crucial. The UK-US arrangement is a powerful symbol of the closeness of our joint interests in the wider world.

The Committee noted:

"The quality of intelligence gathered clearly reflects the value of the close co-operation under the UKUSA agreement. A recent illustration of this occurred when the US National Security Agency's . . . equipment . . . failed and for some three days US customers, as well as GCHQ's normal UK customers, were served directly from GCHQ."

That is an important two-way relationship. There is little doubt that the intelligence budget would have to soar were we not able to rely on the information provided by our transatlantic partners.

I regret that I must depart from the atmosphere of congenial consensus that has prevailed in debates on this subject. We hope that that close co-operation between the intelligence agencies will be secure. However, I must say—and this is the right occasion to say it—that the Government's agreement to move towards a European army may well threaten that capability. *[Interruption.]* The Foreign Secretary has started to emit low noises, but this is an annual opportunity to talk about the work of the intelligence agencies. It is essential to their work that the special, close and intense relationship with our transatlantic partners in the United States should remain intact and fruitful. If we see that there is a potential threat to that working relationship, it is our duty to raise it in the House and we will do so. If that means departing from the peaceful atmosphere of harmony that has prevailed, then so be it. We will not be deterred from raising those matters.

An overt sign of the potential dangers, although very low key perhaps, was the fact that the European Parliament last year opened an investigation into Echelon—the intelligence-sharing network of which the UK and the US are vital parts. As the declaration made after the Franco-German summit in December 1999 made clear, European defence will require intelligence sharing. The declaration stated:

"As far as intelligence is concerned, which is a core element of the European Union's independent assessment and decision-making capacity, we are determined to federalise the existing or future means, including in the space field, in order to create common European capacities."

The Government may say that there is nothing incompatible between the UK-US arrangement and moves discussed at Helsinki and given effect to at Nice to create a

"more effective European military capability"

and the

"reinforcement of our"—

Europe's—

"capabilities in the field of intelligence, strategic transport and control".

The Foreign Secretary cannot be unaware of the strong strand of opinion—perhaps the dominant strand, particularly among the ruling class, if one can call it that, in France—that believes that Britain has to choose between the transatlantic relationship and a full commitment to the European defence capability. We do not believe that we have to make that choice, but others do.

Recently, a French official was quoted as arguing that the British would not be able to play a leading role in the EU unless they jettisoned their special intelligence links with the US. The direct quote was:

"Britain must choose Europe or betray it."

I have recently been told by a very senior French journalist—[Hon. Members: "A journalist?"] Yes, a journalist. He may be a maverick and he may not reflect any current of opinion in France at all, but I doubt it. All the evidence is that he is not a maverick and that he strongly reflects opinion in France. He said that Britain must choose whether it is to be pro-European or pro-American.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): What was his name?

Mr. Maude: I cannot remember the journalist's name, but his comments were all made in public. If the hon. Gentleman is so excited about the name, I undertake to find it and send it to him, but he will not be much the wiser when I have.

The Foreign Secretary knows that what has been created is a European Union military structure which is autonomous vis-à-vis NATO. It has its own separate military and planning committees. After all, the Foreign Secretary has claimed, with typical modesty, that he wrote most of the documents himself. The Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister continue to claim that the new arrangement is anchored within NATO, but the documents that the Foreign Secretary claims to have written belie that claim.

If there was any doubt about that, the French chief of defence staff confirms it. He said recently:

"European politicians need to know what is going on. They need to be able to select options and then conduct operations. Why should we have to go through NATO?"

Yet the Government have stuck doggedly to their flimsy line that NATO has the right of first refusal.

Mr. Donald Anderson *rose—*

Mr. Maude: I shall finish the point, if I may, and then I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

The Foreign Secretary must have been a little dismayed to read further remarks yesterday by the French chief of defence staff, who said:

"There is no question of a right of first refusal. If the EU works properly, it will start working on crises at a very early stage, well before the situation escalates. NATO has nothing to do with this. At a certain stage the Europeans would decide to conduct a military operation. Either the Americans would come, or not."

The Government continue to peddle the idea that the arrangement is anchored within NATO and that NATO has the right of first refusal, but that simply does not stack up. The documents belie it.

Mr. MacShane: It is in the treaty.

Mr. Maude: I have seen the treaty. That is not in the treaty itself, but in the presidency conclusions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We cannot have continual interruptions from a sedentary position.

Mr. Maude: Everything is clearly set out. The reason why a specific military and planning staff and a military committee are set out, and a military headquarters is already being set up, is to make precisely the point that the French chief of the defence staff is amplifying: that the arrangements are designed to be separate and to be able, at any rate, to pre-empt NATO. I acquit the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister of wanting it to pre-empt NATO. What I am saying is that the way in which it has been set up allows NATO to be pre-empted.

Mr. Robin Cook *rose—*

Mr. Donald Anderson *rose—*

Mr. Maude: I give way first to the Foreign Secretary, then to the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Mr. Cook: I would not want the right hon. Gentleman unwittingly to mislead the House about what was said by the French chief of defence staff. The right hon. Gentleman is obviously not aware that the French Ministry of Defence has protested at the way in which the chief of defence staff's remarks have been used, and is complaining that what was not quoted was his remark that the European Union force would not duplicate NATO assets; that European ambitions were limited to the Petersberg tasks; that in a major crisis the EU would depend on NATO planning; and that the US should be involved whenever it wished. That puts an entirely different light on the matter.

Mr. Maude: I shall deal with that before giving way to the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. What the Foreign Secretary says is not at all inconsistent with what I said. I was speaking about the Government's contention—I used their exact words—that the arrangement was "anchored within NATO" and that NATO has a "right of first refusal". Both of those things are specifically not true. The documents make it clear that the arrangement is not anchored within NATO. It is specifically set up to have autonomous, separate organisations and structures.

The French chief of defence staff has not complained about being misquoted. He stated bluntly:

"There is no question of a right of first refusal."

That may be open to misinterpretation, but I have yet to hear it.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Is not the argument a little flimsy if the right hon. Gentleman relies on a French journalist who is so senior that he cannot remember the man's name, and on the chief of the French defence staff, as quoted yesterday in *The Daily Telegraph*, which has its own agenda on this issue? The quote was repudiated in the "Today" programme this morning. If the right hon. Gentleman cares to get the transcript, he will see a view that will not annoy him in quite the same way as the article in *The Daily Telegraph* may have done.

Mr. Maude: I am not relying for my argument on that French journalist. I merely used him as yet another illustration of that strand of thought. The Government may want to shut their eyes to the fact that there is a strain of anti-American opinion in France, but that does not mean that it does not exist. It does exist, and if we are realistic, we accept it. That does not mean, of course, that we do not work with our French partners, but we should be aware that such opinion exists.

On the right hon. Gentleman's other point, the words that I quoted from the French chief of defence staff have not, as I understand it, been repudiated. He may have said other things as well, which were not quoted. I accept that that may be the case. If the words that I quoted, including the blunt statement that

"there is no question of a right of first refusal"

have been repudiated, I am willing to hear it, but I have not heard it yet.

Mr. Beith: Is not the right hon. Gentleman in danger of losing the plot, so interested has he become in the European defence relationship and his misgivings about it? What is the likelihood that two countries, Britain and the United States, which have found an intelligence relationship so fruitful and so mutually beneficial over so many years, will give it up simply because there are some

[Mr. Beith]

people in Europe who have anxieties about it, but who have their own intelligence agenda and carry out their own activities in that field? Is it not much more likely that the relationship will survive in the future, as it has already survived even the complications of limited intelligence sharing within NATO, not to mention the various other circumstances that it has had to face over the years?

Mr. Maude: My point is that we currently have arrangements which are based much less on formal structures than on an atmosphere of deep trust and close personal relationships and a cultural affinity between the institutions which has been built up over decades. That basis of co-operation can quickly be put at risk.

None of us has ever said that we should hold back from any European defence co-operation. For heaven's sake, the Conservative Government were pressing for it back in the 1980s and 1990s. Our point was that that should be done within NATO, because NATO is the umbrella under which those relationships have been nurtured and fostered. We should hesitate for a long, long time before we embark on measures which may jeopardise a relationship that is potentially very fragile. The trust can be broken in a day and may take decades to restore.

Right hon. and hon. Members are challenging my contention that there exists in France a willingness to jeopardise the NATO relationship, yet the Prime Minister said just the other day:

"Well, if we don't get involved in European defence, it will happen without Britain. Then those people who really may have an agenda to destroy NATO will have control of it."

I do not know exactly who the Prime Minister was referring to—

Mr. Straw: French journalists.

Mr. Maude: I do not think that even the Prime Minister would have expected a French journalist to have charge of the European defence operation.

We are concerned, and we are right to be concerned, that the natural and important links between Britain and the Echelon group, based, as they are, on a long period of continuity and trust, are at risk from the lurch to a European army deliberately being set up as autonomous from NATO.

The decision to appoint as the first chairman of the military committee a commander from outside NATO was an act of extraordinary insensitivity. Outstanding though General Hagglund certainly is—and despite the great respect in which we all hold the Finnish armed forces—the signal that was sent out about how closely the European army will work with NATO was profoundly depressing. The right course was for the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, who is always a European, to hold that position. That would have sent a strong and reassuring signal about the closeness with which the new arrangements and NATO would work together. That did not happen, however, because those who want Europe to become a superpower that can compete with America and challenge transatlantic links would have prevented—

Mr. MacShane: Finland.

Mr. Maude: I am not suggesting that it was Finland. I do not criticise our Finnish partners for wanting such arrangements. After all, Finland is not a member of NATO.

Of course, we depend on our intelligence agencies for much information about what is going on in places where Britain has vital interests, but we also depend on Ministers to take the trouble to see for themselves what is happening and to speak to people on the ground. The House might have assumed from the lofty tone in which the Foreign Secretary spoke to me on Tuesday that he and the Minister for Europe were never out of the Balkans. It was, therefore, surprising to read the next day a report published by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs which lambasted them for failing to make such visits. I have visited the Balkans, however, and my remarks about the danger that is created by the west's vacillation on the long-term final status of Kosovo were based on long discussions with Kosovo's political leaders. I may say that they derived also from a visit to Macedonia, where I met both the Prime Minister and the leader of the main Albanian party. I suspect that the Foreign Secretary's position is based less on some superior understanding of the Balkans than on a slavish adherence to a received wisdom that is shown to be false by discussions with people in the Balkans.

Let me close my remarks by commending the Intelligence and Security Committee and its Chairman for the excellence of their work. I also commend those in the intelligence agencies for their outstanding work for the country. I think that all members of the public would want to echo those remarks.

2.21 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this debate. I listened carefully to the Foreign Secretary's remarks, and I think that his suggestion regarding the restructuring of such debates—as he said, I shall not be able to take advantage of such proposals—makes sense. I have discussed the matter with the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), who agrees that the proposal may provide the easiest way of handling reports such as those produced by the Intelligence and Security Committee.

This debate is not a busy one, but the House will appreciate its quality, if not the quantity of those who are present. My Committee greatly appreciates the attendance of two Secretaries of State who represent two of the busiest Departments and carry some of the heaviest responsibilities in government—the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary. Their attendance also demonstrates due respect for the intelligence agencies, for which they take personal responsibility. Indeed, that explains why they do not delegate the work that they do to their more junior Ministers.

I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for mentioning the sheer enjoyment that he felt in appearing before the Intelligence and Security Committee. I hope that he will pass that message on to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, as it is clear that he has not yet received it. Our successor Committee will expect to see the Chief Secretary in the new Parliament. We are charged under statute to oversee the finances of the intelligence agencies. The Chief Secretary has a specific role and is taking a close interest. As both Secretaries of State will know, he has a co-ordinating role and a special report group is reporting back to him on co-ordination between the agencies and on opportunities for such co-ordination.

The challenge of this debate, and the problem of having been accused of too much secrecy, is how to attract the interest of our colleagues when we appear in the daylight. I suggested to my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) that if the Order Paper had stated that the House would sit secretly for this debate, we would have had a full House, if not a full Gallery. That might have made for a more stimulating debate, but, as I said, the quality is here.

There are one or two absentees. I undertook to apologise to the House on behalf of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers), who is a member of the Committee and chairman of our Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation, for his absence. In earlier days, the knowledge that a senior member of the Intelligence and Security Committee had left for Cuba might have caused some excitement or invited security alarms. Such is the change that has occurred, however, that that senior group has been able to make the visit. Indeed, it is extremely senior, as only hon. Members who are not standing for re-election had the nerve to go to Cuba. I think that those involved left last night.

As the possibility of ever getting the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister in the same room together, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer also in attendance, seems completely beyond the reach of the Government machine, I give two cheers for the timing of this debate. One can say only that it is a lot better than last year, although it is occurring at the very last gasp in respect of a report that was delivered to the Government at the end of the summer. Indeed, the Government laid their response before the House when Parliament reconvened after the summer recess. That was so long ago that the Committee has since produced an interim report. Without any especially valuable intelligence, we formed the impression that this Parliament might not last much longer, so we produced that report to cover our work to date. I should like to add a personal point in that respect. I shall not be standing again, and neither will three other members of the Committee. The next Committee must, therefore, have a new Chairman and some new members, regardless of what happens in the election.

One aspect of the Committee's role is to maintain continuity of oversight. Its work suffered a serious interruption after the last election. I make a plea, which is supported by my colleagues on the Committee, for every effort to be made to establish the new Committee as soon as possible after the new Parliament is formed.

This debate marks the end of a chapter. I have had the privilege of being the Chairman of a Committee that did not exist for most of my years in Parliament. It was created in 1994, and a number of hon. Friends have served on it with me since then. New members joined us in 1997. I am grateful for the personal comments made by the Foreign Secretary and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham. I am grateful also for the comments made in the Government's response to the report about the work that I have tried to do as Chairman. All hon. Members will understand, of course, that the work of any Committee is only as good as its members. I am grateful both to the hon. Members who served on the Committee with me originally, many of whom since have continued to serve throughout its existence, and to those who have joined since—in particular, the hon. Members for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), who are present in the Chamber, and the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton).

The Committee suffered a tremendous upheaval as a result of the change of Government, but I am grateful for the way in which its new members have carried on its work. Indeed, they added a new impetus in some directions, but they maintained its ethos, which I hope is respected by the intelligence agencies. The Committee started from scratch with the simple blueprint of the Intelligence Services Act 1994, which required the establishment of a Committee to oversee the three intelligence agencies. Apart from wording on the extent to which secret information could be withheld and the remit within which it could work, the Committee was set up on pretty bald terms, so we had very much to write our hymn sheet and to develop our own operational practice.

I believe that we can claim that oversight is now firmly in place. It is always easy when something starts to ask why it did not happen years ago. It was not very long ago, however, that people would have believed that such a proposal was unthinkable. In fellow member states of the European Union that are a short distance from Britain, it is still unthinkable that parliamentarians could oversee the intelligence and security agencies. The intelligence agencies were undoubtedly nervous when the Committee started out, and such nervousness remains in some quarters. However, in general, a gradual development of trust and confidence has occurred. There has also been a gradual acknowledgement of an obvious point: we cannot form a fair and true opinion unless we are as fully informed as possible. That acknowledgement is shown by the presence of two Secretaries of State in the debate. The Security Service and GCHQ have also accepted the point, and I paid tribute to them in the foreword that I wrote to the major annual report.

I commend a recent event: Sir Stephen Lander, Director-General of the Security Service, had the courage to appear in public at the Royal United Services Institute for the first conference the Intelligence and Security Committee supported and with which it was greatly involved. In my foreword to the annual report, I stated that the Secret Intelligence Service finds matters more difficult. The Committee has sympathy for that point of view and realises that there are reasons for that.

However, the Foreign Secretary knows that some matters might have been less of a problem. He kindly paid tribute to the work of the Committee, and said that he appreciated the occasions on which I made public statements, which were not appropriate for him or the heads of the agencies to make. As spokesman for the Committee, I can sometimes say things that give the public confidence about some situations, when the Foreign Secretary or the Home Secretary cannot confirm or deny the endless diet of allegations that surrounds the agencies.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am leaving the Committee. The role of the Chairman could be reinforced. The Security Service and the SIS should seriously consider the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. There are many occasions on which it is imperative for them to make statements but they cannot do that. They should use the Chairman of our Committee to do it when they can assure us that the information is absolutely correct.

Mr. King: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who knows the occasions on which it has been possible to say

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something. Sometimes, I have been approached to make a statement, which would have been helpful, but we did not have the requisite information. On those occasions, I was not prepared to compromise the integrity or the value of our Committee. One of the valuable roles of the Committee is giving the public confidence in the agencies.

One incident is graven on my heart. An editorial in *The Times* was widely believed to have been written by me—it was not—after the Mitrokhin investigation. The matter had been blown up out of all proportions in some quarters. We were able to investigate it because we were given access to all the information. We made one or two tough criticisms. I paraphrase the editorial, which said that although the agencies might feel a little bruised about some of our comments, they gained from the exercise because they were seen to be subject to a system of independent scrutiny by independent parliamentarians who had generally given them a good report and paid tribute to them where it was due.

We stated that the retrieval of the Mitrokhin archive was an outstanding achievement. Our praise was qualified by specific criticisms of some of the subsequent handling. However, the praise and criticism encouraged public confidence.

We have evolved a unique oversight system in this country. We take some interest in the systems that other countries operate, and we are especially familiar with the exhaustive American system. We are also familiar with the systems in Germany, France, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and our other allies. We recently visited Moscow, where oversight of the intelligence agencies is at an early stage. We visited the Duma security committee, several members of which had considerable experience of security arrangements in the former Soviet Union and Russia. Clearly, developments are occurring, and they will lead to increased democratic oversight of the agencies in future. As both Secretaries of State know, there is a genuine willingness in Russia to seek further co-operation with this country on subjects of common concern such as international organised crime.

We do not claim perfection, but we have a unique system. The Executive authorises, the judiciary verifies and our Committee, made up of parliamentarians, oversees. We have developed our role and our operating practices, which are not set out in legislation. There is no point in considering only the three agencies; we must consider the whole intelligence community. There is no point in considering GCHQ without ascertaining out its customers' view of its performance. If the Defence Intelligence Staff of the Ministry of Defence constitute its biggest customer, it is important that it is in our ambit. We regularly have sessions with the Chief of Defence Intelligence and his colleagues.

We are also involved with Customs and Excise and the National Criminal Intelligence Service, which are also of interest to the Select Committee on Home Affairs. Work on serious organised crime is increasingly being co-ordinated.

We have lengthened our reach by appointing an investigator with Government agreement, which was given readily and is appreciated. I pay tribute to John Morrison, the investigator for our Committee, for the work that he already done and that he will continue to do. He has been a valuable addition to the Committee.

I spoke about the brevity of the legislation and the extraordinarily limited nature of our blueprint. The greatest part of it details the reasons why we should not be given information, and the powers to withhold it from us. I am glad that that is being increasingly ignored for reasons that I mentioned earlier. The heads of the agencies and their colleagues increasingly appreciate that if they want us to have a sensible and full understanding, we need the most comprehensive information. We have tried to secure that build-up of trust, and to ensure at all times the security of the information that we receive. There has hardly been an incident that could lead the agencies justifiably to claim that we had not kept information properly and securely.

Overseeing the agencies' finances is one of our responsibilities. When I was a Minister, there were extraordinary limitations. There was a single intelligence vote, a single line and little proper understanding of the agencies' finances. I would like to claim that we have made a major contribution, ably supported by an arrangement, which was not scheduled in the legislation, with the National Audit Office. Its representatives sit in and advise on our hearings and investigations into the agencies' budgets and finances.

The schedules in our reports are impossible to read because they are full of asterisks. However, they set out the range of financial matters that we cover. All the details are given to the Committee and they are also available to Ministers.

We have taken a great deal of interest in international aspects. If I were to make a comment that is not in our reports—we are currently conducting our annual reviews, which include a review of the agencies' budgets—I would convey to the Secretaries of State a concern felt by the Committee about something that applies not just to the agencies but to every Department in which I have been involved.

The finance function tends to be included in part of the administration of a Department. Someone who is promoted in administration is suddenly told, "You are now the principal finance officer". No one would appoint the chief scientist on the grounds that he was a splendid layman with no scientific experience whatsoever. I think we are entitled to be concerned about the financial qualifications and experience possessed by people who are responsible for financial matters at very senior levels.

That is a firm impression that the Committee has recently formed. I think it important to put it on record because we are dealing with substantial sums of public money, and it is felt that there is on occasion something of a layman's approach to financial issues.

That brings me to the biggest construction project that the intelligence agencies have ever undertaken. The Foreign Secretary referred to it, and we have drawn attention to it. Progress has been pretty mixed so far, as the Foreign Secretary will know: he will be aware of some of the embarrassing events that are mentioned in our report. He will know, for instance, of the extraordinary gyrations in the sums—substantial sums—involved in the costs of the transition to the new building.

We hope, and believe, that project management is much stronger than it was, but we know that the task is still exceptionally challenging. Neither Thames house nor Vauxhall Cross represented the happiest of events in terms of financial control; then the new GCHQ

accommodation building came over the horizon, dwarfing both those earlier major construction operations in terms of cost and complexity.

The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee unkindly suggested that we had taken no interest in the recruitment processes of the agencies. In fact, we have taken a keen interest. During almost the whole period the Committee has been in existence, we have felt disappointment and regret about the difficulties and concern that can be caused by just one or two disaffected personnel. Such people can cause considerable problems for the agencies—and, I suspect, a considerable amount of work for Secretaries of State. I shall not comment in detail on two specific events, but Members will know that I refer particularly to Messrs Tomlinson and Shayler.

We were greatly concerned by the issue of recruitment, and the challenges and difficulties that would be caused by the appointment of the wrong people.

Mr. Donald Anderson: My remark was not meant to be unkind. I was referring to paragraph 8 of the Intelligence and Security Committee's interim report, published this month, which refers to

"issues that would form the basis of this year's programme."

Recruitment was not mentioned, which I thought a little surprising in the light of the events involving Shayler, Tomlinson and others.

Mr. King: Sadly, those issues have been with us for a long time, as the right hon. Gentleman will see if he looks at our earlier reports. People who left the agencies some time ago have been causing difficulties, and giving rise to concern, for a long period.

An abiding theme of our considerations has been recruitment, along with the issues of vetting—including review vetting—and general security. Admittedly, there is a sense in which we could take pleasure in that. During our time, there have been some appalling breaches of security; but they have taken place in the United States, not here.

A deadly comment was made by Mr. John Deutsch, who used to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He said, "It is a terrible thing to find a spy in your organisation. The only thing worse is not to find a spy in your organisation". We have continually emphasised the importance of establishing the tightest possible vetting and security scrutiny, but we live in a world in which the same pressures exist. According to the newspapers, the Prime Minister recently made representations to President Putin about the amount of Russian espionage activity in the United Kingdom. I do not know whether that is true; but our Committee has expressed concern about the degree of Russian activity in earlier years, and about the number of intelligence officers believed to be operating in this country.

In any event, there is no doubt that we shall be exposed to the same pressures as the United States. The ambitions of Russian intelligence services will be the same here as they are in the United States—in the shape of Mr. Aldrich Ames, Mr. Harold Nicolson and Mr. Hanssen.

We in the Committee have observed the way in which the role of the intelligence and security agencies has changed. The Foreign Secretary mentioned the challenges faced in Sierra Leone and the Balkans. My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates), speaking of military intelligence, said that in the old days of the cold war he hardly needed a map when he had to take part in military exercises on a German plain. When today's forces are put in harm's way, in territories that they have never been near before, high-quality advance intelligence is essential, and the promptness and relevance of such intelligence has certainly increased.

The agencies have an increasing role in dealing with organised crime. In the foreword to our main report, I referred to the Committee's visits to Dover, where we spoke of the fragile nature of our controls. We discussed illegal immigrants, and drugs. We saw something of the arrangements that were in place, and agreed that they were fragile enough anyway and, without intelligence, would be virtually non-existent. We said that before the terrible tragedy involving a container-load of dead Chinese immigrants. The traffic in immigrants was not fully identified until that tragedy, of which we knew nothing, was revealed to the British people. It underlined the scale of the challenge presented to intelligence agencies—that they must try to combat the sophistication and determination of big international gangs.

We also referred—as did the Foreign Secretary, in graphic terms—to the problems of information warfare. It is possible to shut the country down with no need for a bomb: a good computer hacker can often wreak, or at least threaten, far greater damage. I do not want to become involved in an argument about whether the Government coped better with the Anna Kournikova virus than they did with the love bug—that is the sort of language now creeping into our discussions—but as we pointed out, the House of Commons, ancient institution though it may be, was more on the ball with the "love bug", and gave earlier warning, than the great UNIRAS—unified incident reporting and alert scheme—which was supposed to warn every Department. The Committee went to America shortly afterwards and we observed that the slowness of the official system to warn the United States meant that people had got out of bed and switched on their equipment only for the virus to get into it as well before the British warning arrived. I am pleased that when a further major virus attack came, it was dealt with much more promptly.

The role of the intelligence agencies and the continuing importance of their work in the world is recognised and accepted in the Committee. Changes are occurring in international terrorism: there is an on-going threat from and serious concern about breakaway elements in the republican movement and the continuing heavy burden that they represent. The Security Service thus has a role to play in respect of the continuing need to acknowledge the threats posed by foreign intelligence services.

I was interested to read today's announcement that Mr. Sergei Ivanov, who some of us met recently, has become Russian Minister of Defence after being transferred by Mr. Putin from his position as secretary of the National Security Council. He is a former KGB colleague of President Putin's, so the influence of the intelligence community in the new Russian Government is real.

We have discussed the importance of agencies working together on different issues, organised crime in particular, and such developments and changes mean that, although they are separate, they must co-operate more closely. The Government are encouraging that and we also support it. That is one reason why my Committee attaches

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importance to the Ministerial Committee. I know that there is full access and that all the Secretaries of State attach proper importance to the work of the agencies for which they are responsible, but we are looking for more joint, co-operative working.

I am sure that the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary would pay tribute to the work of the Security Service, but it is important that the role played by the agencies be fully considered; and we believe that, as a minimum, there should be an annual ministerial meeting chaired by the Prime Minister so that the agencies' work in their combined role as our intelligence community, which plays an increasingly important part in the uncertain and thus more dangerous world in which we live, can be pursued and recognised at the highest level.

I shall leave to my colleagues who want to pick up individual points our concerns about the Official Secrets Acts and the need to ensure that we have relevant protection in place. There are secrets that need to be kept and the Foreign Secretary put it very well: nobody will entrust us with their secrets, which they may risk their lives to give us, if they believe that we are not a trusty and secure home for those secrets.

There is interest in freedom of information and a feeling that there is unnecessary and excessive secrecy. There are good arguments to be made on both sides, but we must not go so far as to say that there is no longer any need for the basic protection of essential secrets. It would be enormously damaging to the security of our nation if it was thought that we no longer regarded any information as secret and put it all in the public domain.

We have had the opportunity, which is given to few, to launch a new function of parliamentarians, set up a new Committee, and build a new relationship with our intelligence and security agencies. I place on record my personal thanks to the Clerks who have served our Committee. When one goes to the United States to meet the House Intelligence Committee, one sees that it has a 30-strong staff. One then meets in the Senate another 30-strong staff, as well as the 30 staffers working for the Congressmen on the Committee and the 30 staffers who serve the Senators. One begins to realise a sense of scale.

I offer my personal gratitude to two individuals, Jonathan Alden, our first Clerk, and Alistair Corbett, who took over from him, and the teams that have worked with them, which are minute compared with those in the United States. I know that the whole Committee will join me in expressing appreciation for the work that they have done.

Mr. Mackinlay: Although I have been absent, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I have been following all he has said with great interest and admiration. I also realise that all my colleagues here are distinguished parliamentarians.

I want to make a narrow but important point of principle about the status of the Committee. The selector of its members is the Prime Minister, who is the head of the security services. He chooses those who are there to scrutinise him. I know that hon. Members work diligently, but is it not time selection was undertaken by the House rather than by the Executive branch of government, namely, the Prime Minister?

Mr. King: If we introduce a system of secret ballot for membership of Select Committees, we may be able to draw a real distinction between the way members of those Committees and members of the Intelligence and Security Committee are chosen. I believe that the Liaison Committee has made a suggestion along those lines. However, the point that I am obviously making is that if it is being suggested that who serves on Select Committees is decided by the free, unfettered will of the House and individual Members, then I must have missed something. No one is under that illusion. Personally, I think that such a distinction is vanishingly small.

I have described the work of the Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire was Chairman of the Defence Committee for many years and other Members have served on the Public Accounts Committee and other Committees. Obviously there are differences in the ways we work. Our Committee meets in secret, although, as I have said publicly, I hope that we shall move on. I am sure that our style of operation will evolve under a new Chairman with a new approach and we may meet in public, although it will not be possible to do so in respect of all matters. That could be helpful.

There are those who hold to a point of principle, saying that there are too many asterisks in our reports and that there is too much secrecy over information. However, some Defence Committee reports contain many asterisks because information has been withheld. Some of us have worked on nuclear matters on which evidence has had to be given in secret. A considerable amount of information is excised from reports.

This is a process of sending for persons and papers. I have used the example of the Chief Secretary, who, so far and unfortunately, has failed to appear, but in the main, people have been willing to appear. We have received every paper that any Select Committee would have had and we have also received a considerable number of papers that no Select Committee would ever have got its hands on.

I know why the Committee was set up, though I was not privy to the information at the time: there was a fear of the agencies and departments; there was also a fear of giving the Committee powers that might have led to the Director-General of the Security Service being summoned to the Bar of the House for refusing to give us a paper. There was perhaps a sense that an impossible situation would arise over the ownership of material, but we have ignored all that. We carry on as effectively as any Select Committee would, and the only difference is that we work within the ring of secrecy. If some people want to change that, they may be able to do so, as they are now familiar with members of the Committee and Members of Parliament.

We have made a lot of comparisons with experience overseas. That is no secret, as I have said it in public. In Australia, a decision was made to have oversight of intelligence, and to set up the first oversight committee. Someone went up to their Chief Whip, or whoever it was, and said, "We're going to have this committee. Whom are we going to put on it?" Someone else then looked up everyone who had ever asked a question about intelligence agencies. They were all members of what I call the awkward squad. They were put on the committee because it was thought that they were interested in intelligence.

The result was that the committee was a complete shambles and collapsed within about nine months. The agencies knew that those people had asked a lot of

unhelpful questions—I am not pointing at the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who would never fit into that category—and the result was that the agencies clammed up and told the committee as little as possible; the exercise was a shambles. The committee has now been rebuilt on a much more sensible basis. We avoided that kind of hiccup by setting up the Committee in the way that we did.

I have taken up too much of the House's time, but I would like to thank both Secretaries of State who attended the debate, and the Prime Minister, for their courtesy in relation to the work that we have tried to do. I have seen both Secretaries of State on behalf of the Committee, on private occasions and on different matters. We have not always agreed, but we have tried to preserve the integrity of the Committee. However, they have taken a genuine interest in our oversight work and genuinely believe that our function is not just a nuisance to be borne with as much good humour as possible, but positively helpful to the functioning of the agencies, the respect in which they are held and the value in the public eye of the matters for which the agencies have a serious responsibility.

I want to thank every member of the Committee who served with me. I am a pretty intolerable Chairman at times, but they have borne that with good grace, and this has been an interesting and—I hope they will feel—worthwhile experience for all of us. There is a feeling in the agencies that our report was a bit negative, because we are always reporting on issues and problems on which we have comments to make. That can give a flavour of our not having a real appreciation of the good work that the agencies do. I shall therefore end with the words that I wrote at the end of the foreword to our annual report about the agencies:

"In particular it has been a privilege to work closely with those who serve in our Intelligence and Security Agencies. Mistakes are made and we will criticise failings as we find them, but these should not detract from the recognition of the generally high quality and commitment, and at times, great courage of those who serve our country in these essential tasks."

3.3 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I am pleased to pay a genuinely warm tribute to the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), under whose chairmanship I have served since the Committee was set up. He may say that he is an intolerable Chairman, but I do not think that that is quite the word that I would choose. He may occasionally be a stern Chairman, but he has been a very effective one and he has enhanced the Committee's ability to do its work by the way in which he has conducted its meetings. By our own choice, he has represented the Committee externally. We made the decision that he should be the person who, on almost all occasions, spoke for the Committee, and he has always taken the various views in the Committee into account when he has done so.

The right hon. Gentleman has achieved the results that he has through consensus on the Committee. I cannot remember the Committee ever taking a vote, except, on one occasion, to decide whether we should travel by plane or train between two European capitals. That was a pretty closely contested vote. However, I cannot remember any others, because the Committee does not proceed in that way. We make unanimous reports, and are usually able to accommodate the occasional element of dissent, or regard it as less important than the overall recommendations that we intend to make. It is no small tribute to the right hon. Gentleman that he has achieved that.

I also want to pay tribute to my other colleagues on the Committee. It is not apparent, because the record is not public as it is in other Committees, that the members of the Committee share a very high level of commitment. Some Committees of the House have difficulty maintaining a quorum for their meetings; that does not happen in ours. Members attend every week and are heavily committed to the various visits that we undertake. They take their responsibilities very seriously and apply a great deal of effort and energy to them, in the full knowledge that hardly anyone will notice what they have been doing, except those who are aware of the Committee's importance and are closely involved in the work of the intelligence agencies.

There is no shortage of threats and tasks for the agencies. The most obvious example, perhaps, is the continuing activity of the Real IRA and the various dissident republican groups. A major responsibility for our agencies is tracking down and preventing terrorist outrages whenever possible. Further examples include the work of other terrorist groups, and activities such as drugs smuggling and people smuggling, into which the agencies have been drawn in addition to their traditional roles. Serious organised crime also falls into that category.

A major area of activity for the agencies, involving a great deal of detailed work and specialised knowledge, is dealing with arms trafficking, chemical and biological weapons, and weapons of mass destruction. An enormous amount of unseen work goes on in that area. The agencies are also involved, more obviously, in support for our troops in dangerous conflicts, such as those in Kosovo and Sierra Leone—examples that the Committee referred to in its reports. That is vital work.

In addition, the espionage being carried out against this country continues to require the efforts of counter-intelligence. The Hanssen case in the United States—as well as the earlier Ames case—demonstrated vividly how much intelligence activity is still going on, how much money can be involved in luring people into such activity, and the extent to which people's lives can be threatened by the activities of people such as Hanssen and Ames. As our Chairman pointed out earlier, such cases are a reminder of the vigilance that we have to show, and a great deal of effort goes into that.

Intelligence cannot do everything, but it can make a huge difference to the vital tasks in those areas. Sometimes, there is a danger of exaggerating what intelligence can do. However much intelligence we gather on drugs, it remains an issue that can be resolved only by combining intelligence, law enforcement and work within society to persuade people not to endanger their lives by taking drugs. It is important that our intelligence resources are used to catch some of the dangerous and unscrupulous people operating in that area, and to break some of the supply lines. It is also important that our law enforcement agencies can bring those people before the courts and present evidence that will convict them. However, we can deal only with a minority of the suppliers, and as long as there is a high level of demand, supply routes will be found. As the Foreign Secretary pointed out, all the activities have to be combined. Intelligence cannot do all sides of the work.

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

Intelligence is obviously increasingly important to securing our borders against unwelcome traffic of various kinds. It is increasingly widely recognised that mere border checks do not solve such problems. There was a tendency for a few years to say, "We're an island and therefore we can keep out all sorts of unwelcome things." My experience on the Committee has demonstrated to me that it is through intelligence that we are able to interdict unwelcome movements into the country, whether they involve people, tobacco smuggling or drugs smuggling.

To the extent that we are successful, we depend heavily on intelligence to be so. That is partly because we could not conduct trade, or allow the movement of people in the way that most people want to be able to travel from one country to another, if every person was strip-searched on every overseas journey, or if every cargo was searched at every border point that it crossed. That is not the world in which we live. Intelligence, therefore, attracts a greater importance, whether we are talking about the work of intelligence agencies or about the intelligence component of the work of law enforcement agencies, which is directed more towards bringing people to justice than towards identifying traffic movements.

Our intelligence and security agencies work on those various tasks, but we must remember that intelligence can be wasted, ignored—especially if it does not accord with the prejudices and preconceptions of the person on whose desk it falls—used for the wrong purposes or misdirected. The Committee exists to monitor those matters and to try to ensure that mistakes are not made. The Committee has followed trails, trying to establish that intelligence was not wasted or misused. There have been earlier conflicts—going right back to the Falklands—where there was plenty of evidence of available intelligence not being used as it should have been to avoid conflict and to save lives.

The Committee can help to monitor and prevent the misuse of intelligence and the use of techniques for the wrong purposes. In a semi-public speech, the Director-General of the Security Service indicated that there is a tendency now within the agencies to ask what the Intelligence and Security Committee would think if they embarked on a certain course of action. That argument could be used in the future against Ministers who want intelligence in areas that the agencies do not think fall within their remit.

Intelligence can be expensive and it is relevant to ask whether resources are being committed to the right issues and whether too much is being spent on particular areas. The Committee, with the aid of the National Audit Office, is alone in its ability to question the order of priorities.

Intelligence can compromise civil liberties. It is a natural interest of a Liberal Democrat member of a Committee to want to attach importance to raising those questions. Many intelligence techniques—particularly those used at home in counter-intelligence—can pose a threat to civil liberties. We have various techniques through which we try to protect those liberties. These have become topical following the passing of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.

The Act has a bad name, but perhaps we should put on record that it greatly widened the recognition of surveillance and what ought to be subject to regulation. The Act did so to comply with the European convention on human rights, but it has brought the activities of many Departments—MAFF, for example—within the ambit of broad regulation. All sorts of Departments must use some kind of surveillance to prevent things from happening or to discover what is happening. We cannot open our newspapers without being reminded of that. In the last couple of days, there have been questions about meat imports and whether we should have examined more carefully the imports that might have led to the foot and mouth outbreak. That would involve some kind of surveillance by Departments that we might not have thought would be involved.

The area that caused the greatest worry was the extension of surveillance powers to electronic communication and e-mail. The first and major anxiety was that of large sections of the industry in Britain, which were led to believe that it might impair their ability to produce material for export and to trade in such equipment if this country had a harsh regime. I hope that there is an increasing recognition that we cannot avoid applying in those areas the surveillance techniques that we apply to telephone communications. We would simply shift the traffic from one to the other if we did not have techniques that could be used properly by law enforcement and intelligence agencies. However, that makes it even more important that the powers of control are strong and effective.

That has led my party to argue that it would be better if the key decisions on matters that intrude on individual liberty were made judicially and not by the Executive. That view has not been accepted by the Government, but it is one that we will continue to press. We have Executive approval, but with an area of subsequent judicial examination. That is a problem to which we referred in paragraphs 19 and 20 of the interim report, which deal with the support available to the commissioners and the tribunal. The new amalgamated tribunal deals with a wide range of public complaints about security and intelligence issues. The several bodies involved are dependent on a tiny support structure which is quite incapable of carrying out the job. As we reported, there was not even anybody to open the mail, let alone process it, for many months. That was ludicrous.

The sort of mail that the tribunal will get requires some scrutiny, because some of it bears a resemblance to the mail sent to Members of Parliament. A number of our constituents believe that they are under daily surveillance from the security agencies, who are up the chimney, in the garage, or inside the television set. Such delusions give rise to a great deal of correspondence, but hidden among that may be a serious case involving an intrusion on civil liberties. We are in a ludicrous position if there is nobody to process that.

We have been advised that urgent steps have been taken to remedy the present situation, but we have not yet had the chance to check on that. The new Committee, when it is appointed, will have to do so at an early stage because great reliance is placed on the mechanisms. They are Britain's defence in relation to the European convention on human rights, so that an individual who believes that his civil liberties are being damaged has a mechanism through which he can appeal. If those involved in that mechanism cannot even open his letter—let alone process it or put it in front of the judicial authority who is to adjudicate upon it—we are not providing a safeguard that should be there.

That was not a failing of the agencies, but of the Government, as was the delay on the regulations on employment tribunals. We are talking about the civil rights of people employed in the agencies; they, too, have rights that we must safeguard. The absence of an employment tribunal is clearly something that we should not allow to continue, particularly as that is increasingly cited as an excuse for behaviour which it does not excuse—namely, giving away our official secrets, obtained in the course of previous employment, to further one's own case. Nothing excuses or justifies that. Nevertheless, that was a gap that needed to be plugged. The change was only introduced in a late stage of an earlier piece of legislation, but it was not entirely to our satisfaction in the form that it took.

As has been pointed out, the regulations have been laid before the House this week, so the debate has—as the Foreign Secretary conceded—had a real, practical value in concentrating somebody's mind somewhere. But how long will it be before the necessary vetted staff and tribunal members are in place? We could have another year of delay if we are not careful. There must be early action on that matter, which need not wait on the parliamentary process. If the regulations have been laid, we can get on with the job so that the tribunal is available within a matter of weeks, rather than months or years.

These civil liberties failings are Government failings, not agencies' failings. There is a real awareness in the agencies that they are working to defend our liberties as a nation. Those involved are the beneficiaries of those liberties; they want to live free and civilised lives. They have a consciousness in their work, which must be set against the demands placed upon them and their difficult task in dealing with some pretty unscrupulous people about whose activities we need to know.

It should not be assumed that the agencies are staffed by people who have no concerns about civil liberties; they do, including concerns about their own. That issue came up in the whole question of trade union rights at GCHQ some years ago. Part of the pride that those people have in their work is that they are defending the liberty that we enjoy as citizens of the UK. Many are exposed to danger, difficulty and challenge as they seek to defend those liberties.

As a party, the Liberal Democrats believe that the Committee that scrutinises these services should be a Select Committee. That is the appropriate model, but I share the view of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, who said that this is an evolving matter and that it would have been difficult to start from that point. I recognise that the way in which the Committee began was probably the best way to win the confidence of all concerned.

I believe that if the Committee operated as a Select Committee, we would not behave significantly differently from the way in which we behave now. Our work would continue in much the same manner, and we would have to establish pretty much identical procedures to the ones that we have now, probably including the presentation of a report to the Prime Minister and then to the House. We would certainly still meet in secret and require secure premises in which to do so. Therefore, it would not make a great difference to the way in which the Committee operates.

Such a transition would probably help in a small measure to remove an argument against the Committee and enhance public and media confidence in it. Confidence in the Committee has grown regardless, and we have had glowing comments from some parts of the media on our work in the past year or so. Nevertheless, such a change would have some symbolic value.

Committee members have to serve as guarantors of democracy and liberty. By using that mechanism, Parliament is effectively sending inside that ring of secrecy a group of Members in whom it has some confidence, thereby allowing them unprecedented access to information. I think that Parliament also assumes that those Members' instincts, political background and awareness of colleagues' feelings enable them to act decisively in dealing with anything that might be wrong inside that ring, to set boundaries and parameters, and to ensure that money is not being wasted and the job is being done properly.

There used to be some very odd attitudes to intelligence and security. There was a left-wing attitude that all of it was unnecessary and that all such activity should be stopped. There was also a right-wing attitude that our boys are doing a grand job, so do not ask any questions. Neither of those views is sustainable. We need our intelligence and security services, but they need to be scrutinised. Probably the only way of scrutinising them is to entrust a very limited number of people with the task of getting in there and examining the services very carefully.

That group of people has to be given the necessary information. The Committee does not need to know everything. We do not need to know a specific agent's name or location, but, sometimes, we may have to know an operational detail so that we can determine whether the right or wrong action has been taken. Currently, we have relatively little difficulty in obtaining the information that we think we need. However, just occasionally we do have difficulty, and some outstanding issues have to be addressed.

The Government have to recognise that the Committee cannot make authoritative statements to the effect that "nothing wrong has been done" or "the matter has been pursued properly" unless we have the necessary information. The Committee will not make that type of statement or give the assurances that the House requires unless those statements and assurances are based on the necessary information. If we have that information, we can give the assurances.

Committee members will have to be in place if they are to do the job. I endorse the remarks of the retiring Chairman, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, that it is vital that the Committee is appointed quickly after the general election. The new accommodation project at Cheltenham will still be a major issue, as will many of the very topical matters mentioned today by hon. Members. It would be a travesty for those matters to be unsupervised for the next six to nine months. I therefore hope that someone, somewhere—including the usual channels, the Cabinet Secretary, the Prime Minister's office and anyone else who is involved—has received the message that the Committee requires an essentially continuous existence to do a very necessary job.

3.23 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I shall be very brief as I am hoping to catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair after the Easter recess, on Monday 23 April, when I hope we shall have a debate on privileges. I hope to participate in that debate prior to the next general election.

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is in the Chamber, and I should like to reply to his intervention on a matter that, as he knows, has been discussed by some of our hon. Friends—the nature of the process by which Committee members are appointed.

The truth is that, if I were a Chief Whip, there are some hon. Members on both sides of the House whom I would not appoint to the Committee. That has nothing to do with whether one has been a rebel in the past or has asked hundreds of questions that may have been embarrassing to the security services. I remember a time, in the mid-1980s, when I would go to the Table Office to table questions that included names. When I was not looking, the staff would ring someone to check whether I was allowed to do so, and I always presumed that they were ringing the services to find out whether the name would identify someone who was active. But we have moved on from that.

We could never allow a system whereby someone could be appointed without great consideration. Ultimately, the whole system survives because of the relationship between the services and the Committee. The problem is that one Committee member could completely destroy the Committee's integrity and credibility. Even so, I am in favour of having on the Committee people who are questioners.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock would make a particularly good Committee member. I believe that he would adopt the same type of attitude to its work as I have had, and I know that he has the interests of the state very much at heart. The fact that someone is a maverick should not necessarily prevent their membership. It is a matter of where their loyalty lies. That is the issue. As a Committee member, one very quickly discovers that that is critically important.

Outsiders who consider our activities may wonder how far we have come. We have moved on from the 1980s, when it was very difficult even to ask a question and one certainly never received an answer. Although I was not able to go on the trip, some Committee members have been to Moscow to meet all types of people, some of whom I presume probably had the closest contacts with former regimes in the former Soviet Union. That is a measure of the change that is occurring.

It is a measure of the trust that the services have in the Committee that they felt that they could add their support for such a visit—in the knowledge that nothing would be compromised, and that we would be helping the process of creating and generating international relationships which in the longer term may benefit both the former Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. There are matters of common interest, such as the fight against drugs and international organised crime. There would also be, to some extent, a matching of views on Islamic issues.

I now want to deal with the critical shifts that I think have been made during my membership of the Committee. When I joined it, having spent 12 years on the Public Accounts Committee, one of the things that struck me was that—although we knew that the National Audit Office was in the background—prior to the appointment, in 1997, of "the new boys and gals", the Committee never took evidence from the NAO. One of the first things that I, and other hon. Members, did on being appointed to the Committee was to press for the development of that relationship.

I have always regarded the NAO's role as critical to monitoring what is happening inside any Department. It is the NAO, on behalf of taxpayers, that follows taxpayers' money. I think that the public might be very interested to know that the NAO can go as far as examining the detail of a particular investigation by officers in the services, pass comment on that operation in relation to financial accountability, and, if thought to be necessary and appropriate, make that information available to the Intelligence and Security Committee. If the NAO believes that there has been a misuse of public money, for example, it can draw that to our attention.

I confess that we have not been presented with operational information of that nature. However, it would be within the Committee's power to have access to such information if we felt that that was necessary. Although obviously we would not have access to the details of the operation or the personnel involved in it, access to the other information demonstrates the level of intensity that the NAO can apply in its investigation if it chooses to do so.

I believe that the compromise arrangement on an investigator—it was a compromise to some of us—was also very important. I was taken by the idea of an inspector general when the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) returned from their visit to Australia and were so enthused by what they had found. Subsequently, some of us argued most strongly for the establishment of an inspector. However, we compromised on an arrangement that was proposed, I think, by the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates,) which has proved to be an excellent arrangement. It has introduced the principle of someone outside the Committee, but acting on our behalf, having the right to go in and find out precisely what is happening in greater detail than we can, reporting to us within the remit set by law.

Stephen Lander talked about something at the Royal United Services Institute lectures that I thought would never be referred to in public. He said that, on occasions, he felt able to go further than the law required in terms of providing information to the Committee. To outside students of our activities, that should be very interesting, because it shows that our remit extends further than the legislation and that we are therefore more effective than might be supposed. We can go further, on occasions, without compromising any element of national security.

I have been struck, on visiting the agencies, by the number of young people there. The agencies offer a career that must be unparalleled in our public service. It may not be the best-remunerated career in the world, although reports show that there are developments in that area, but it must certainly be the most exciting.

It is quite wrong for people outside to presume that the agencies are riddled with people on the right wing of politics, who fly the flag and are incapable of considering libertarian principles. In fact, they contain people of all political persuasions. I have had some fascinating discussions about politics with people whose name I did not know. I cannot emphasise enough how acutely aware they are of the civil libertarian arguments that take place

here. They would never allow their politics to interfere with their judgments in carrying out their public duties. It is very impressive.

I understand from my sons, and I have discussed it with agency personnel, that there is much discussion in universities about applying for intelligence work, particularly at GCHQ, which must be having one of its finest periods for recruitment. Many people on relevant courses are being attracted to and applying for jobs at GCHQ. That is good news and bodes well.

A young man in his mid-30s in one of the agencies—I am not breaching security in saying this—told us about his work, within the limits of what he could say. His sense of commitment was remarkable. We could tell that he had the national interest absolutely at heart. I must not say too much, but I want to emphasise how impressed I was by our conversation. If he has the opportunity to read *Hansard*, I hope that he will be able to identify himself, because there are many such dedicated people in the agencies. I told him that many people in the House of Commons would be most impressed if only they had the opportunity to talk to him.

I do not want to labour the arguments about Select Committees—I have done so repeatedly over the years, in the Committee, on the Floor of the House and outside—but there is one very important matter that the House should take into account. We are moving into a century that will be very different from the previous one. Throughout this century, there will be more and more attempts by Governments of all political persuasions to compromise our civil liberties, not because they want to but because they feel that they have to if the wider freedom of all individuals in society is to be preserved. It is a tremendous dilemma to decide how far we can allow the state to go.

National identity cards are an example. Some see them as an invasion of individual freedom. I do not. There is a division of view within the Conservative party. Some Conservatives—right-wingers such as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—regard them as infringing civil liberties. I am not making a party political point here, because the same is true of the Labour party. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) would be completely opposed to them, preoccupied as he is with civil liberties, whereas I take the opposite view and regard them as necessary for the future.

I believe that national identity cards are inevitable, and will come regardless of which party is in power. I remember when closed circuit television cameras were introduced on our streets. Civil libertarian groups in my constituency were outraged and saw them as an intrusion, but now I never hear any criticism of them at all. People want them. There was an element of principle to begin with, but compromise was inevitable. Every time we move the debate on and allow such principles to be compromised, we must have a check in place with which the public can identify. There has to be effective public scrutiny, and that has to be through this institution.

If we are to allow such intrusions to take place—which we will; in the end they will be accepted, or at least acknowledged as being for the wider good—we need them to be overseen by an institution that is identified with elections and has the imprimatur of Parliament. That is why I want the structure to change.

Mr. Mackinlay: My hon. Friend flagged up something that has exercised me since last autumn. I abhorred and found anathema the actions of those people who tried to hold the country to ransom over fuel, but if surveillance was used on them, as we are led to believe, I am in a dilemma. I wonder how my hon. Friend feels about it, given our mutual belief in democracy and liberty. Is it right for the state, for economic reasons, to use the machinery of surveillance that we would normally use in relation to national defence, on people who are trying to frustrate the state and exert pressure on the Government in relation to fuel prices—or perhaps on other malevolents? Where is the fine line?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: There is a category in which the state would have some interest, and that is what we would call economic well-being. That is where we come in, because we can ask questions about such matters. During the course of our inquiries we can bring the heads of the services before us—in this case, the head of the Security Service. We can ask Stephen Lander about developments in this or that particular area, and he will have to reply.

Of course, our report would go through the Prime Minister before it filtered through to Parliament, but there is a mechanism for dealing with such issues. My hon. Friend should not remain interminably suspicious that such matters cannot be controlled. There is also the role of the Home Secretary, who has responsibilities in that direction; we know that the present Home Secretary takes those responsibilities extremely seriously. I hope that I have put my hon. Friend's mind at rest slightly.

I know that there has been lots of banter in the Committee about Select Committee status, particularly between the hon. Member for East Hampshire and me. I have always thought that when we are on a platform together, as we were last week, the people who watch us like that. They know that even within the present remit, there are divisions of opinion, and we can argue them out, even in a public forum. That is helpful to the process. I know it is helpful to the services, too, because people in the services are fascinated by those arguments. Within the services themselves there are people who want the Select Committee structure to be set up. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will know about that.

I have said what I had to say, and unless I have the opportunity to speak in the debate on privilege on 23 April, this may well be my final contribution in the House. Thank you.

3.43 pm

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who made what could be his last contribution in the House. I would be happy to cross swords with him again on 23 April, because I, like him, think that a general election would be a distraction at the moment—but I shall not go into that now.

All this business about a Select Committee is an old chestnut by now. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have crossed swords about it before. I have never

[Mr. Michael Mates]

heard the case so persuasively put as it was by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith)—who has just stopped on his way out to hear me say that. However, persuasively as the case was put, I have to tell him that I am not persuaded.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, I had the honour to chair the Defence Committee for six years, and I have now been a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee for six years. He was right to say that there is a distinction rather than a difference, but there is an enormous distinction.

We dealt with very sensitive matters; for example, we examined the Trident nuclear submarine programme, year after year, almost from its inception to its end. However, when a Government Department—or, particularly, one of the intelligence agencies—gives evidence to a Select Committee, that evidence then becomes the Committee's property. That is the distinction. That is the only difference between us.

Once somebody gives evidence to a Select Committee, that evidence is the property of the Committee and of the House, and at the end of the day the Committee can do what it will with it. The difference that was—rightly in my view—built in to the structure of the present Committee, is that the evidence does not become the property of the House until it has been filtered through the Prime Minister. I am certain that without that filter, we would not have been privy to even half the growing amount of information that we have been given over the years. We must remain exclusive and different.

However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater said, it is a distinction that need not bother us, because our work is very similar to that of a Select Committee. I say that for the benefit of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), too. It is simply that the ownership of the highly sensitive information that we have been given has to remain within the ring of secrecy until such time as the Prime Minister and his advisers allow it to be reported to Parliament.

I do not think that there is a difference in the confidence that the House and the general public have in the Intelligence and Security Committee, as opposed to a Select Committee—although there may have been a difference for the first few years, when we were a new Committee. I think that that feeling of confidence will grow. In four or five years' time, whether there is a change or not, and I do not think that there will be—*[Interruption.]* I must tell the hon. Member for Workington that I have the last word at the moment, which is a nice position to be in.

I do not think that by that time there will be any difference perceived, either outside or inside the House, between the level of accountability of the intelligence and security services, and that of the other Departments to their respective Select Committees. That argument is academic, and is becoming more academic as the days and years go by.

My right hon. and hon. Friends have raised many of the relevant points, so I can be quite brief. First, I want to amplify what the Foreign Secretary said about the inherent dangers of technology and information warfare. As has been said, an enemy could do far more damage by bringing down computer systems than by dropping bombs. That gets truer every day.

I remind the House of something that may have slipped people's minds. Three or four years ago, an 18-year-old computer hacker brought the entire US air force in the United States to the ground by hacking into the air traffic control system for military aircraft. The authorities were bemused. They knew that this was not a friendly hacker, and he was so clever that he made it appear that the attack on the computer system was coming from India. For two days, until they sorted it out, all they could do was to ground the entire United States air force. I do not need to tell hon. Members what would happen if that took place even in a period of low-level conflict, as we have had in the Balkans all too recently. There would have been chaos.

I shall give another example, because the danger needs highlighting. A couple of years ago, an IRA plot to use bombs to disable the electricity generating sub-stations around London was discovered. It would have crippled the electricity supply of the capital, but by careful intelligence and very good work by the police and the intelligence services, the attack was prevented.

How much more effective would that attack have been had the terrorists moved somebody into the London electricity generating control centre and left him there for years? At the appropriate moment, they could have told him to destroy the computer system. That would have been more devastating, it could have been done much more quickly, and there would have been less chance of discovery, because the IRA would not have needed garages in back streets full of cars and explosives.

That is an important factor, and I hope that the Committee will look into it if I have the honour to serve on it again—if, indeed, I have the honour to get back here and serve on the Committee in the next Parliament. I hope that the Committee will take the matter up to help the Government go forward into an ever more complex and dangerous area.

That is why we will need more intrusive inspection of computer communications—to prevent just such a threat. I know that I am repeating what has been said before, but I thought that it would be helpful to illustrate the point, so that people who do not understand intelligence matters could grasp the size of the problems caused by the ever increasing pace and sophistication of technology.

My last point is about the growing problem of serious crime—smuggling drugs, illegal immigrants, false asylum seekers and all that. This week I visited Dover and went across to the other side with the customs officers, because I could not be there when the rest of the Committee went two or three months ago.

I saw the new scanner. With X-ray cameras, officers can now scan a container lorry as long as this Chamber in five or 10 minutes. I could see how effective that was. One sees the contents immediately, and can spot differences, and whether there is anything irregular. I commend the Government for having introduced the scanner and I hope that they will further speed up its introduction. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater said, without intelligence there is no way that we can interdict such activities at the moment.

If everyone has to go through the scanner routinely, the smuggler will face a much harder problem. The Treasury Committee looked at that in its second report and recommended that 13 scanners were needed very soon. I do not suppose that anybody will oppose that except

the Treasury, as scanners are expensive items. I urge the Ministers concerned to tackle the Treasury about that, because it is one way in which—I hesitate to use the phrase—at a stroke they could improve the detection of a huge amount of smuggled contraband, especially cigarettes. The Treasury is now losing hundreds of millions of pounds, but it is difficult to explain to it that it will eventually make a profit. It does not see the matter that way, but it has always worked like that.

I saw the highest-tech piece of kit imaginable, which is mobile and looks a bit like a Heath Robinson device: it goes over the top of the lorry and moves along it. The plan is to move in fixed technology, whereby the lorry drives through and is scanned, rather as one's suitcase is at the airport. Although more expensive, the sooner that that happens, the better. Despite all that wonderful technology, the approach to lorries is back in the age of the quill pen and dependent on the observational ability of Customs and Excise.

I raise that point for the benefit of Ministers, who may not be aware of it. It is a question of the British and French Governments organising matters so that information, which is available on computer, can be transferred. Our customs officials in France and, indeed, the French customs officials at Dover, would therefore have access to low-level intelligence, such as manifests, number plates and so on, before the lorries arrive. They could add that to the intelligence produced by our own intelligence sources, and identify suspicious lorries in good time, as opposed to the three or four minutes that they have at the moment.

When one sees millions of pounds worth of new technology alongside a chap trying to look down a handwritten list that changes twice a day, one realises that we have not yet got that right. In the battle against smugglers—of people, drugs and so on—we need to address that problem and get it right quickly. That is a matter for the two Governments and the organisations that run the cross-channel ferries, the tunnel, freight trains and everything else. I very much hope that that will be taken to heart and acted on quickly, as it is frustrating, especially for customs officials, to have wonderful kit, but to have one link missing in the chain.

It is time to thank everyone. I am happy and grateful to have been on the Committee since it started. If I survive, I hope that I may serve on it in the next Parliament. I shall miss the hon. Member—I was about to say "hon. Friend"—for Workington. I shall miss him as a maverick and a member of the awkward squad whose presence adds a little ginger to our proceedings even if, alas, as everyone else has said, they are rarely seen by the public.

The House will have gathered from the speeches of Committee members—there are still one or two to come—that not only do we work happily, but effectively and well. We work without party politics as a team.

3.54 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): May I tell the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) that he does not have the last word on the status of the Intelligence and Security Committee? It seems that that has become part of our annual debate; we do not have to justify it, but give our own opinions about its status.

I was particularly interested in the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who is a member of the Committee. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock has attended previous debates on the matter, but I believe that our entire debate is a distraction from the fact that we should be debating the Committee's annual work load, as far as that is possible in the public domain. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) talked about the symbolism of the Committee. I am not greatly into symbolism; we should consider whether something is functional and practical. The way in which members of the Committee are assembled by the Prime Minister and the Executive, who, it is true, have prime responsibility for national security in this country, needs to be set alongside the way in which other Committees in the House are assembled.

I must tell my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock that, after the 1997 election, I was offered, by telephone, the chairmanship of a Select Committee, which I declined. The offer was not the general will of Parliament; it was made by the Executive. About two and a half years ago, I was asked by telephone to sit on a pre-legislative Select Committee, which examined the Bill that was eventually passed by the House to set up the Food Standards Agency. Not only was I asked to sit on that Committee, but I was asked to be Chairman. I must tell my hon. Friend that it was not the will of Parliament that that offer was made; the call came from someone in the Executive. To a large extent, therefore, our debate is a distraction from what the Intelligence and Security Committee is about.

I do not agree with everything that the hon. Member for East Hampshire said about what would, or would not, be seen if the Committee was a Select Committee, as opposed to a Committee of parliamentarians assembled by the Prime Minister. I am not arguing that the Committee should never be a Select Committee; we should get down to what it does, what it makes public, and how that squares with what happens in society, with Parliament and with our perception of people's attitudes towards the intelligence services in this country.

In that context, I want to say a few words in our debate. What has happened to British intelligence agencies in the past two decades is unique. First, it is only in the last 20 years that there has been a public admittance on paper that those agencies exist. In the past decade, the Executive and the Prime Minister set up a Committee of parliamentarians, on which I have served since 1997. Members of the Committee who had not signed the Official Secrets Act had to do so, and look into sensitive areas of the agencies' work inside and outside the country.

Every speaker has paid tribute to the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), but I want to do so in the context of those two unique decades. During that period, he has performed a singular role. He has been a Secretary of State, with direct responsibilities for signing off, at least annually, the budget of an agency which, in theory, did not exist; its existence was not acknowledged. Yet he sat in Cabinet signing off its annual budgets and, presumably, not wanting to take responsibility for some of its capital projects. In 1994, he then took up the chairmanship of the Committee. I had little parliamentary contact with him, other than across the Floor of the Chamber, until I joined the Committee in 1997, but I believe that he has been an extremely good Chairman. He has not caused trouble, as people often do when they chair committees, as he said himself.

[Mr. Kevin Barron]

I want to pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his ministerial experience and chairing of the Committee. I recall his saying on numerous occasions in the Committee that although he had held ministerial responsibility for the intelligence agencies, he only really got to know about them when he became chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I probably should not be saying that, because people might think that I am out to cause trouble. I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman will be writing his memoirs when he retires from Parliament. However, I genuinely want to thank him for the work that he has done, as have other speakers before me, including my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

The work of the Committee is evolving; there have been further developments since we discussed the last annual report. It has not been quite 12 months, as the last one was produced quite late. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater spoke about the leader in *The Times* and the press reports about the publication of our report on the Mitrokhin archive. The right hon. Gentleman said that someone had suggested that he might have written the leader himself. At the conference held two weeks ago at the Royal United Services Institute on oversight, security and intelligence issues, when the Director-General of the Security Service sat down, having spoken for the first time ever about the relationship that the service has had with the Committee over the years, we could have been forgiven for thinking that the right hon. Gentleman had written that speech as well. It went into detail about the evolving relationship between this Committee of parliamentarians and the agencies.

The right hon. Gentleman can be proud of how he has steered this ship. It could have got into troubled waters; it might, once or twice, have got a bit near the coastline at low tide, which might have been unwise. However, by and large, the Committee has kept away from troubled waters, certainly for the years I have been a member. That is due in no small part to the right hon. Gentleman's stewardship.

I was reminded of the director-general's speech when my hon. Friend the Member for Workington said that the director-general had said that sometimes more had been done than the law required. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members here today, those who will read this debate in *Hansard*, and members of the public will recognise that this debate covers only a part of the work that we have done over the past 12 months. I suppose that the iceberg metaphor is the correct one inasmuch as the report is indeed the tip of the iceberg—a lot of other work has been done. Some of it is asterisked in the report; some has not been included but remains in the confines of our office.

I turn to the investigator who has worked closely with the Committee over the past few months. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater paid John Morrison a compliment, which I would like to do as well. However, considering the work that has been done, a few other people should also be thanked.

We were not sure how the investigator would work with the Committee. He reports to us, and we task him in relation to going into the various agencies to look at matters that we could look at if we had the time. His ability to concentrate on specific issues has been very valuable.

We have had three reports in the past 12 months. The report on the agencies' security policies and procedures was eventually sent to the Prime Minister. There was a report on the use of laptop computers. No one will be surprised at our decision to look at that issue. It was not simply about laptops going missing or being left in taxis, although that is an important aspect. That report went into detail, some of which has been included in our annual report. When there are multi-use laptop computers in organisations, they should be wiped clean when an individual has finished with a particular issue. When laptops are for the sole use of an individual, we should ensure that there is no build-up of sensitive information. If the laptop went missing and fell into the wrong hands, a lot of material could obviously be lost.

The third report deals with information technology systems and strategies in the public sector. That has nothing to do with the agencies; sadly, massive amounts of taxpayers' money have been misspent in many areas of the public sector, including health, on the procurement of IT systems. The investigator was tasked to look at the issue on that basis. I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said that we now have an IT champion looking at some of these issues.

The Government's response to the reports that we sent to the Prime Minister, as well as their response to the investigator's reports on the agencies, showed a mature attitude to what some people thought was an uneasy path for us to take. The period from 1997 until now may seem quite long, but we hope that it will in fact be a very short time in the life of this oversight Committee in the United Kingdom. Everyone's attitude to the investigator's report has been very important.

An ever-increasing part of the intelligence agencies' work is serious crime. The action taken on human smuggling and its awful consequences has been mentioned this afternoon. I refer not only to the deaths in Dover but to human trafficking around the world. We, along with many other countries, must deal with the problem of people exploiting others for money. That is a developing area which is highlighted in our report, and I am pleased that something is being done about it.

Serious crime is also a major issue. Drugs have been mentioned, as have the intelligence products that some of our agencies use in the international field to stop the movement of drugs around the country. Many of them are targeted on the misery in our communities and constituencies, where people are hooked on drugs. Such products are invaluable in trying to stop drug trafficking.

There is greater use of the agencies' products to deal with Customs and Excise evasion or fraud. I have an interest in public health matters, tobacco in particular. Tobacco smuggling into this country costs the Exchequer somewhere in the region of £2.3 billion to £2.5 billion. It is argued that tobacco is smuggled because of our high taxes: it is not. European Union countries such as Italy and Spain have lower taxes on tobacco products, but smuggling is as big a problem there as it is here. So the reasons go wider than that.

I am concerned not simply about the loss to the Treasury, but about the fact that much of the smuggled tobacco reaches the under-15s, who cannot buy cigarettes in legitimate outlets. They are cheaper, and as a consequence people get hooked on cigarettes at an early age. A lot of work is being done on that, too.

While we have the ear of Ministers, I draw attention to the interim report of the Committee, which has been published in the past few days. Paragraph 32 says on the subject of tobacco smuggling:

"The Committee was concerned to hear that large consignments of cigarettes continue to be exported from the UK, only to be smuggled back into the country via a staging country or countries."

I know that an independent Department of Trade and Industry investigation is taking place. It looks at what happened in the past, but the quotation makes it clear that the Committee has received evidence that such smuggling is still happening now. The Minister may want to pass on the Committee's concern expressed in that part of the report. I believe that the Government should have a look at it.

In both of the past two years, we have commented on the absence of legislation to give people who work in the security agencies the right to go to an industrial tribunal. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary say that orders to that effect had been laid in Parliament this week. That was fortuitous, given that the debate was scheduled for today. We shall be pleased to see the orders passed. I am not sure whether anyone in the agencies could have usefully used the legislation in the years since we have been lobbying for it, but it is good that the machinery is being put in place. We hope that it will not be needed. Two years ago we sought to ensure that there was a good system in each of the agencies to enable people who did not feel that they were being looked after properly to seek redress internally. The system should be able to handle that; we did a fair amount of work on it.

We have included a deliberately short comment in our interim report on the future of the Official Secrets Acts. I will not go into the detail of that paragraph, but I genuinely believe that the Act needs to be re-examined quickly. We say in our annual report that the future of the Act should be considered by any follow-on Committee, if there is to be a general election in the next few years—*[Interruption.]* That might be wishful thinking, not on my part, I hasten to add. If there is to be an election in the next few weeks, a new Committee should be set up more quickly than in May 1997 and it should look at the operation of the Act.

The context of the Official Secrets Act is changing—if in no other sphere, then in that of the internet and its effect on people's ability to put information in the public domain. That can form a case for the defence in any judicial action. The situation needs to be addressed.

Our compliments to the professionals who work in our agencies are in our report for all to see. On every visit, on some of which we have given staff a rough time by questioning what happens in their departments, I have never ceased to be amazed at their professionalism and courage. They do jobs in our democracy that most of us who are democratic representatives would shy away from because of the personal danger. I cannot emphasise enough the fact that, in the years I have served on the Committee, which I have thoroughly enjoyed, I have always been amazed at their professionalism. The people who work in the agencies ought to be given recognition by everyone. They look after not their own interests but the interests of the country, and they do that job well.

4.14 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Unlike other Back Benchers who have spoken so far, I am not a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I hope to have the indulgence of the House in doing what I usually do, which is to talk primarily about intelligence and security issues rather than the work of the Committee. However, I shall touch on one aspect of the Committee's work before I conclude.

The topics that I wish to address are MI5 and subversion, with reference to some recent and on-going developments; some historical topics relating to the retention of files and the examination of foreign archives; and oversight and the problems of reconciling it with the needs of security.

On 12 January 1998, a prominent story in *The Times* was headlined "MI5 decides that democracy is safe." The reporter, Michael Evans, said:

"The once-thriving F branch of the Security Service, which in its heyday investigated the extreme Left and the extreme Right, is now reduced to 'half' a desk officer who concerns himself with the pensions of former employees. . . .

An acknowledgement that this line of MI5 business has gone out of fashion will be made clear in the third edition of the Security Service booklet to be published in March".

Indeed, the booklet "MI5—The Security Service" was published in March 1998. It stated on page 19:

"Subversion in the UK is essentially an historical phenomenon. . . . The Security Service currently has no investigations in this area. During the financial year 1997/98 only 0.3 per cent. of the Service's resources were allocated to the remnants of this work, predominantly to pay the pensions of retired agents."

That came back to me on 21 June 1999, when the Home Secretary made a statement in the House about the demonstrations in the City of London. There had been some violent demonstrations, and the right hon. Gentleman said:

"I want to place on record my appreciation . . . for the way in which the City of London police, supported by the Metropolitan police and the British Transport police, dealt with this wholly deplorable outbreak of violence which was plainly premeditated . . .

At the moment, I have no firm information to suggest that a recurrence of those demonstrations is likely in the foreseeable future. However, I intend to hold further consultations with the Commissioner and the police service, to ensure that everything possible is done to protect the safety of the public and the businesses in the City and elsewhere in London . . .

The London police . . . have a fine record of co-operating fully with peaceful demonstrations. But the refusal of the organisers of that demonstration even to discuss with the police how the event was to be handled was wholly irresponsible, and showed a contempt for peaceful protest and for democracy."—[*Official Report*, 21 June 1999; Vol.333, c.778.]

Hear, hear, we may all say to that.

In the questioning that followed that statement, I pointed out to the Home Secretary that perhaps we were having a problem with non-co-operation of demonstrators taking part in mass and illegal action because F branch of the Security Service had effectively been closed down. I urged him to recognise that that was a mistake and that, when such riots were being surreptitiously organised, the counter-measures that were required were those which that part of the Security Service had specialised in, but no longer carried out.

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

I was evidently wasting my breath, because the same thing happened all over again the following year. On 2 May, the Home Secretary once again made a statement to the House about demonstrations in London and Manchester. He said:

"Yesterday's shameful violence was the culmination of a loosely organised series of events that took place from Friday to Monday. Although all the events were broadly described as a protest against capitalism, they were organised by a number of wholly disparate groups.

None of the organisers was willing to discuss preparations in advance with the police, who therefore had to make their plans on the basis of the best information obtained by them."—[*Official Report*, 2 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 21.]

A number of times in the statement and in the questions that followed it, the Home Secretary referred to the "benefit of hindsight" when hon. Members said that mistakes had been made in the way in which the London demonstration had been handled. However, I do not believe that it was a question of being wise after the event. It was wholly to be anticipated that, with demonstrations of that sort being organised in a clandestine manner by people who had no intention of obeying the law or demonstrating peacefully, a level of disruption would be caused that could have been dealt with only by the normal methods of the Security Service functioning as F branch of MI5 used to do.

I raise the matter of those two demonstrations because a third is in the pipeline. On 18 February, *The Sunday Telegraph* carried the following report.

"Thousands of anarchists plan to take over London streets on May Day in a violent version of Monopoly, seizing hotels and company headquarters in an effort to disrupt the general election expected on May 3.

Police have uncovered plans for more than 15,000 extremists to converge on London from all over Europe on May 1."

The article quotes one of the plans, which states:

"This year we want to celebrate May Day by playing a game of Monopoly on the streets of London on May 1."

The plan advises activists to "consider the possibilities" and to

"seize the headquarters of companies involved in debt, privatised railways and utilities such as gas and electricity."

The plans also instruct activists to target

"above all the streets and areas in which the daily business of capitalism continues normally unhindered."

A number of speakers in the debate so far have wisely referred to the increasing importance of the role of the internet and of methods of communication by that means. The information that I have may or may not be reliable, but it suggests that the information that the police have managed to gather so far has primarily come from a study of websites such as www.mayday2001.org, or www.maydaymonopoly.net. Those sites include information that the organisers of the forthcoming riots have chosen to make available on the internet. I gather that details about how they are really proposing to organise their events are contained in encrypted e-mails. That encryption is easily available via a commercial firm—I will not name it because I do not wish to give more publicity to its activities—which has recently recruited a senior US encryption expert.

My information is that it would take the most powerful computers of the American National Security Agency or our own GCHQ at least 24 hours to break such a code. We are therefore facing the possibility of quite major, planned disruption that could well spill over into the day on which the general election may be held. However, our police are having to make do without the advice of the Security Service that they would have had in the past if the decision—erroneous, in my view, and in that of others with an interest in this subject—had not been taken to destroy the counter-subversion arm of MI5.

I have been interested to note that some of the events of past subversive activities still have knock-on effects today. A letter published in *The Guardian* yesterday was headed "Log on to keeptheToriesout.com, the democratic way". It encouraged people to visit the website of something called "tacticalvoter.net".

I visited the website, to see what it was all about. Naturally, I had a degree of personal interest, given what the site might have contained with regard to my constituency. The site's home page revealed a commendable degree of honesty in stating that the aims of the organisation are to

"promote anti-Conservative tactical voting at the General Election . . . To demonstrate the need for electoral reform . . . To raise interest in the election and improve voter turnout."

In a section called "Background", the website states:

"At least 25 Tory MPs lost their seats to tactical voting in 1997. A further 127 are vulnerable."

I think that that figure is calculated on the basis that hon. Members who won anything under 50 per cent. of their constituency vote are, in principle, vulnerable to tactical voting.

The site continues:

"Websites that allowed Greens and Democrats to swap votes received ½million hits, and nearly kept Bush out of the Whitehouse . . . Web-inspired tactical voting could make a big difference to the shape of parliament and the tone of politics after this election."

So far, so good: we live in a free society. However, an item at the bottom of the page caught my attention. It stated that

"tacticalvoter.net is a company limited by guarantee . . . We are funded by grants from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Limited and the New Politics Network".

It is then stated, in bold type, that

"tacticalvoter.net is not affiliated to or funded by any political party".

Well, yes and no: the organisation is being a little too modest in saying that it is funded by the New Politics Network. A visit to the network's website reveals that the telephone and fax numbers and the address of the New Politics Network are the same as those of tacticalvoter.net, which it funds.

I thought that the name New Politics Network rang a bell, and I was reminded of an excellent article that appeared not in a right-wing or reactionary magazine but in the *New Statesman*, that journal of progressivism, on 23 October last year. The article was by Nick Cohen, an investigative journalist of the left with a commendably independent spirit. The article was headlined, "Up for grabs: £3.5 Million of Stalin's gold; New Politics Network funded by smuggled Russian gold."

The article began:

"You may think that the Communist Party and its heirs is of no importance. But their wealth could still have a profound political influence.

I doubt if one person in 100,000 has heard of the New Politics Network. The all but unrecognisable remnant of the once militant communist Party of Great Britain has been rebranded and repackaged like a flagging line of groceries . . . The network matters because it has money—£3.5 million, to be precise—the residue of the Moscow gold smuggled from the Kremlin to the British communist Party. To socialists, £3.5 million is a fantastic sum. Outside the trade union movement, no organisation on the left can match the network's wealth."

Putting together those few bits of paper and snippets of information might have been routine for MI5, if it had retained its counter-subversion role. It appears that an organisation that is avowedly trying to influence the outcome of a democratic election is doing so on the basis of funds supplied by the KGB—illegally—to the Communist party of Great Britain. That party is the direct ancestor of the organisation to which I have drawn attention.

In the course of this Parliament, a number of other interesting cases have arisen out of cold war history. The case that has interested me a great deal is the targeting by the Stasi of certain activists and individuals in the United Kingdom.

The Home Secretary, whom I am delighted to see back on the Treasury Bench, will remember our pleasant debate on the retention of MI5 files. In the early days of this Parliament, it looked as though those files might not be retained—indeed, some quarters on the left exerted a great deal of pressure to destroy the cold war files of the Security Service. Having secured a half-hour Adjournment debate on whether the files should be retained or destroyed, I had the experience—intriguing to me, as a relatively new Back Bencher—of being fortunate enough to have none other than the Home Secretary himself responding to that debate.

I am not sure whether any other Back Bencher has been so fortunate as to have a Cabinet Minister respond in person to an Adjournment debate chosen by ballot, but I certainly felt duly privileged. Furthermore, I was delighted with the outcome: the Home Secretary took it on himself to refer the question of whether or not the files should be retained for future use by historians or destroyed to a proper committee of academics working in conjunction with the Public Record Office. Although it will be many years before those files are open to academic historians, I am sure that the Home Secretary concedes that it is as a result of that chain of events that a substantial part of the MI5 archive is now to be retained.

A similar process went on in the former communist East Germany in respect of the Stasi files held in Berlin. A large quantity of files was retained and has gradually been worked through by scholars, historians and some intelligence agencies. I shall not rehearse the revelations that have emerged during the course of this Parliament about the role of various people in British public life acting as agents for the Stasi, although as recently as September 2000, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) and I were intrigued to be identified as people who had attracted Stasi attention because of our work combating unilateral nuclear disarmament in the 1980s.

During the course of that controversy, I became concerned that it had taken a British academic, Dr. Anthony Glees, to go to Berlin, to investigate the contents of the files and to bring into the open the role that had been played by some people in British public life in serving the Stasi, and that, at the time that Dr. Glees made his investigations, it was clear that no similar investigation had been carried out by our official intelligence agencies. I believe that since I raised that issue in the House, progress has been made. Dr. Glees has been consulted by the Security Service—I can say that openly, because I received a letter from a Minister confirming that.

My final point arises from those positive developments. Early in the debate, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) seemed to suggest that the question of who was appointed to the Intelligence and Security Committee should be a matter for a simple vote by parliamentarians. I was greatly impressed by the comment by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours)—I am often greatly impressed by his comments—that one member of the Committee could completely destroy its integrity. I have always been concerned to ensure that, if we are to have oversight of the intelligence and security services, we are satisfied that those who undertake the job are themselves as thoroughly discreet and reliable, and have been vetted in a similar way, as those who are privy to the secrets of the agencies themselves. Otherwise, we build a weak link into the agencies' operational security. Although I hasten to emphasise that, in my following remarks, I shall not say anything to identify any individual, I should like to speak in support of the view expressed by the hon. Member for Workington as to a potential danger.

Among the papers that Dr. Glees found in the Berlin archive was a Stasi report in which the agent tasked with reporting on the activities of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament noted the following:

"In the execution of the strategic orientation of goals, the CND will, in the future, more strongly exploit its position within Parliament using MPs. In this way, the CND members and MPs"—

here the agent names two people whom I shall not name—

"had been elected into the Parliamentary Defence Select Committee and would have access to confidential NATO materials which are marked 'Top Secret'. They would not have access to documents marked 'COSMIC'."

As a member of the Select Committee on Defence, I can confirm that I have not seen any document marked "COSMIC".

The point we should bear in mind is that the people who made those reports to a hostile foreign intelligence agency regarded the possibility of getting sympathetic Members of Parliament on to a sensitive Select Committee as a potential opening for the obtaining of classified information. I am happy to say that I am not aware of any document in the archive that shows that any such breach of security ever took place.

Mr. Barron: Does the hon. Gentleman recall the press reports about another case emerging from the East German Stasi files, that of Professor Vic Allen, who was based in west Yorkshire at the university? He had been on the central committee of CND, had been spying on the organisation, and had reported back to the East Germans. In the light of the hon. Gentleman's interests before entering the House, does he approve of Professor Allen's actions?

Dr. Lewis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because he tempts me to take a path that I had been

[Dr. Lewis]

rigorously resisting. No, I do not approve of what Professor Allen did and I have raised that matter in the House. It gives me little satisfaction to have to point out that back in the mid-1980s, I was one of those who publicly identified Professor Allen as one of the most prominent pro-Soviet activists in CND.

However, on the specific question of membership of Select Committees and access to classified information, I am not aware that there was ever a case of a Member of Parliament leaking such information. From the files, I have learned that certain individuals, such as Professor Allen, Dr. Robin Pearson and others, behaved disgracefully. I think that some of them should have been prosecuted, but the Government, in their wisdom, have decided that that should not be done. None the less, I believe that the document from which I have quoted confirms the importance of the comment made by the hon. Member for Workington, namely, that we have to have some safeguards to ensure that the people who are appointed to sensitive parliamentary Committees are reliable.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I became a member of CND in 1978—I am not sure whether I still am a member—and I am a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. The idea that someone might think that they had an interest in me because I have been a member of CND is utterly ludicrous. The problem is that the hon. Gentleman compartmentalises people: he presumes that because one had a view on nuclear weapons in the 1970s and 1980s, one falls within a group who would necessarily be targeted because they were somehow disloyal to the state. He is completely wrong and he misunderstands the British Labour movement.

Dr. Lewis: I hope that when the hon. Gentleman reads carefully what I said in *Hansard*, he will see that I am not making that mistake. I am saying that we have to expect that people who were attempting to find out illicitly sensitive, classified and, if possible, "COSMIC" top-secret information, hoped that by working through Members of Parliament who were sympathetic in some respects—although not necessarily all the important respects—with their point of view they might progress their nefarious aims. That is why the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the need for some protection with regard to those appointed to such Committees are apposite.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Speaking as a member of Scottish CND and of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, whether I am on the files of MI5 or the Stasi or not, I have never heard of any approach by SCND to Scottish Labour Members of this House of the sort that he suggested a few moments ago, before he started on his qualification.

Dr. Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me to do what I hoped I would not have to do. I am delighted to be able to say that a lady who is the president of Scottish CND, Marjorie Thompson, is a close personal friend of mine. We have always disagreed about nuclear weapons. She has stated publicly—this is why I am prepared to state it in the House—that one reason why she withdrew from the national CND and now confines herself to SCND was that she was so distressed by the extent to which sincere nuclear disarmers such as herself, who would never have dreamed of doing anything to favour the Soviet Union, had to fight off some senior communist sympathisers within the organisation who were trying to use it to those ends. Those are my views, but they are hers, too, and she would be happy to confirm them because she has stated them in public.

I will end as I began. A Security Service that does not have a counter-subversion capability is incomplete. In two successive years—I do not think that the Home Secretary was present when I pointed this out—we have had serious riots in the capital. On each occasion, the right hon. Gentleman has felt it necessary to bemoan the fact that those riots could not be contained as they should have been because of a lack of intelligence about what was going to happen.

We are not living in an age in which the police alone can hope to penetrate the electronic communications that are being used in encrypted form to organise such demonstrations. Therefore, I renew—possibly for the third year in a row—my plea to the Home Secretary to think again about the closing down of F branch and about the need for a counter-subversion arm to the Security Service, MI5.

4.44 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The money may or may not have come from Stalin's gold, but it is interesting that the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), with his decades of magnificent, or otherwise, obsession, seems to think that the definition of subversion would include a body that asks people to vote tactically in elections, including those in the New Forest. That same obsession runs him close to the danger of smearing all those who have been linked with CND.

The hon. Gentleman and I come from the same city of Swansea. Indeed, he claims that as a boy in a local school he sat at my feet when I gave a lecture. He is a most assiduous researcher, but even his researches have not discovered that, for a brief period when I was an undergraduate, I was press secretary of Swansea CND. Shortly after, I was recruited into the senior branch of the Foreign Service and I have a higher security classification than he has had. Therefore, he must be a little careful when he nears the boundary of smearing people who have taken a certain interest in nuclear disarmament. Along that road lies the investigator and matters about which any democrat would have to be very wary indeed.

The hon. Gentleman and I have one thing in common. I think that we are the only two hon. Members to have spoken who are not in the ring of secrecy—that charmed circle. The debate has been rather like a nostalgic goodbye party. We heard the excellent valedictory dispatch from the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and the helpful personal pilgrimages and observations of those who have served on the Intelligence and Security Committee.

I think that the right hon. Gentleman used the words "initial nervousness" to describe the attitude of some of those in the security establishment. I pay him this tribute: if one were devising an identikit CV for someone to chair that Committee, his background and the senior offices of state that he has held would offer the exact description of

someone who would soothe the anxieties of anyone who suffered that nervousness. He has prepared that Committee for what I hope will be a rather more relaxed future. He has served democracy extremely well as he, perhaps, glides along the Corridor to another existence.

The only discord was in the speech of the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude). I would dearly love to comment on and answer his obsession with Europe and the European army. I will not do so, save to say that he mentioned the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the Balkans after Milosevic, which was published this week. He was quoted yesterday as saying that the report was "an indictment" of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz). In a serious report of 190 paragraphs, it contained but two sentences on my hon. Friend in one paragraph. In that context, perhaps we may put the right hon. Gentleman's judgment in perspective.

I shall make one further comment before I come to the main part of my speech, which relates to the Foreign Affairs Committee. As the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) said in his excellent speech, the threat has changed. When I was being recruited for another organisation many years ago—as it was 40 years ago, this is probably outside the limits of the Official Secrets Acts—we were given an introductory lecture on security.

At that time, the lecturer would choose a text and sermonise on it. The text was something about the devil thine enemy roaming about seeking to devour whom he might find. The person giving us the lecture said that in one's first posting overseas, one would never know who the senior Soviet agent would be. He continued "In my first posting overseas, the senior Soviet agent was my head of chancery, Donald Maclean."

To show how times have changed, a couple of years ago I met General Klaus Naumann, who was then the senior European officer in NATO, who told me that following the founding Act, one member of the Russian group at NATO headquarters was caught involving himself in—let us call them—clandestine activities. General Naumann called the head of the Russian delegation to him and said, "That behaviour is quite unacceptable, but this is the material that your colleague was seeking. Do have leave to open it and see what it is."

Times have indeed changed, and the threat, as the hon. Member for East Hampshire mentioned, comes from various terrorist organisations, asymmetric warfare, such as that conducted by the hacker, and so on. It is a turbulent and multifaceted threat that our people face.

I shall now put on my hat as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and speak about our activities and our relationship with the security services. Although the Committee has found over the four years of this Parliament that the Government are co-operative with its inquiries—I pay great tribute not only to the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Office, but to diplomats overseas for the way that they have helped the Committee in its inquiries—there has been one notable area where that has not been the case.

Requests for evidence on intelligence matters have not been met forthrightly. The Committee is appointed under the Standing Orders of the House to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and any associated public bodies. The Secret Intelligence Service is an associated public body of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Foreign Affairs Committee has asserted its right to take evidence from the SIS when the circumstances warrant it and when such evidence is relevant to a specific inquiry being carried out within the Committee's remit. There have been a number of such inquiries, notably those in respect of Sierra Leone, weapons of mass destruction, and the Kosovo conflict and its aftermath.

Dr. Godman: May I remind my right hon. Friend that when he, as Chairman of the Committee, requested such meetings, those requests were supported by every member of the Committee, Tory, Liberal Democrat and Labour?

Mr. Anderson: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for that observation. We are indeed an all-party Committee. We have worked on a consensual basis and, save in respect of the Sierra Leone report, we have always produced unanimous reports. The quality of the reports that we produce can be affected by access or lack of access to intelligence material. Our focus can be misdirected if we do not have access to some of that material, so the effectiveness of the Committee's reports could be adversely affected.

For example, as part of the Committee's inquiry into Sierra Leone and the Sandline affair, we asked the Foreign Secretary for access to relevant intelligence reports and assessments. The request was refused on the basis that intelligence information was not normally released to Select Committees. We also sought to hold a private evidence session or, failing that, an informal meeting with the head of the Secret Intelligence Service. Both options were refused by the Foreign Secretary, who told us that the Intelligence and Security Committee was the appropriate Committee to examine the work of the SIS.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will my right hon. Friend tell us what he thinks is the highest level of security classification to which his Committee should have access?

Mr. Anderson: It is difficult to answer that without serious consideration. I should have thought that, at the very least, we should have access to the level marked "Secret". I remind my hon. Friend that members of the Committee that has been chaired so well by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater have a distinguished parliamentary past. Comparing person with person, we have on the Foreign Affairs Committee several individuals who have been Ministers in the Ministry of Defence, the Northern Ireland Office or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Person to person, I think that our background is at least as distinguished as that of the Intelligence and Security Committee. It is, therefore, rather sad that we are not considered trustworthy in this context. I may revise my view on the "Secret" classification, but I believe that we need all relevant information that is consistent with national security.

Mr. Tom King: I have considerable sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman's remarks, but the level of classification is not the point. There is no question about the integrity of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Of course, classification of information as secret depends on the issue that is involved. If a particular issue falls within the purview of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but is classed

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as top secret, it is likely that details can be provided by arrangement. As I understand it, however, the argument lies in the need to avoid overlap and to decide what is within the purview of each Committee, rather than in a need for absolute classification of the information that the right hon. Gentleman's Committee can receive. In the right circumstances, I would have thought that there would be no limit on such information.

Mr. Anderson: I am obliged to the right hon. Gentleman for providing a rather better answer than I did on the definitions that are at stake. Certainly, it is partly a question of trust. I am pleased that, as Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, he has broken down some of the aura of lack of trust. I hope that that will allow those involved to be a little more flexible in their relationship with Parliament.

There is not all that much overlap between the two Committees. Much of the recent Intelligence and Security Committee report deals with the future intelligence and security programme in terms of administrative matters such as the financing of the new headquarters and so on. There is no overlap between such work and that which is done by the Foreign Affairs Committee. Equally, on Sierra Leone, I understand that the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee focused on secret communications and on the fiasco that occurred, about which I shall not go into detail. That matter would not, of course, have been within the remit of the Foreign Affairs Committee. However, some information might have helped my Committee in another direction. Certainly, we would have been assisted by having access to the reports, or at least by being told that no reports were relevant to our work. That might have ensured that our report was more properly centred.

During the inquiry into Kosovo, my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, and I wrote to the Prime Minister asking to hear evidence from the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Chief of Defence Intelligence. The Prime Minister refused to allow the Joint Intelligence Committee to give evidence to either of our Committees. He was willing for the Chief of Defence Intelligence to appear only before the Defence Committee. Like the Foreign Secretary before him, he cited the Intelligence and Security Committee as the appropriate forum for hearing such evidence.

Paragraph 8 of the Intelligence and Security Committee's annual report for 1999-2000 states that the Committee

"examined the intelligence contribution to the Kosovo campaign, taking evidence from the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of Defence in their role as customers".

The report contains a series of unhelpful paragraphs that are filled with asterisks, such as paragraph 64 and those that immediately follow it, which relate to Kosovo. Paragraph 66 states:

"GCHQ provided a flexible and in-depth service of intelligence, including ***

***

***

It provided intelligence on ***

***

GCHQ monitored the situation *** and helped to provide reassurances that ***

***

***

GCHQ stated that some *** of the intelligence that went to UK customers was *** in origin."

That paragraph is not helpful.

Dr. Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) informed me before he left the Chamber that, in his inimitable fashion, he had totted up the asterisks. They totalled 720 in the main report and 4,005 in the annexes.

Mr. Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is as assiduous as ever.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Perhaps the matter is not as simple as it appears. The number of asterisks shows the level of the information that we received. They show that the Committee has access to information that perhaps Parliament did not realise it received.

Mr. Anderson: I am sure that that is true. However, it is also true that we were denied any of that information for our work on Kosovo. Access to it might have led us to modify or even abandon some of our conclusions. Information, to which we did not have access, was available to the Government. Perhaps we did not receive it because the Foreign Affairs Committee is not trusted in the same way as the Intelligence and Security Committee. We have always kept secure any information that we received from the Government, and there is therefore every reason to trust our Committee.

The Foreign Affairs Committee has stated its regret about the Government's refusal of its request for limited access to germane intelligence. I stress the words "limited" and "germane". We also stated that such obduracy had inhibited the Committee's work and was inimical to the Government's best interests. We emphasised that the Committee had a long history of receiving confidential and classified documents from the Foreign Office and that it had always handled them with the utmost discretion. I refer colleagues who want to follow up the references to that part of our report on Sierra Leone that considers the history of the relationship, and covers the Crown jewels, the Belgrano affair and other matters.

It is therefore regrettable that the Foreign Office does not regard the Foreign Affairs Committee as sufficiently trustworthy to have access to intelligence material or personnel. I concede that the attitude has modified, but only in a limited way. Proper scrutiny of Government sometimes requires access to such information.

One argument has been used to deny the Committee access to information for the Sierra Leone and Kosovo inquiries. The Government claim that the Intelligence and Security Committee is the only

"appropriate forum for oversight of the agencies by parliamentarians".

What is, therefore, the role of the Intelligence and Security Committee? The Foreign Affairs Committee welcomed its establishment; we respect its work,

its Chairman and its distinguished members. However, it is not an adequate substitute for the departmental Select Committees.

The Intelligence and Security Committee is appointed by the Executive, not the House; it reports to the Prime Minister, not the House; its secretariat is responsible to the Government, not to Parliament. The work programme that paragraph 8 of the Committee's latest report outlines shows little overlap with the work of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Lord Hurd was Foreign Secretary when the Intelligence Services Act 1994 received its Second Reading. He gave an assurance to the House that the Intelligence and Security Committee would not

"truncate in any way the existing responsibilities of existing Committees."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 1994; Vol. 238, c. 164.]

In my judgment, hon. Members should resist any attempt to renege on that commitment. The Foreign Affairs Committee, and other Select Committees, must have access to requisite intelligence and security information, and to officials in the intelligence services, when such access is germane to our inquiries.

Mr. Mates: The right hon. Gentleman has just made two remarks that should not go unchallenged. He mentioned the fear that Lord Hurd's undertaking would not be adhered to, implying that he was receiving less intelligence information than the Foreign Affairs Committee had received before the establishment of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I venture to suggest that the information is no less and no more: there was not any then, and there is not any now.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's second remark, can he really suggest with a straight face that the Executive and the Chief Whip had nothing to do with his appointment to the Committee?

Mr. Anderson: I have never had much contact with the Chief Whip, but I will say this in mitigation, if I may. As a member of the Select Committee on Liaison, I invite the hon. Gentleman to consult "Shifting the Balance" and subsequent reports. Those who chaired the Select Committees were unanimous in suggesting that if we were to perform our role as a legislature properly, the task of appointing Committee members should be transferred from the Whips to another body—a proposal that I gladly accepted.

Dr. Godman: The intervention of the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) was certainly blunt.

I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) and I were recommended to the Foreign Affairs Committee by the Chief Whip; that is a matter for conjecture. I remind my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), however, that our investigation of circumstances surrounding the Sierra Leone affair was sustained and complicated, and that we were not helped by the obduracy of the Foreign Office when we requested general information.

Mr. Anderson: Given the sturdy independence of members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, if we were all there at the Whips' behest the Whips seem to have done a pretty bad job, and their intelligence seems not to have been very well founded.

Traditionally, foreign affairs in the United Kingdom have been very much the domain of the Executive. Only rarely has the legislative body been allowed to intrude. The situation has become even more difficult lately, given the speed of communications, the potential for secrecy, and so forth. To some extent, that total dominance by the Executive changed with the appointment of Select Committees at the beginning of the 1980s, but we still have a long way to go in comparison with the United States. That is an obvious comparison, although I concede that the constitutional relationship between the Executive and branches of the legislature is different in the United States, and that that causes differences between our arrangements. However, the same can be said in respect of some of our European Union partners.

Some advances have been made in the current Parliament, but not enough. We could end up with reports that were not entirely in focus, which would be bad for the House and bad for democracy. Paragraph 92 of the Liaison Committee's last report, "Shifting the Balance", states:

"Parliamentary accountability of the intelligence and security services is a major issue, to we which plan to return".

We shall indeed return to it, fortified by what the right hon. Member for Bridgwater and his Committee have done in preparing such an excellent platform. This is not an ending point but a process, and that process has been helped by the right hon. Gentleman's work. It is certainly clear from the work of the Foreign Affairs Committee—on which I am delighted to serve, with my two colleagues who are present—that the current position is unsatisfactory, and I look forward to returning to the matter in the next Parliament if I, too, am re-elected.

5.9 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak because, as many Members have said, this may be our last debate before the general election and, with the retirement of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and others including my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), we have reached a watershed in the Committee's development.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) made several comments about the Committee and improvements that could be made, but I am sure he agrees that, since the Committee's inception in 1994, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, an incredible trust has been built up between parliamentarians on the Committee and the intelligence and security agencies. That trust would have been unimaginable 10 years ago.

I understand that the Director-General of the Security Service said at a conference recently that he cringed at some of the matters that he and the Security Service felt unable to share with members of the Committee when it was established. He paid tribute to the trust that has been achieved and the work of parliamentarians on the Committee in building up that trust, which has enabled the agencies to become more transparent and more open. That is the aim of the Committee and the agencies in this process.

It is particularly important that we maintain the move towards openness and transparency in this new era, especially because the agencies work in closer co-operation

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with law enforcement agencies on operational matters. As that relationship becomes closer, it is important that there is accountability and openness in it. Openness and transparency mean proper scrutiny not only by the Committee and the parliamentarians on it, but by Ministers.

The meetings—or lack of meetings—of the ministerial committee have been mentioned. At least the Government gave a commitment in their response to our report that an attempt would be made to make the committee meet annually and that it would meet shortly. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary can confirm that that remains the Government's ambition, because it also remains an important part of maintaining democratic oversight. We must maintain too public confidence and trust in our security agencies. People must feel that someone is making sure that the agencies are properly accountable.

These debates always provides an opportunity to pay tribute to the hard work, professionalism and enthusiasm of those who work in the agencies. They want a proper system of parliamentary oversight to be achieved, so that if they are suspected of any wrongdoing, they can prove that proper accountability and oversight are in place.

We rely on those who work in the agencies to protect us and to enter dangerous situations on our behalf. That is why it is only right that they receive recognition for the work that they do, and in that work they should also have proper employment rights. That is why the Committee emphasised in the 1999–2000 annual report the recommendation that those who work in the agencies should have

"a dedicated and specially cleared Employment Tribunal . . . to hear Agency staffs' cases . . . when they could not appear before a normal Employment Tribunal for national security reasons."

I am glad that the Department of Trade and Industry has now moved to make that a reality. It is a pity that it has taken so long because that sends the wrong message to the people who do a lot to protect us. However, let us hope that that provision can now be enforced quickly.

Scrutiny is also important for reasons relating to public resources and to the agencies' budgets. The single intelligence vote is about £900 million, which is a lot of money. Other right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the Committee's concerns about the new accommodation project at GCHQ. The Committee has played an important role in ensuring that such projects are accountable, and that there is proper reporting to Parliament—including the Prime Minister and other Ministers—through the Committee, about that issue. That is a huge project, and it is important to keep Parliament informed about it.

It is also important to ensure, in relation to the budgets and general working of the security and intelligence agencies, that the agencies' work does not overlap. The appointment and work of the efficiency adviser is important in that context. I hope that the Home Secretary will give us an assurance that efforts will continue to be made to ensure that there is no overlap between the work of the agencies, or between the work of the agencies and the law enforcement authorities. We are also considering whether increased joint working is possible. We need to ensure that there is no repetition of work undertaken by the agencies.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the work that the agencies undertake on tackling organised crime. As we said in the interim report, we took evidence from Keith Hellawell that showed greatly improved co-operation on that issue. That evidence also showed that the agencies were fully integrated into the Government's anti-drugs strategy, and that additional funds are now going into tackling the problem. I hope that the Home Secretary will reassure us that he is still considering whether more can be done to use the agencies to help in that work, and to help to tackle the disturbing new aspect of organised crime, mentioned by the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates), involving criminal gangs bringing illegal immigrants and so-called bogus asylum seekers into this country. The tragedy that can result from such activities was demonstrated by the deaths of the 65 Chinese people in June last year. We must see if there is more that we can do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) referred to the Official Secrets Acts—something that the new Committee should look at. In our interim report, we pointed out that the traditional threat of espionage from hostile foreign Governments has not receded, while other matters, such as cheque-book journalism, have increased. Disclosures are increasingly being made—sometimes anonymously—through media such as the internet with no obvious means of redress for the UK authorities. The injunctions taken out by the Government are civil matters and tend only to prevent disclosure in the UK. Obviously, this matter needs additional work and the new Committee must look at it closely.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater said that we might consider his chairmanship to have been intolerable. I would certainly disagree. I thank him and all members of the Committee who have helped and supported me since I joined it last year. One of my enduring memories of the right hon. Gentleman was of our recent visit to Russia, when we had a number of unusual meetings with people with whom, I suspect, he would not have expected a few years ago to be indulging in friendly conversation.

The Committee's visits to other countries, and our meetings with other parliamentary oversight committees to advise them on what has worked and what has not worked in this country, have been important. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Bridgwater on the way in which he led those visits, which have led to important links with other countries. I also wish to thank Alistair Corbett and his team for the help that they have given to the Committee and to me.

We have heard many arguments about turning the Committee into a Select Committee or whether it should remain as it is. Following the general election, there will be an opportunity, with the establishment of the new Committee, to review how it has worked so far. It will be important for the Prime Minister and the ministerial committee to draw on the expertise of those who have been on the Committee since its inception and of those senior members who may be retiring.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater wondered whether some of the Committee sittings could be held in public. This will be the time to discuss that, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will agree that we should review the system. The Committee should be re-established quickly and should continue to evolve

positively, to maintain the trust of the services and to operate in the effective way in which it has operated in the past.

5.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Although I am not a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee and am perhaps to bat last before the Front Benchers wind up, I hope that the House will be a little patient with me if I do not use quite the conversational tone that has characterised this very fine debate and trespass into some spheres that I think are germane to it.

First, however, as one who hopes to be a survivor and return after the general election, I should like to express my great respect for both the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I first knew of them from newspaper reports of by-elections. The right hon. Gentleman won one, whereas, initially, my hon. Friend was a casualty of one. They are distinguished parliamentarians. I hope to be able to say that, in a week or two, to other hon. Members, but I say it particularly to them. It has been an honour and a pleasure to serve in Parliament with them. I have learned a great deal from them and from other colleagues who may soon be leaving. I hope that they will have a resurrection in the tranquil waters of another place.

My next point might sound like a matter of levity, but I make it most seriously. There is both a light and a serious aspect to it. It has become almost a badge of office for my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench to be able to boast that, in years past, they were the subject of scrutiny by the security and intelligence services. I deeply regret that I was not so scrutinised. However, although it is amazing how people can become a part of the establishment, and things have moved on, those events are still within living memory. I remain to be persuaded that I can be confident that—among those who freelanced in our security and intelligence services 30-odd years ago—there is no residue of the contempt and arrogance that allowed them to dip into the private lives of people who posed no threat, but who are probably loyal and committed public servants with pride in their United Kingdom citizenship.

Therefore, although I am not a Committee member and accept that things have moved on—a process in which the Intelligence and Security Committee has been an important element—I am concerned that, within living memory, there has been a capacity for people to delve into the lives of students and, I believe, to try to undermine the Labour Government of 1966 to 1970. I have spoken at some length to Lady Castle about that matter and I know that she shares that view. Some very deep forces which were not unrelated to the security and intelligence services had a capacity to try to undermine that democratic Government.

I should like to make a point that touches on the way in which I approach Parliament. When some hon. Members were involved in the 1968 demonstrations, I was working and earning a crust. I did not go to university. I remember being summoned by the deputy clerk of Surrey county council, for which I worked. His summons was equivalent to a papal summons because, although I had worked there for three years, he had never spoken to me.

Basically, I was called in and asked to spy on the students at Guildford art school who were participating in a sit-in with students at Hornsey art school. I think that the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs might have been one of them. I am also told that the Home Secretary said that he was organising them. However, the serious point is that the establishment was making a concerted effort to deal with the students.

I was required to telephone students to entice them to reveal the names of the principal organisers of the sit-in. Although the request caused me great trauma, the next day, I went back and politely but firmly told the deputy clerk of Surrey county council that the answer was no. I deeply resented the request, but the incident has always been a lesson to me and served as an example when I have had to stand up to those who were trying to lean on me, both outside and inside this place.

We have dwelt for some time on the nature of the Committee itself. One Conservative speaker said that whether it was a Select Committee or a body appointed by the Executive was a distinction without a difference. I listened very carefully to both the right hon. Member for Bridgwater and the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on the subject. It might surprise them to learn that I am not too exercised by the matter, in that I understand their point, which was also made by my hon. Friends the Members for Workington and for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), that there is a dynamic—things are moving on—and we need to show some confidence.

I hope none the less that in the next Session the House will dwell on the fact that, human nature being what it is, Prime Ministers, no matter how fine, always feel the need to appoint someone who is not a maverick, a loose cannon, eccentric or bloody-minded—someone who is not, as one distinguished Prime Minister put it, neanderthal. If we could remove responsibility for that appointment from the Executive, it would be a healthy constitutional development.

Of course, we are all on Committees by patronage, perhaps from the Whips Office or party groups. Many of us want to minimise that patronage. Whatever mechanism we have for appointment, common sense must ultimately prevail. We must have confidence in our capacity, collectively, not to appoint those who are reckless and undisciplined, as distinct from those who are inquisitorial and determined to promote and protect the rights of Parliament without fear or favour.

We have a special responsibility because, almost uniquely among democratic legislatures, we neither sanction nor even retrospectively authorise the commitment of our armed forces abroad. I think that that is a deficiency in our constitution. I know that that is a minority view, so I shall not labour the point, but as we do not have such parliamentary endorsement—the equivalent of the United States War Powers Act or similar legislation that, as I understand from parliamentary answers, applies throughout NATO—we have an especial responsibility to be confident that we do not have arbitrary government and that there is proper prudence in our foreign and defence policy. This must not be the end of the tale: it must be the beginning of trying to promote parliamentary scrutiny in this field, as in many others.

Mr. Tom King: We have had a mini-debate about the Liaison Committee report, in which the Intelligence and

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Security Committee was mentioned. The hon. Gentleman has made the point well that the issue of patronage and who is appointed to Committees is not confined to the Intelligence and Security Committee but applies to all Select Committees. That issue needs to be tackled. The more I listen to the debate, the more I understand that there is a compromise over our Committee. I do not want to be unkind to the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but he provides an instance of paralysis. He kept asking for things and being told that he could not have them. The Committee was supposed to be all-powerful in sending for persons and papers, but it did not get any.

Our success, if I may be allowed to claim it, is that we get all the material. One could say that we get it by virtue of a different structure, but it is a measure of confidence in who is on the Committee. We are getting over the problem. The awkward squad often attracts Back-Bench support, and there are Conservative as well as Labour Members whose appointment to the Foreign Affairs or the Intelligence and Security Committee I would not recommend. There needs to be some control there.

Mr. Mackinlay: I do not, I think, demur in principle from anything that the right hon. Gentleman has said, but his intervention invites me to amplify my remarks. Clearly, the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs has broken new ground during this Parliament, to the intense irritation—there is no point in disguising it—of both the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

We have not succeeded in everything, but I think that what we have done has been well worth while, and I do not regret it. Probably one of my proudest moments in the House was securing the continued investigation of our involvement in Sierra Leone, despite repeated attempts—both direct and, I have to say, indirect—by the executive branch of Government to close down that inquiry. One day I shall write about it, because there is more to come out—*[Interruption.]* I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase), who is the Foreign Secretary's Parliamentary Private Secretary, not only that there is more to come out, but that one day it will come out. I hope that he will not provoke me, because what might follow would probably not be the most prudent thing I have done in my life. We pursued that matter, and the test will be what happens when our applications to be reappointed are submitted. It will be interesting to find out how they are treated. We shall see.

I was talking about the Official Secrets Acts, and how I have probed the Home Secretary during this Parliament about how our existing legislation can be squared with our obligations under human rights legislation. I am referring in particular to the fact that, as I understand it, we do not have a defence in law whereby a person who has disclosed information can argue that it was done in the wider public interest.

In a sense, that is where the French courts were superior. I hold no brief for the man who absconded to Paris—Mr. Shayler—but the French courts said, in effect, that the English legislation was flawed because he could not advance the defence of a wider public interest. We should remedy that, because the public interest should be an important test.

Something that has surprised me about the Home Office over this Parliament is that when Ministers ask the advice of their lawyers, the lawyers seem to be consistently wrong. Ministers then have to eat their words, and I say, "I told you so", but no one gives me a badge for merit.

One example concerns the electoral franchise for the people of Gibraltar. The lawyers are consistently wrong. The Home Secretary ought to look into the deficiencies of the Official Secrets Acts and, early in the next Parliament, seek to remedy them in the context of human rights and the capacity to advance a defence in line with our European obligations and our obligations to justice.

In an intervention I asked a question to which I do not know the answer; it has not been answered in this debate. I mentioned my misgivings about how to draw the fine line between people or organisations that clearly pose a threat to the security of the state and prejudice the whole existence of the United Kingdom and its sovereignty, and people involved in industrial or economic disputes. We might find either or both sides in such disputes abhorrent, repugnant, irresponsible, or disloyal; nevertheless, as democrats, surely we are prepared to take those disputes on the chin time and time again, because the wider interests of democracy are paramount.

We know that the security services have been used over the decades—I guess that they are still being used in this decade—in connection with trade union leaders, industrial disputes and so on. From what we can ascertain, there was some activity concerning the people who stopped the movement of essential fuel last autumn. Clearly, I do not identify with those people; I think that they were grossly irresponsible and had a hidden political agenda. None the less, in a democracy, we should strain to the very limits to allow such things to happen, without using the machinery of the state to subvert what we might find an unpalatable stance.

Mr. Barron: My hon. Friend mentioned the fuel protest. What bothers me is that that consisted primarily of people protesting against the level of taxes on fuel. I thought that tax and spending were matters for the ballot box and the general election. If those people managed, as they nearly did, to shut the economy down for a time, could they not equally decide to do so because they thought, for example, that nobody with blue eyes should live in this country? Would we not then be moving towards a different type of democracy—or rather, a dictatorship, which is something that people in this country have fought against for many centuries, and given their lives in that fight?

Mr. Mackinlay: My hon. Friend did not listen to me sufficiently closely. Perhaps I was expressing myself inadequately. Of course, I hold no brief for those people and deprecate their actions. However, his words are almost exactly the same as those uttered by the Opposition on other disputes.

Mr. Straw: Does that make it wrong?

Mr. Mackinlay: I am posing a question and trying to demonstrate to the House that there is a difficult line that we should be cautious about crossing. I do not want to make any point but that; we should be extra vigilant because of the dangers of a slippery slope concerning our liberties.

I was interested in paragraph 85 of the annual report, the content of which features in other documents. The Committee identifies considerable work on combating organised crime, and there is common ground between it, the Government and other hon. Members on the need to combat smuggling, bootlegging and especially the terrible trade—which, I fear, will increase—in trying to smuggle human beings into the United Kingdom, which is surrounded by tragedy and wickedness.

On a minor point, I hope that the Home Secretary will keep an open mind when his colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions conduct their inquiry into the future policing of our ports. I hope that he will consider that there is a powerful case for having a dedicated police force in our ports, as many other countries do. It should complement, not be used instead of, the immigration and nationality directorate of the Home Office, the secret branch in our ports and Customs and Excise.

Not having such a force is a flaw; there should be a dedicated force like the British Transport police in all our ports, and the cost should be borne by a small top-slicing of port fees. It would greatly assist the primary agencies that combat organised crime, illegal smuggling, bootlegging and so on. I invite my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to look at the port of Tilbury, Dover harbour, Felixstowe and Teesside, where police are taking such action. Comparable forces do not exist in many other British ports; the ports that Canada polices are a particularly good model.

I have a constituency interest in our debate. My constituent Michael John Smith is serving 20 years in prison for breaching the Official Secrets Act. I hold no brief for him; I visited him once and he has never disguised his offences from me. He disclosed secrets, which the courts found were of extreme importance to the United Kingdom. Some of his trial was held in camera, and I believe that some evidence was not disclosed to the defence. I do not want to trespass on that today, other than to say that he was largely found guilty on the evidence of a defector, Victor Oschenko, who featured in "The Mitrokhin Archive" and is well known.

When the Home Secretary makes his wind-up speech, will he give us some assurance about how we treat the evidence of defectors, many of whom are brave people? I do not take that away from them, but if one is on the other side one does not look on them as brave. Indeed, when the defection is in the other direction, we do not look on people who defect from us as brave. Arguably, defectors have a vested interest in exaggerating the importance of the information that they can impart. Again, that is human nature. I am concerned that there are probably not sufficient guidelines, nor is there a sufficient review of the evidence and information volunteered by people who want to defect or have defected. I am nervous about how we handle that.

Finally, I shall refer to another constituency matter. On 31 October, I raised in Westminster Hall the case of my constituent John Redgrave, a senior Metropolitan police officer who was involved in Operation Nightshade. That operation had three elements—a planned cocaine shipment from Venezuela, money laundering and an illegal arms deal using Sierra Leone as a trans-shipment point. John Redgrave was the principal police officer investigating these criminal operations. He headed up a multi-disciplinary team, including the Houston branch of United States Customs, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Branch of the US Treasury Department.

A man from a Texan gang, Roger Crooks, who runs the Mama Yoko hotel in Freetown, Sierra Leone, had approached people in the United Kingdom about supplying weapons, including M16 assault rifles, grenade and rocket launchers, plastic explosives, mines and ammunition.

During the operation, there was considerable liaison between the Metropolitan police and their United States counterparts. Then things went terribly wrong. Despite the fact that Roger Crooks was at one stage expelled by the Government of Sierra Leone for arms trafficking—their official website says that it was for trying to smuggle arms to and from Northern Ireland—he has somehow been rehabilitated. Operation Nightshade was closed. My constituent was suspended; when he came up before a stipendiary magistrate, all charges against him were dismissed. He has been on suspension for three or four years without any reconciliation of his position.

I think that my constituent got in the way of a wider security operation. I do not know the detailed circumstances of Roger Crooks, the Mama Yoko hotel and the attempt to bring weapons from Sierra Leone to the United Kingdom. However, my constituent is in limbo. That is wholly unsatisfactory; no matter how difficult the circumstances, people should not be treated in this way. There has been no resolution of his case, unless it has happened in the past few days. If so, my right hon. Friend might know about it.

The few disciplinary matters outstanding have not been resolved, through no fault of my constituent but because of the inability either of people whose names and organisations I know not or the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to deal with this case. I am sorry to have to raise it on the Floor of the House, but I have not imparted anything that was not disclosed in Westminster Hall. There is a bit of a hum about this and I hope that it will be looked into.

I am sorry to have delayed the House on a number of issues but I hope that I may have opened up one or two that were not directly featured in the report of the Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater. As I said earlier, although I have not known him intimately in the House, I have always respected him as a parliamentarian and held him in very high regard.

5.48 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): This has been a good debate. Quite rightly, most of the contributions have come from members of the Intelligence and Security Committee. There have been three exceptions to that general rule. The right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) reminded the House that there remained an important role for departmental Select Committees in scrutinising the work of the security and intelligence agencies. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) and my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) seemed, between them, to be auditioning for the soon-to-be-vacant role of the awkward member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. Which of them will have done most to impress whoever is in a position to make such appointments, I will not risk guessing.

Everyone who has spoken has paid tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and of my right hon. Friend the Member for

[Mr. David Lidington]

Bridgwater (Mr. King), the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I start by doing the same, although I am conscious at this stage of the evening that it must seem at times to both of them, especially when listening to the hon. Member for Thurrock expressing hopes for their future resurrection, that they have been granted the exceptional privilege of attending their own memorial services, without the trouble of crossing the road to St. Margaret's.

The hon. Member for Workington has shown all hon. Members, but especially those more junior in service than him, what can be achieved by way of persistence, awkwardness and a determination to insist on answers to questions, even when those answers are being resisted by a Government of whatever party happens to be in office.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater has brought to his chairmanship of the Intelligence and Security Committee his experience of serving as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and as Secretary of State for Defence. In both offices, he learned a great deal about the work of the agencies that we are debating and about the real, pressing and permanent nature of the terrorist threats which those agencies devote a great deal of their time and energy to resisting.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) summed up the work of the Committee by saying that he had worked happily but very well. The fact that that description can be applied is in large measure due to the skilful chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater. It is in large measure due to his leadership that the Committee has, from an untried beginning, earned itself within a few years a formidable reputation within the House and a reputation for persistence and trustworthiness among the senior members of the agencies whose work it scrutinises. The House has every right to be proud of and grateful for the work that both my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Workington have undertaken during their time on the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Tribute has also rightly been paid to the members of the various security and intelligence agencies. The security of our country and its citizens depends in no small part on their vigilance and professionalism, and we are all in their debt.

The debate has ranged widely over the contents of the reports from the Intelligence and Security Committee. I shall confine my remarks to three or four matters. I hope that the Home Secretary may be able to provide some answers to questions raised not only by me but by other hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon.

The first matter is recruitment and retention of staff. Getting the right calibre of officers is clearly essential if we are to have agencies of the quality and professionalism that we have come to expect. The hon. Member for Workington spoke encouragingly about what he had seen and learned of recruitment efforts in our universities. In paragraph 27 of its 1999–2000 report, the Committee reported that although the agencies were able to recruit staff for their mainstream work, they were experiencing difficulties in the recruitment of specialist staff such as IT and electronics specialists. The Security Service reported that it was experiencing problems retaining officers after they had served for about three or four years.

That is worrying, especially given what the Foreign Secretary said in his opening speech, and what my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said later. They both referred to the way in which electronic communications are becoming ever more important in intelligence and counter-intelligence work. The Foreign Secretary referred to the exponential growth of e-mail traffic, and to the threats to this country's interests that could be posed by a computer-based attack on them. I hope that the Home Secretary, therefore, will be able to give the House some assurance that the difficulties identified in the Committee's early report are being addressed, and that the agencies are now managing to recruit and retain the specialist staff that they need.

Secondly, I want to refer to the agencies' expenditure programmes. The hon. Member for Workington commented trenchantly on the importance of the National Audit Office in supporting the Committee's work. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's comments about the new accommodation project at GCHQ, and the news of the appointment of Sir Edmund Burton as a non-executive director. However, I hope that the Government will take account of the strictures levelled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater at the quality of the financial management and accountability in the agencies.

Like other hon. Members who have spoken, I question the Government's reluctance to disclose to the Committee figures for individual agency budgets. The Committee notes in its report that the only criteria for non-disclosure would be the risk of compromising national security or prejudicing the continued discharge of the agencies' functions.

I accept that it is clear that there must come a point at which the detailed disclosure of finances would let in too much light on the operation capability of the service concerned. However, I hope that the Government will at least reflect on the comments made by members of the Intelligence and Security Committee of all parties, and consider whether it is safe to let in a little more light than previous Governments, including Conservative Governments, were willing to let in. I also hope very much that the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary will be able to persuade the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to reconsider his reluctance to give evidence in person to the Committee.

That leads me to the broader question of the accountability of the security and intelligence agencies. The balance is incredibly difficult to get right. In the end, I believe that Parliament must trust the Ministers appointed to take responsibility and be held accountable for work that must, by its very nature, remain secret. The key and overriding priorities must be to protect the integrity of secret intelligence work that is vital to the defence of this country and its interests, and to protect the lives and safety of those who serve in the field as agents on behalf of those services.

There has been quite a lot of discussion this afternoon of the tribunal system set up under the previous Conservative Government and continued by the present Administration. I welcome the way in which the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 has simplified the structure by creating a single investigatory tribunal and getting rid of the some of the duplication that would otherwise have complicated matters. However, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) asked whether the tribunal had the capacity to process the

complaints that are brought before it, saying that, for much of 2000, the tribunal did not have enough staff in the right place even to open the post regularly and at the right time. I hope that the Home Secretary can state how much progress has been made since the Committee first reported its concerns.

The debate has also covered the question of possible disclosure to the Committee of confidential annexes to the commissioners' reports to the Prime Minister. I understand the arguments advanced by members of the Committee that they need access to those annexes to judge whether the tribunals and the agencies have responded properly and in full to complaints that may have been justified. However, as I said in respect of finances, at the end of the day Parliament has no option but to trust the judgment of Ministers. None the less, I hope that Ministers will keep the issue of further disclosure under close review. As members of the Committee have said, the Committee has built up over the years a relationship of trust between its members, members of the agencies and—I hope—the Ministers to whom the agencies are accountable. The extent of disclosure is a matter that any sensible Government would review from time to time.

Certain matters are more directly relevant to the Home Secretary's sphere of responsibility as the Minister to whom the Security Service regularly reports. Organised crime and the role of the intelligence and security services in combating it are themes that have run though the debate and featured in speeches made by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. In his introduction to the 1999-2000 report, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater cited the opportunities given to international serious organised crime as

"one particularly unwelcome consequence of the end of the Cold War",

and added:

"In the face of the volume of traffic entering this country the chances of preventing criminal activities are not good. The briefest study of Heathrow or Dover reveals immediately how fragile our present defences are, and without intelligence they would be virtually non-existent."

My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire and the hon. Members for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) and for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) all alluded to the challenge presented by organised crime.

The Security Service website states that, in 1998–99, about 7 per cent. of Security Service expenditure went on operations against what was described as "serious crime". The definition of that excludes terrorism, which forms a separate heading. Is the Home Secretary able to tell the House whether that percentage has increased since those figures were reported, and if so, by how much; and what plans there are to enlarge further the resources and effort directed against organised crime by the Security Service and other agencies? That too is an issue on which there was consensus among hon. Members on both sides. The Government have said that they look to increasing the efforts made against organised crime by the agencies. I hope that the Home Secretary can give us a little more detail.

The hon. Member for Doncaster, Central pointed out the need to secure better co-ordination between the work of different agencies that are engaged in combating organised crime. The Committee's report refers to evidence that it took from Customs and Excise and the Security Service about tobacco smuggling. It also commented on the role that the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the National Crime Squad are playing in helping to lead the work to combat the international traffic in human beings.

The Home Secretary could answer one question. The Committee recommended in its earlier report that both NCIS and Customs should be given a place among the members of the Joint Intelligence Committee. I was not clear from looking at the Government's response to the report whether that has happened. It would be helpful to have an answer if possible.

One aspect of organised crime that has drawn the attention of both the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Home Affairs Committee in the past 12 months has been the organised trafficking in human beings. The Home Secretary and I have been known to disagree on immigration and asylum policy, but there is agreement across the Chamber about the need for resolute action to deal with the ruthless trafficking in human beings, the consequences of which we saw in the most stark and tragic form in the deaths of 58 young Chinese men and women in the back of a truck in Dover last year.

At paragraph 90 on page 32 of the Intelligence and Security Committee's report for 1999–2000, it expressed its concern about

"the scale of illegal immigration into the UK."

It reported that the Joint Intelligence Committee had taken a paper on the issue in June last year. The Intelligence and Security Committee then stated:

"GCHQ and the Security Service have also produced intelligence on this topic, but accept that they could do more."

I hope that Ministers will be able to assure the House that that comment has been heard and that greater efforts are being undertaken to combat this particularly cruel traffic in human beings.

This debate has been characterised by a seriousness of purpose and sense of agreement on the basics on both sides of the House. I started by paying tribute to the retiring members of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I conclude by paying tribute to the men and women who work in our security and intelligence services. When I have spoken to former Ministers from Conservative and Labour Governments who have had responsibility for dealing with the security and intelligence agencies, they have all said how impressed they have been by the courage, patriotism, professionalism and sheer commitment and hard work of those men and women, who go about their duties in secret on behalf of us all. Those of us who are outside the circle of secrecy have to rely on the occasional glimpse through the veil. Perhaps the best tribute that we can pay is simply to place on the record our acknowledgement that the constituents of every hon. Member can go about their lives today more peacefully and securely because of the work that members of those agencies do.

6.10 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): As the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said, this has been a good debate. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said in his opening remarks that such debates were traditionally bipartisan, but given the electoral timetable, he wondered whether

[Mr. Jack Straw]

that would be tested to destruction. It almost fell over with the first speech from the Opposition Front Bench, that of the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), to whose remarks I shall return in due course.

There have been one or two discordant voices, and rightly so, but the debate has been of a high standard. It has served to illustrate the great effectiveness of the Intelligence and Security Committee in holding Ministers, particularly my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and myself, and the Government to account for their stewardship of the intelligence and security services.

My right hon. Friend began by paying tribute to members of the Intelligence and Security Committee who are leaving the House, and I shall do the same. Two members who are leaving, my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers), have not been able to be present today for the debate, for reasons that we all understand. However, I know from the assiduous way in which they have attended the Committee, and the even more assiduous questions that they have put to me and to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, that they have made an important contribution to the work of the Committee and will be greatly missed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) entered the House, in the end, at the same time as I did, after three tries, two in Darwen, the adjoining constituency to mine, in February and October 1974, and then at a famous by-election, when Fred Peart went to the other place to become Leader of the House of Lords. I first got to know my hon. Friend the Member for Workington—he may not remember it, but I do—as Barbara Castle's bag carrier at a meeting in Darwen at which he was speaking before the October 1974 election. I admired him then and I have admired him ever since. Over the period in which we have been in the House together, we have become firm friends.

My hon. Friend has done a huge amount not only to maintain but to enhance the reputation of the House, at a time when there have been many assaults on its reputation from inside the House as well as outside. He made his own decision to be a parliamentarian, rather than to seek office, and very effective he has been. When the history of the period comes to be written, he will feature in more than footnotes, whereas many others who served in government will scarcely appear even in footnotes. I place on record my great thanks and the tribute of us all to him for his work across the House, and not least in the Intelligence and Security Committee.

My hon. Friend will go to his grave as a member of the awkward squad, and quite right, too. The House cannot operate if it is simply full of self-congratulatory toadies. He would not be a member of any such club. His characteristic criticism, combined with good judgment, makes him such a good Member.

The last of the four who are leaving is the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). Many tributes have been paid to him and I underline them all. There are other records for which he will be known. I had to look twice in the reference books to refresh my memory. He must be one of the few hon. Members in the past century to have served as Secretary of State in three Departments within 10 months, as he did in 1983. Between January and June that year, he was Secretary of State for the Environment; between June and October, he was Secretary of State for Transport; and between October and some time in 1985, he was Secretary of State for Employment. No doubt that was a shock to him, if not to his Departments. He then served with distinction as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Secretary of State for Defence. He has been the mainstay of the Intelligence and Security Committee, although I have no idea whether he has been a difficult Chairman. He has never been difficult with me, only firm and inquiring. Long may that tradition continue. We wish him well whatever he does and wherever he goes, although a few of us might lay some bets about that.

The fundamental work of the Committee is a theme that has run through the whole debate. Its role is to hold the agencies and the Ministers who are responsible for them properly to account for what they do. The Committee ensures a degree of accountability in the most difficult areas of Government. Of course, they are so difficult because the matters with which they deal are secret by definition.

It is interesting to reflect on just how far we have moved in this country in 17 short years. Before the Interception of Communications Act 1985 took effect, none of the work of the intelligence or security agencies was done on a statutory basis. Indeed, the existence of most of their work was denied. Officially, they did not exist and no one owned up to working for them. All their work was done on the basis of directives such as the Maxwell-Fyfe directive and of the royal prerogative. Since that time, however, Parliament has introduced the Interception of Communications Act 1985, the Security Service Act 1989 and the Intelligence Services Act 1994. Much of that legislation was driven by the fact that the way in which the agencies were operating—as opposed to what they were doing—was increasingly inconsistent with our obligations under the European convention on human rights.

At each stage, people in the agencies, as well as Ministers and Members of Parliament, were extremely worried that steps towards greater accountability would reduce the agencies' efficiency and effectiveness. The great thing is that those fears, which were understandable at the time, have turned out to be entirely misplaced. In my judgment, the agencies have become more effective and efficient as they have become more accountable.

There is a twofold reason for that. The oversight systems that have been established have better ensured that the agencies and their staff stick to their task. In any field of government, people can distort the purpose for which they are employed, but that is especially true with regard to law enforcement. It is true of the police service, the customs, the immigration service and the agencies, as they use the coercive power of the state. Indeed, they often do so covertly.

That work gave rise to suspicions, some of which were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). I have no doubt that some of those suspicions were well founded, but I believe that many of them were unfounded. There is no doubt that public confidence in the work of the agencies was undermined, whether they were performing tasks set clearly by the House and by Ministers or following an agenda of their own. We now have a much greater degree of certainty

about the integrity of the staff, their professionalism and the degree to which they are following a programme laid down by Ministers and, in turn, by this House.

When we are dealing with parliamentary accountability, there are moments when the rights and interests of Parliament run directly counter to those of the Minister who is being held accountable. In acute circumstances, that can lead to the resignation of the Minister concerned—and quite right too. However, I believe that I speak on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary as well as myself when I say that our increasing accountability to the Committee and thus to Parliament has directly helped our role of not only holding the agencies to account, but ensuring that their work takes a more effective direction.

I could give many examples. The most obvious is that the list of questions that I am likely to be asked by the Intelligence and Security Committee triggers thoughts in my mind. All Ministers are busy; we cannot ask every question. When others raise issues, especially on the basis of greater expertise, it helps our work. The Home Office intelligence and security liaison unit and the terrorism and protection unit work with the agencies. They acknowledge the importance of the ISC's work in enhancing their supervisory role of the agencies.

Debate continues about whether the ISC should be a Select Committee. The Prime Minister expressed the Government's view this time last year. There is much to be said on both sides; I personally see the argument from both sides. If it became a Select Committee, it would be a rose by another name. It would also show that it belonged to Parliament rather than to the Prime Minister of the day. Perhaps we will move towards that in the next decade. However, it must be done on a step-by-step basis.

I stress to the sceptics, and there were many in 1993 and 1994 when the House considered the formation of the Committee, that the ISC has done work that is at least as good as that of any Select Committee. I do not disparage the work of Select Committees by saying that. I have witnessed the work of the Select Committee on Home Affairs under two Chairs. They and their members have been independent-minded and held me to account. They have done it differently from the ISC because the work for which I am answerable to them is overt rather than covert.

In practice, the ISC has been able to drill deeper, even though its proceedings are secret. It has been able to go into more detail and develop greater expertise. However, I stress to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) that the way in which the members of the ISC and members of Select Committees are chosen is no different. Although we could go for secret ballots, tossing coins and drawing names out of a hat, as long as our democracy is based on parties, they are bound to take a view about the membership of the Committees.

It is evident that not only toadies need apply to become members of Select Committees. I say as a compliment to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock that if that were the case, he would never serve on any Select Committee. That applies to a long list of my hon. Friends and to many Conservative Members. We are all members of political parties, which are the bedrock of parliamentary government.

I want to deal briefly with some of the points that were raised. The hon. Member for Aylesbury asked about recruitment and retention. Eighty-nine IT specialists were recruited at GCHQ this year against a target of 95. That is not bad in a highly competitive market. A lot of effort is put into recruitment and retention. I stress to the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, my hon. Friends the Members for Workington, for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) and for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have put in a lot of effort with the heads of the agencies to ensure that they improve the performance of their recruitment systems, examine individuals' background more closely and make sure there is better psychological profiling.

Crises or disruptions in people's personal lives occur in any organisation; the agencies cannot be immune from that. Such disruptions can contribute to or cause relationship problems in the office. We want to ensure that people are given better counselling and support than they received in the past and are not simply left. That applies to the staff not only of the agencies, but of Departments.

Direct access to employment tribunals for people with grievances relating to employment problems is important. Both my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I regret the delay in enforcement of the regulations. We are grateful for the work done by the Committee, and for the knowledge that the debate was impending: it concentrated people's minds.

Members have raised the issue of finance. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater asked whether there should be more qualified people running the agencies' finances. That gives rise to an interesting debate which, as the right hon. Gentleman said, is not confined to the subject of the agencies.

There is a point at which people in every organisation must decide whether there should be subject specialists in Departments, or whether there should be a crossover involving people with more general expertise that is relevant to the way in which the organisation is run. There is currently a great debate in private industry—in the PLCs—about whether finance directors should end up running organisations, and about the point at which taking an interest in the organisation and having expertise in financial matters should cross over into more general skills. I do not think that there is any one answer, but I know that it is important to have proper systems of control, while also making use of qualified people.

Mr. Tom King: I hope the Home Secretary will allow me to say something about what might be described as a hobby horse of mine. People who may have had experience in a number of parts of an agency or department may never have been involved in finance. They may suddenly be promoted to the job of principal finance officer, although they have no expertise in that field. Not many companies could be found in this country that would entrust their funds to a financial director who had no financial qualifications.

Mr. Straw: That is a fair point.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury mentioned the risk of information being given to the Intelligence and Security Committee. He cannot have known this, but we give the ISC full information about the balance of expenditure not only between but within agencies. The issue has been whether the information should be provided publicly. My right hon. Friend and I are at one, in that we understand the argument for having a snapshot of only one year, but do not consider it to be sustainable.

[Mr. Straw]

Questions were raised about organised crime, NCIS and Customs and Excise. NCIS and Customs and Excise attend occasional meetings of the Joint Intelligence Committee, but are not full members of it. An increasing amount of the effort of agencies—not just the Security Service, under its specific powers, but the Secret Intelligence Service and GCHQ—is devoted to dealing with organised crime, and a great deal of effort goes into improving co-ordination of work across agencies. I see, directly, the work of the Security Service, the National Crime Squad and NCIS in dealing with organised crime, as well as that of the Met. Although there was a fair amount of suspicion initially, as often happens with law enforcement services, it is gradually being broken down, and the organisations involved are learning from each other.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) suggested that the Security Service should concentrate more on subversion. He implied that the problems that we experienced with two successive riots in the City could be blamed on a decline in the size of F5.

As is well known, there was a time when much of the effort of the Security Service was spent on investigating potential subversion in this country. That was the case throughout the cold war, and for as long as there were suspicions that many people might be fellow travellers and potential traitors. It goes back to the concerns of the Attlee Government after the war about the lack of vetting. Information gradually emerged about the extent to which various secret organs of the state had been infiltrated by the Communist party. As the cold war wound down, that was bound to change.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that if he thinks about what those organisations were doing, he will realise that they were mainly concerned with bodies such as the Communist party and those who might spy for the Soviet bloc. They had some involvement in industrial trade unions, but, for a similar reason, they were little concerned with general mayhem on the streets. One could think of plenty of examples of potentially violent and, in some cases, very violent demonstrations in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, including the poll tax riots, that occurred when there was a high level of activity by F5. Palpably, that activity did not prevent those demonstrations, because, even with the best intelligence in the world, one cannot prevent them. Furthermore, that is not what the organisation was there for.

The hon. Gentleman also slightly glossed over the situation as to those riots. There were serious lessons to be learned from the 1999 riots, and most were learned by the time of last year's May day riot. Yes, that riot occurred and damage was done, but it was controlled to a high degree by the Metropolitan police. I pay tribute to it for its direction.

Dr. Julian Lewis *rose—*

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I want to close my remarks.

Members of the Intelligence and Security Committee are concerned that staff of the agencies may sometimes think that they are mentioned only when their work is being criticised. Any member of staff who has listened to the totality of the debate will recognise that any criticism has been made with affection and support for the organisation. Across the Chamber, every Member who spoke expressed high regard for what staff do, and that is entirely right.

One of the great delights of my four years as Home Secretary has been getting to know what necessarily secret organisations and people who cannot name or laud themselves do and witnessing their commitment, professionalism and esprit de corps. I have to add that they also show a great deal of personal courage. In thanking members of the Committee for their work and in paying tribute to the outgoing members, in particular the Chairman, I know that I express, on behalf of the whole House, our great debt of gratitude to the agencies and their staff.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Ravenhead Glass

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

6.33 pm

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an important issue on behalf of many of my constituents. I should inform the House that Ravenhead Glass, which went out of business three weeks ago, has a long history in St. Helens—it has had a factory there for more than 150 years. In its heyday, it employed more than 5,000 people, but when it closed two weeks ago, it employed 200.

Many of those people, after 30 years' service, would normally have expected gold watches, enhanced redundancy payments or even good pensions. Most of the staff are aged over 50 and, as I have said, most have more than 30 years' service with the company. Three weeks ago they were made redundant and were told that they would receive only statutory redundancy pay, and that they would have their pensions reduced by about 20 per cent., as the pension scheme contained a £5 million black hole.

These workers are not numbers; they are people. An example is Mr. Dave Rotherham, who contacted me recently. He had worked in the plant for 30 years, and his father had worked there for 50 years. His life has been turned upside down in recent weeks. He has lost his job, he has no enhanced redundancy payments, and he faces a family crisis and a bleak future. That is after 30 years' hard work for the same company.

The Ravenhead company is owned by a parent company, Durabor, which is owned by the Belgian regional government. Ravenhead went into administration in November 1999. It had massive debts and an undervalued pension scheme. The Ravenhead plant at St. Helens is one of only two glass manufacturing plants in the UK. The other is in Chesterfield and is also, by coincidence, in receivership. It is quite possible, therefore, that within a few weeks Britain will have no glassware industry at all. That will be the end of another British industry. It will be lost for ever, thanks to the current problems that the industry is experiencing.

The Department of Trade and Industry has been very helpful with the recent problems that we have had, and I would like to pay tribute to Ministers and officials for all the help that they have given me. From day one, when we were trying to find a new buyer, they gave us every assistance with advice, and financial and moral support. I cannot criticise the effort made by the Department, and I would like my hon. Friend the Minister to pass on my thanks to his staff, especially those in the north-west office, for all their help.

The workers have now lost their jobs—some after 30 years—and they want to know why. I am having great difficulty understanding why the company got itself into such a mess. Many of the workers believe that responsibility lies with the management of the company. They want to know why the factory closed, why their pension scheme was so underfunded, and why Durabor forced the St. Helens factory to sell glass at well below cost price. Those people believe that forcing the company to do that led to the closure of the factory in St. Helens.

A large stock of surplus glass in the Ravenhead factory warehouses is now up for purchase as a result of the closure. Rumour has it that Durabor is in open discussion with a company based in America called Libby's, which is about to buy up those stocks. If it does so, it will buy them at very low cost, and be able to sell them at a fat profit. The workers at the plant believe that a deal has been struck between the American company and Durabor to gobble up the whole of the British and Belgian markets.

Following the closure of Ravenhead in St. Helens and Delmar in Chesterfield, there will be no glass producers in Britain. If the American giant were to take over the company, it would have complete control of the Belgian and UK markets. It would then be able to increase prices over a period of time and have a very healthy business. I believe that there is a case for investigating whether any anti-competitive practices have been carried out by that company, and I would welcome any such investigation.

My constituents who worked at Ravenhead have been told that there is a £5 million gap in their pension fund. Many of them worked there for 30 or more years. The company took a contributions holiday back in 1998. When the scheme was revalued in 1999, a deficit was found. It was agreed that the company would increase the payments over a number of years to make good that shortfall. Obviously, that will no longer happen now that the company has gone out of business, and the company pensioners have been left with a pension scheme that does not meet the requirements needed to maintain their pension levels. They want to know why the trustees and the company decided to take a contributions holiday and why the scheme went into deficit. I would welcome an investigation into pensions schemes. I know that that is the responsibility of the Treasury, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to contact Treasury colleagues about it.

There should be an investigation into the closure of the plant and into whether anti-competitive practices have gone on. We need an investigation into the relationship between Libby's and Durabor, as I believe that there is strong evidence that they have been working collectively for many months to destroy the competition in Britain and Belgium and to give themselves a dominant position in the market for years to come.

There is also a case for the Government to consider legislation on employment rights and pensions. It is totally unacceptable for workers who have given such loyal service to a company over many years to be treated in such a shabby way. British workers need to have better employment and pension protection and I hope that the Government will look at that in some detail.

I also want the Government to consider legislation on a company's ability to take a contributions holiday, and I wish to make some suggestions. No pension scheme, and no trustee of a scheme, should be allowed to take a contributions holiday unless the scheme has built up a buffer zone, which could be used if the scheme underperformed. There is a strong case for removing the employer from the pension scheme altogether. That would have made a major difference to the employees' scheme at Ravenhead. There is also a strong case for requiring pension schemes to be revalued every year, rather than every four years. Recently, we have seen how the market can move rapidly and revaluing pension schemes every four years is unacceptable.

[Mr. David Watts]

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will discuss with his colleagues how we can investigate those issues and make sure that people are held accountable for their actions. The very least my constituents expect is that a full investigation will be held into the allegations that they have made, which I have restated today.

Durabor, the Belgian parent company, is not a small operation; its majority shareholder is the Belgian regional government. That regional government may not have a legal responsibility to the employees at Ravenhead, but there is a strong moral case that they should make some compensation payments to my constituents.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to make representations on behalf of the workers of Ravenhead to the Belgian regional government, who must stand by their ex-employees and accept responsibility. They cannot walk away, leaving people who have worked in the company for more than 30 years with minimum statutory redundancy pay and an undervalued pension scheme. I would welcome any help and assistance on those issues.

The Labour Government have done a lot in the past few years to strengthen pensions and employee regulations, but the case that I have outlined tonight demonstrates that we have a lot more to do.

6.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) on securing this debate and drawing attention to what I know is an important issue for him, his constituents and former employees of Ravenhead Glass. He has, as usual, made an eloquent and forceful case on behalf of his constituents. It might help if I set out in some detail the current position of the company.

On 29 November 2000, Paul Stanley and Ronald Robinson of Begbies Traynor, Manchester were appointed joint administrators of Ravenhead. An administration order allows court-appointed administrators to make proposals to restore a company's viability or to sell all or part of its business as a going concern. Officials have been in touch with the office of the administrators, and it has been confirmed that, until 16 March 2001, Ravenhead was trading on the basis that negotiations to sell the business as a going concern would be successful. Regrettably, the American company with which those negotiations were being held pulled out, citing the considerable capital investment required, particularly in view of the substantial losses and large overheads associated with the company's current operations.

Most of Ravenhead's employees have now been made redundant, except for 60 or so who have been retained to conduct an orderly rundown of the business and fulfil back orders. Officials have been informed that the administrators are now proceeding to sell the individual assets of the company, and the indications are that there will be no prospect of a payment to unsecured creditors.

It is always a great blow when a company goes into a state of insolvency and redundancies are necessary, although those are of course commercial matters for the parties concerned and not something in which the Government can intervene. The Government's role is to ensure that employees have minimum safeguards in employment rights legislation and to provide support and assistance to business when appropriate. I shall say something a little later about the points that my hon. Friend raised on anti-competitive practices and the way in which British workers are treated in such situations.

My Department's redundancy payments service can, under the Employment Rights Act 1996, within limits pay certain entitlements owed to former employees of insolvent companies. That legislation, which implements the European Union insolvency directive, guarantees a basic minimum of payments to employees of insolvent employers who would usually have to wait a considerable time for payment, or receive no payment, as creditors in the insolvency.

The RPS in Birmingham received 120 application forms from redundant employees of Ravenhead, and they were validated against information supplied by the administrators. The RPS has, under the legislation, made redundancy payments to all employees who have completed two years' service. Any holidays that have accrued at the time of the employees' dismissal and bonuses have been paid as well.

The RPS is currently processing compensatory notice payments, and the vast majority of them have been paid. The only claims still to be processed are those of the long-termers who are claiming the maximum 12 weeks, and they will be dealt with as soon as the employees return the forms. As far as I am aware, there are no outstanding queries.

It might be helpful if I explain that, when payments are made, the RPS will take over the employees' rights in relation to the amount of the debt paid from the national insurance fund and seek to recover the payment by lodging a claim for the debts in the insolvency proceedings. The payments of contractual debts that exceed minimum statutory entitlement payable from the national insurance fund remain lodged in the insolvency. Payment of those amounts will depend on whether the insolvency practitioner is able to raise sufficient funds from the sale of the company's assets to cover the debts.

I should also point out that the EU collective redundancy directive provides for employers to consult employee representatives on proposed redundancies and is implemented in the UK under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. All employers operating in the United Kingdom, including overseas companies, are bound by UK consultation legislation. Similarly, any UK companies operating in another member state are bound by the legislation of that state.

The directive also provides for sanctions to be taken against an employer for failing to comply with the consultation requirements. It is for the member state to determine the sanctions that may be taken. In the UK, an employer who is proposing to dismiss as redundant 20 or more employees at one establishment over a period of 90 days is required to consult appropriate representatives of employees who may be affected by dismissals or measures taken in connection with them.

Unless prevented by special circumstances, the consultation must begin in good time, and in any event there is a minimum requirement of at least 30 days before the first dismissal takes effect in a case in which between 20 and 99 dismissals are proposed, and 90 days when 100 or more are proposed.

Employers are also required to notify my Department's redundancy payments service within the same time scale, so that support may be given to those facing redundancy in the form of measures, including retraining, that the Government office and other local agencies take to mitigate the effect. Statutory employment rights are also in place for employees in these unfortunate circumstances.

An employee's representative may make a complaint to an employment tribunal if it is believed that the employer has failed to consult in accordance with the statutory provisions. If the tribunal finds a complaint justified, it will make a declaration to that effect, and in appropriate cases, whether or not the employees are still employed, it may take steps to safeguard their remuneration by making a protective award. The period of the award is determined by the tribunal and may be up to a maximum of 90 days.

My hon. Friend asked about the pension scheme. There is an anticipated shortfall of about £5 million. The administration of the scheme has now been delegated to an independent pension trustee who will deal with employees' claims and investigate the reasons for the shortfall. Any concerns that employees have about the scheme need to be reported to the administrators so that they can liaise with my Department's redundancy payments service. The Department operates a free telephone helpline on matters relating to redundancy, and my officials will do what they can to assist with any questions. The telephone number, it may be helpful to note, is 0500 848489.

I note that my hon. Friend feels that the present legislation does not protect employees or their pension schemes from unscrupulous companies. However, it may be helpful if I outline the relevant provisions of the employment protection legislation. They provide that an employee of an insolvent company who is owed arrears of wages, holiday pay and certain other debts may claim these amounts, subject to statutory limits, from the redundancy fund.

Furthermore, if an insolvent employer has failed to pay some contributions into the pension scheme, a claim can also be made for payments into the scheme from the redundancy fund. Taking together the work of the independent trustee and officials at the DTI's redundancy payments service, we should be able to address my hon. Friend's points.

On a general note, insolvency law contains what I believe are effective provisions against abuses of limited liability. For example, under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986, the administrators are required to make a report to the Secretary of State if they form a view that the conduct of a director makes him or her unfit to be involved in the running of a company. Of course, I cannot anticipate whether the administrators will make such a report, but if they do, the Secretary of State has a discretionary power to apply to the court for a disqualification order, if he judges that to be in the public interest.

Disqualification orders run for between two and 15 years, and all identified cases of misconduct are pursued. About 2,800 directors have been banned for unfit conduct in the past two years. The concerns that have been expressed about the management of Ravenhead should be passed to the administrators for their consideration. In addition, if there is evidence that there has been fraudulent or wrongful trading, a liquidator can ask the court to declare that those responsible should make a personal contribution towards the company's assets. However, any such sum would be available for the general body of creditors rather than any specific group, such as employees.

Ravenhead Glass was designated a large-scale redundancy in December, when the first redundancies were announced, allowing early access to Employment Service programmes. Some initial discussion has been held locally about the rapid response fund. Former Ravenhead employees have been placed on a case load for matching to any suitable vacancies that arise. The jobcentre is also carrying out a specific marketing exercise to target local companies that may be able to offer employment to these people. I know that my hon. Friend is deeply involved with that process.

The final 40 workers left Ravenhead on Friday 23 March. Local Employment Service jobcentres opened on Saturday to book appointments and deal with initial claims.

Before I say a little about the glass industry in general, I shall respond to what my hon. Friend said about the way in which UK workers are treated, compared with those in other European Union countries. He will be aware that in early February my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced a complete review of redundancy arrangements, with regard not only to information and consultation, which have become a concern following some recent high-profile cases, but to the question whether it is easier to sack British workers than anyone else in the EU.

Unlike some political parties represented in the House, we do not think that this country should sell itself on the basis of being the sweatshop of Europe. We are sensitive to such criticisms, and I am sure that the comprehensive review that we have set in train, which involves the CBI and the TUC, will illuminate the debate on that issue when it is concluded. I shall also consider what my hon. Friend said about anti-competitive activity.

I should take this opportunity to mention the support that we have given to the UK glass industry since 1 May 1997. The industry overall has accepted offers of regional selective assistance totalling £18 million, of which £1 million has gone towards the manufacture of hollow glass.

In addition, the Department has been working with British Glass and Glass Technology Services in a number of areas, including financial support for an innovation project to design safer screw threads on glass bottles, and assistance with the establishment of a glass manufacturing improvement club.

Discussions were held with British Glass last year about other potential projects, including a competitiveness analysis. I strongly urge it to consider working with the Department on a competitiveness analysis, because such an analysis can often lead to the identification of further areas in which the Department can work with the sector to mutual best advantage.

My hon. Friend suggested that the parent company may have employed anti-competitive practices. The trading operations of the company have been under increasing pressure because sales to European countries are made under fixed-price contracts in euros, which have been seriously affected by the fall of the euro against the pound. I shall ask my officials to look into that issue.

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

Finally, my hon. Friend was kind enough to pay tribute to the Department's representatives, especially in the north-west. I shall pass what he said on to them, and I assure him that we shall continue to give whatever assistance we can in what we understand are the very difficult circumstances that have arisen at Ravenhead in his constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 30 March 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Adoption Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.33 am

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for kindly selecting this Bill for Second Reading. I am sure that hon. Members are aware that we debated the Government's Adoption and Children Bill on Monday, but they might be interested in the process that ensued after that debate and the reason for having this debate today.

Usually, private Members' Bills are of a strongly consensual nature and enjoy large cross-party support. I am sure that hon. Members agree that adoption is precisely one of those subjects on which there is consensus. I do not expect today's debate to be any different in that respect, but hon. Members may find interesting the historical precedents for the situation that we are in, namely, Second Reading of a Government Bill being followed in close proximity by a private Member's Bill.

Such a circumstance has occurred before. It is well documented in "Erskine May" that it arose in the 1994-95 Session with the Disability Rights Commission. A private Member's Bill had been introduced to drive forward the important issue of bringing such a commission into being, but the then Government introduced their own Bill to achieve that. Interestingly, on that occasion also the Speaker ruled that both Bills should be debated.

The criteria for allowing both Bills to be debated in such close proximity is that they should be distinct and different. They may ultimately have the same objective, but they should have different ways of approaching the problem. That is exactly the challenge that fell to me between Monday and this morning: to find a way that was distinctly different from the way in which the Government had chosen to approach the reform of the law, but which may have the same outcome. I assure hon. Members that quite a lot of midnight oil was burned between 10.45 pm on Monday and my Bill going to the printers at 2 pm on Wednesday.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Does my hon. Friend agree that "complementary" might be the right word? Her Bill skilfully fills in the gaps in the Government Bill—which is basically a good measure—and as such should be seen as complementing and supporting the Government Bill.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. "Complementary" is exactly the right word. I would not dream of using the word "block", particularly on a private Member's Bill Friday. Perhaps it would be wrong to anticipate the outcome before we have had the debate, but I fully expect that the two Bills will result in better legislation in the long run. In searching for complementary aspects of adoption reform, I hope ultimately to see those worked into the reform of the Adoption Act 1976, which is what we are trying to change.

For the sake of hon. Members, I want to explain some acrobatics that had to be performed with my Bill. They may be confused over why my Bill does not refer to the Government Bill, which had its Second Reading on Monday. As I explained, my Bill needs to be distinct and different. Its purpose must be to reform existing law—to all intents and purposes, that is principally the 1976 Act. It cannot specifically refer to legislation that is in the pipeline, but it must take account of what is in the pipeline—the Government Bill—in order not to duplicate it. I hope that it is clear that that is the course that I had to pursue.

I pay tribute to the Clerks for helping me to perform that piece of procedural acrobatics, especially at such short notice. I do not know whether it is in order to mention a Clerk by name, but Nick Walker was extremely helpful in trying to get the Bill right in what was a pressurised time scale. I have relied heavily on his advice. I wonder how it would have been possible to meet the criteria without his advice and assistance.

The historical setting was not discussed during Monday's Second Reading debate, but it is an important dimension to the adoption debate. Interestingly—I would not have been aware of this without the Library's research paper for Monday's debate—we seem to debate adoption only once a generation, or every 25 years, and one or more private Members' Bills have usually acted as the catalyst for change to adoption law.

The Adoption of Children Act 1926 introduced legal adoption in England and Wales, but a private Member's Bill introduced in 1922 started that process. Although that Bill was considered on Report, it had to be dropped on the Dissolution of Parliament. In 1923, two Bills on adoption were introduced, both of which had to be dropped. In 1924, three Bills, including one applying specifically to Scotland, were introduced. Two of them received a Second Reading but were subsequently dropped. In 1925, private Members' Bills made further attempts to change adoption law. Eventually, in 1926, Government adoption legislation was passed.

That history demonstrates an important pattern that was repeated in the post-war years and the passage of the Adoption of Children Act 1949. As history tends to repeat itself, and, at the start of a new century, we seek to reform adoption legislation, it might be helpful to remember that history. I should add that although legislation was passed in the 1960s that slightly amended previous adoption legislation, the foundations for current adoption legislation were laid in the 1976 Act.

Precedents on reforming adoption legislation were set at the end of the previous century. It is generally acknowledged that, in 1996, a draft Bill on adoption reform was prepared. Like the current Adoption and Children Bill, it was preceded by full consultation and a White Paper. In short, therefore, we seem to have reached that point in the generational cycle at which adoption legislation—the 1976 Act—seems to need reform.

[Mrs. Spelman]

It is instructive to note that changes to adoption law have been a reflection of changes in society and that reform of the 1976 Act will also reflect societal change. In the 1970s, for example, 20,000 children were adopted, whereas towards the end of the 1990s, only 4,100 children were adopted. There are major societal reasons for that change, such as the fact that far fewer babies are available for adoption—partly because of the greater effectiveness and availability of modern contraception. Presumably, introduction of the morning-after pill will have an impact on the number of babies available for adoption.

Another reason why fewer babies are available for adoption is that it has become easier, although not easy, for a woman to raise a baby on her own, and the stigma of doing so has largely fallen away. I was quite interested by the fact that last year only two babies were adopted in my neighbouring health authority area in Coventry. I think that that statistic illustrates the great change that has occurred.

Conversely, many children are in care. Although the number has fluctuated over time and occasionally reached 100,000, currently about 58,000 children are in care. I expect that part of today's debate will concentrate on the needs of children in care and the fact that, in many cases, their opportunity to find permanence in a family home has been obstructed by unnecessary bureaucratic delay. Many of those children have suffered because of delay in finding them a permanent home.

A sad litany of statistics demonstrates why it is so important to address the needs of children in care. The statistics show that children in care do not fare well and that collectively, as the corporate parent, we have done a poor job in looking after them. It is a depressing fact that 70 per cent. of young people leave care without having gained a GCSE or GNVQ qualification. Additionally, 25 per cent. of looked-after children aged 14 to 16 do not attend school regularly, may have been excluded, and have no regular educational placement even when they are in care. As the corporate parent, we can look only to ourselves to explain why their educational attendance record is so poor.

A statistic that particularly upsets me as a woman is that between 14 and 25 per cent of young women leaving care are either pregnant or have a child, whereas only 3 per cent. of 20-year-old women in the general population have a child. I have to conclude that hon. Members, as representatives of the corporate parent with responsibility for looking after children, have dismally failed those young women.

Another important but depressing statistic is that 39 per cent. of male prisoners under 21 have been in care. There is a close correlation between the experience of young children who have been in care and their poor life chances. Although they undoubtedly had difficulties before going into care, their experience of being in care seems only to have added to their decreased opportunities for success in life after leaving care. In many cases, the experience of being in care has clearly been detrimental.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I had not intended to intervene so early in my hon. Friend's speech, but she has raised an issue that concerns me. In east Kent, we have a heavy problem because of the vast numbers of children being taken into care—some of whom have been quite literally dumped there by London boroughs that do not make their own provision, but choose to use out-of-county and out-of-town provision. Anything that she and other hon. Members who support the Bill can do to alleviate that problem and ensure that those children receive a proper family upbringing will, I am sure, have the full support of colleagues in Kent on both sides of the House.

Mrs. Spelman: I am very sensitive to the extra burden that Kent has borne. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, proportionally, Kent offers more places for children in care than many other counties do. I know for a fact that my own local authority—all the way from the west midlands—looks to Kent to place some of our most difficult cases. Although it is recognised that the particular expertise of some of the care homes in Kent is available nowhere else in the country, I am sure that my hon. Friend would want me to make the point that the resources provided to Kent do not always reflect the fact that it carries that additional load not only for some of the other London boroughs, but for places as far afield as the west midlands. We should recognise that.

I do not wish to imply, by citing those statistics, that I think that all care provision is bad, as that is certainly not true. Many people work extremely hard with inadequate resources to provide care for children who often are quite damaged and have many difficulties. That is not an easy task, and I recognise that they try their very best in difficult circumstances.

I recognise also that not all children fail because of being in care. That would be a false conclusion to draw from the statistics. Nevertheless, the outcomes are poor for many of those children. That issue is inextricably linked with this debate. I feel very strongly that if more of those children had an earlier opportunity of permanence in a family, their subsequent life chances might be better. That is the point.

In the adoption debate, we must not generalise about adoption provision across the country because it varies greatly from one part of the country to another. Currently, council adoption rates range from between 0.5 and 10.5 per cent. of looked-after children being adopted each year. The average time spent being looked after before the decision is made that a child should be adopted is one year and four months, and from decision to placement takes another seven months—a total of nearly two years. I know that it is the Government's aim to speed up the process through their Adoption and Children Bill. A clause in my Bill about fast-tracking tries, in a complementary way, to improve on that for younger children.

There is another point when considering the issues of children in care and the need to reform adoption. An estimated 14 per cent. of children who are adopted have experienced six or more placements in their care history. That is another feature of our failure as a corporate parent. That is an excessive number of moves for a child who has already had to be severed from the birth family.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): In my experience of sitting judicially in the courts and having to deal with young people, youngsters of 17 and 18 have frequently had half a dozen placements. That results, I am afraid, in

their turning to criminal ways and coming before the courts, which has a huge impact on the criminal justice system.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. His experience will make an important contribution to the debate. The magistracy sees a great number of these court orders and has important things to say. I look forward to my hon. Friend's contribution, as some of us do not have his direct experience of such matters.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The hon. Lady makes a very important point. Does she agree that the emotional and educational damage done by repeated replacements of young people in different settings undermines their life chances in the most serious way possible?

Mrs. Spelman: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. In human terms, it is bound to be damaging for children to be constantly uprooted from a setting, not to know where they belong and constantly having to reform relationships. It must get to the point where it is very difficult to form any sort of permanent relationship at all.

Before this debate, I was interviewed by four young people, all of whom had been in care until the age of 16. One of them had been placed in as many as 20 homes. That flabbergasted me—it can be as bad as that, although it is estimated that 14 per cent. of children who are adopted were moved six times. However, this young woman was remarkably well organised. She put some searching questions to me about the care system, and I am confident that she will go on and make a success of her life, but hers is not a start in life that we would desire for any child.

The severity of the problem is great. The frequency of placements and replacements often has to do with the system's failure to provide permanence for the child. One of the objectives of the Government's Bill is to speed up the process so that permanence is achieved much sooner. I hope that my Bill will complement that.

My Bill deals with the important question of finance. Just as there is quite a wide variation in the percentage of children adopted by local authorities, so there is variation in adoption allowances. I know that the Government want to consider that issue, which I think has contributed to some of the problems in the process of adoption. Some 20 per cent. of adoptions, having been made, do not work. Undoubtedly, one reason for such a high failure rate has to do with post-adoption support. Most of us have had constituents, friends or relatives who have tried to adopt and might have gone on to do so. The amount of assistance available to them once the children are received into their home is lamentable.

If children have gone through the very difficult experience of having to leave behind their birth families, it will not instantly be sunshine when they arrive in another family. There is a lot of hurt and difficulty, and much assimilation is required. However, we have been weak when it comes to post-adoption support, and I would like to see that addressed.

I want to present the background to the clauses in a little more detail. Clause 1 deals with finance. I am not asking the Government to increase their spending, as we have to be very careful on that point. How the money is spent is probably the most important question. Despite the Government's Adoption and Children Bill, one significant issue is missing from their attempts to reform the system—the several causes of delay. We agree with the Government that the introduction of a national adoption register will help in certain respects, and we have supported that from the beginning. Indeed, we sought to introduce a provision into the Care Standards Act 2000 that would have brought a national adoption register into being last July.

The register will allow better matching throughout the country because it expands the pool of parents who want to adopt and children who are available for adoption, which is a good thing. However, the difficulty of making a match, which is often a cause of delay, is not simply down to knowing who wants to adopt and which children are available for adoption. There is also a problem with finance. Local authorities are, not unnaturally, deterred from travelling the length and breadth of the country to find the best match because they have to finance that out of their budget.

I suspect that the local authorities of most right hon. and hon. Members present are in the same boat as mine, and have substantially overspent, not for the first year, on social services. The breakdown of the overspend in my local authority of Solihull—and it is the same with neighbouring authorities—shows that it has occurred on children's services. The main reason for that is, sadly, the amount of family breakdown. We cannot run away from the fact that local authorities have to spend a disproportionate amount on services for children because family breakdown is a key feature of British society. Therefore they do not start from a strong position, even given the £66 million that the Government put on the table to support the changes to the adoption process. My concern is that, given that the budgets are already overspent, will that money ever actually find its way to where the Government want it to go and be spent on providing the kind of post-adoption support that is so vital in making adoption matches work well? I seriously wonder about that.

Specifically, clause 1 would passport money with the child. That important proposal is designed to support the national adoption register. Without such an arrangement, it would be difficult to make the register work as effectively as it could. I shall explain that by referring to a local authority—Coventry—that abuts my own. It is interesting that its policy is not to look very far outside its own area when making adoption matches. Coventry city council would not look beyond the A5 and, if possible, not outside north Warwickshire to make such matches, simply because of the cost entailed in travelling to and fro and in making the assessments. The council made a practical point in asking how parents would travel the long distance to the preparation evenings that the local authority would regard as an essential precursor to its assessment and acceptance of prospective adoptive parents.

There is a real practical problem, in that the match is unlikely to be made unless the resources flow with it. We may create the power to make a match, but it is significant that the Adoption and Children Bill, which the Government are proposing, does not contain the power to make the match happen. That Bill includes a requirement to make an assessment, but the local authority can still

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decide whether to provide the services that need to go with that assessment, so we are not a great deal further forward. If a local authority is strapped for cash, it has to make the assessment, but it may legitimately say that it cannot provide the service. I am trying to break that deadlock, so that the money flows with the child.

At present, responsibility for adoption allowances falls to the authority where the child ultimately resides. That is a disincentive to the matching process. A local authority that has spent resources on recruiting and assessing a set of adoptive parents is unlikely to allow them to adopt a child who is in the care of another local authority, even if the national adoption register exists.

The local authority where the adoptive parents reside will lose money relative to the local authority where the child resides because, first, it will not save money by moving one of its cared for children out of care. I understand that the average cost of that is between £2,000 and £3,000 a week. Secondly, the local authority may have to pay an adoption allowance, depending on the circumstances of the receiving family. Thirdly, the local authority may have to pay for the child's special educational and health needs. A high percentage of the children who have been looked after often have statements and often struggle to find the resources to support themselves through education. Fourthly, the local authority's social workers may have to provide post-adoption support, and they are already stretched by having to undertake the assessments, and so on.

Clause 1 would require the local authority from which a child has been adopted to refund the cost of the adoption allowances that the local authority to which the child has gone has had to pay. I hope that that passporting mechanism will solve the practical problem of resources flowing with the child who needs them to the family who will also need them.

Under the Bill, adoption allowances would be classified as direct payments to the family and support services provided by the local authority. I mention that because, under the procedural acrobatics that I described at the outset, I have had to propose the reform of existing legislation that is not explicit on post-adoption services, and I want to make it clear that the word "allowances"—the plural—embraces the very important concept of extending the financing to post-adoption support.

It may be helpful if I dwell for a second on some examples of those support services. Counselling for the children to help them come to terms with their circumstances is very important, as the failure rate can be high without it. There is little support for adoptive siblings in coming to terms with a new brother or sister, but that is an important dimension. Short-term domestic help should be provided to enable the adoptive parents to spend more time helping the child to settle in.

I was struck by the contrast in the experience of some friends of mine who adopted two children, who, I think, were seven and six at the time. When a woman carries her own baby, she has nine months to get ready for the bombshell that will hit her, and she is helped to prepare for that. She is also helped when she has given birth and is assimilating a new life into the family. However, the life of a couple who adopt can change overnight. They have less time to prepare and less thought is given to how to support them through that process of change. That is one reason why we need to consider the support provided in that very important post-adoption period.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North–East Hertfordshire): I am listening very carefully to what my hon. Friend is saying about the allowances. If an adoption were to break down and could not continue, what would be the financial position? Would the original authority continue to pay for the support of the child and take over the care role again, or would the resources go to the new authority in which the child had been placed?

Mrs. Spelman: It would entirely depend on where the child went next. If the child returned to its original local authority, the resources would return with the child. The concept entirely involves the money following the child. Another family may be found in the same receiving local authority, in which case the money would go to them. The tragedy is that that involves the child being uprooted again, which is why it is so important to do all we can to make the match work. Continuous uprooting is disruptive to the child's education and, ultimately, for its well-being.

Examples of needs that might be met by the adoption allowances could include one-off payments to cover the extra resources needed if a couple agreed to take several siblings. The couple might find that their car will not accommodate four children. Although people movers are a wonderful invention, we must recognise that there can be a capital impact on a family who are willing to prevent a group of siblings being split up because they have to cope with a sudden expansion. A traditional saloon car will not take six people legally. That is the kind of difficulty that a family can suddenly face.

Time-limited payments to cover the cost of counselling should be considered, especially if the national health service is unable to meet that cost locally. Counselling for post-adoption support has not been especially strong. Women in birth families who have been parted from their children, and those who have received children, have told me that, in some cases, the counselling makes matters worse, so specialist counselling must be got right. I was struck by the fact that it can be very difficult if the counselling is provided by those who are too directly involved in the matching process, because such counselling is not objective.

I hope that hon. Members will understand what I mean when I say that if the local authority is keen to place to children from care in a particular family, it has a vested interested in that process working. However, if the problems are too great, the family is not coping with the placement of the children, and the counsellor comes from the local authority, the counselling can be insufficiently objective. I hope that I have explained what I am driving at.

If arrangements have been made to allow contact to continue with the birth family, financial support must be given to cover the costs of travelling to visit them, especially as that can sometimes entail large distances. At the moment, lower income families are very poorly represented among foster and adoptive parents, and we must face up to that fact when considering the problem of adoption allowances. The ideal would be a range of adoptive parents representing the full spectrum of society. Finance can be a real reason why families on lower

incomes do not put themselves forward for fostering and adoption. Barnardos feels strongly about that. I have no doubt that hon. Members have been briefed, as I have, about the difficulties that lower income families face.

Post-adoption support services are essential for parents who have adopted older children with emotional problems. About 20 per cent. of adoptive placements of older children break down, whereas, unsurprisingly, the failure rate for babies is only 5 per cent. We should not be surprised by that. The older child has usually had more problems along the way that need addressing.

Clause 1 is a complement to the existing legislation designed to help make the national adoption register work better. It assumes that the register will be law, even though it does not exist in the Adoption Act 1976. We hope that the clause will command support.

Clause 2 deals with appeals. In his review of adoption last year, the Prime Minister said:

"Clearly there is a place for a much more comprehensive appeals system which gives all parties within adoption/permanence a louder voice and better representation. There must be provision for the independent scrutiny of and appeal against the—doubtless few—bad or unjust decisions, such as those involving placements."

I quote his words because the Government's Adoption and Children Bill contains a provision on appeals, but I remain unconvinced that it is anything like the comprehensive appeals system for which the Prime Minister called.

The definition of a determination of an adoption case is unclear in the explanatory notes to the Government's Bill. It simply says that the term will be defined in regulations, so we are no clearer about it. For the benefit of hon. Members, I should say that I am talking about clause 9 of the Bill. It provides for the establishment of a review procedure. It says:

any person in respect of whom a qualifying determination has been made . . . may apply to a panel constituted by the appropriate Minister. . . .

(3) The regulations may include provision as to—

(a) the duties and powers of a panel

(b) the administration and procedures of a panel".

That is all the Bill says: it is not clear. The determination procedure lacks independence, which is important.

Mr. Brazier: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. If determinations are confined to, for example, obtaining a place on the national register, the prospective parents who are being turned away now would be no further forward. It is essential that the procedure apply to at least some matchings and allow parents to appeal where a child is not to be allocated to anyone else and the outcome would be that the child would remain in care. It is important that the appeals procedure should cover such cases, as my hon. Friend's clause does.

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend makes a good point. He has a great deal of experience of dealing with adoption—far more than me. He describes one of the failings of the present system, which we must address urgently. I want to go even further in my clause on appeals, to an appeals system that deals with what I call the eternal triangle. The three sides of the triangle are the birth family, the child and the adopters. The Government Bill would not deal with all three sides of the triangle. We all know from talking to adoptees, adopters and birth families that feelings run high about the present system. They feel that there is no adequate complaints procedure to deal with their grievances.

At present, each local authority is required to offer its own complaints system, which usually consists of three or four levels, all of which are run by the local authority against which the complaint is made. At level 2, the procedure must include an independent person, but that person is interviewed, recruited and appointed by the local authority. How independent is that person? It is not hard to see that all too often the local authority is found not guilty of the misconduct of which the complainant accuses it. Those who complain feel that the system is insufficiently independent. Adoptive parents are forced to complain to the director of social services whose department they are complaining about.

A lack of independence is a common feature of complaints procedures for public services that do not work well. All too often, individuals who have a complaint feel that professionals close ranks and that they cannot have their case heard objectively and independently. That is reflected in the social services inspectorate survey, which found that 52 per cent. of complainants were dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaints procedure. That is a poor result. Many complained that they had no one to turn to after the procedure was complete.

It is necessary for each establishment to have a few people with unrestricted access to children in care whose purpose is to find out at the point of delivery whether proper care is being provided. I am trying to establish that independent element. I have suggested in clause 2 that we should have a proper ombudsystem for adoption. We have such a system for health, although it could be made to work better. There is a local government ombudsman, but as Members of Parliament know, since we often refer cases to him, only cases that meet the narrow criteria of maladministration can be referred to him. One often sits in one's surgery feeling that people have been dealt with badly and unjustly, but knowing that technically their case cannot be defined as maladministration. We know that they have little chance of justice or even an apology or recognition that something has gone wrong.

We are not yet a heavily litigious society like America, and I hope that we do not go that way. Often, people would be happy with a timely and sincere apology, but they rarely get one in respect of adoption. I would like to see a proper ombudsystem for all three sides of the triangle. I have suggested that at the top should be the Children's Commissioner for Wales and the equivalent children's rights director in England. I am sure that the House is aware that there is pressure from all sides for a children's commissioner for England, so that we have like for like. We are concerned as to whether a children's rights director has the same power and scope as a commissioner. To be at the top of the ombudsprocess would provide the independence that is so important.

I would like to create the opportunity for the child in the triangle to voice a complaint about the way in which they have been treated. At present, the child has no right to appeal against any decision made in the adoption process. My clause would enable the child to appeal through the guardian ad litem, who would have the discretion to filter out frivolous complaints. It is possible that a child, perhaps a truculent teenager, will make a complaint that it would not be a good use of time and

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resources to pursue. Guardians ad litem do a good job as children's advocates in the present system and are well able to make a balanced decision about whether a genuine complaint should be heard.

I am concerned that the role of the guardian ad litem is restricted in terms of their window of opportunity in the court process. I should like to see their role expanded so that they see the child through the system to a successful placement and permanence, and look out for the child's interests.

Mr. Heald: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Government's proposals to cap the fees for guardians ad litem will mean that there are not as many such guardians? If anything, my hon. Friend's proposal, if implemented, would require more guardians ad litem. We are seeing the interests of children being badly damaged by ill thought through proposals, and they would make my hon. Friend's proposal extremely difficult to implement.

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am not able to ask for extra spending, but within the resources that are available, I believe that my proposal would be a good use of money. The vast majority of guardians ad litem do an excellent job, very often with good will. It is important to resource their role.

We have learned about these matters through some most disturbing reports about children in care. I and other hon. Members had to read the Waterhouse report. Others who read it will also be disturbed by the poor voice that children have in our society. It is important that there be a voice for vulnerable children in care, and that someone should see them through. Again and again, children are lost in care because the key worker who was alongside them changes jobs, or someone else comes in. There is no continuity. At a key stage, a guardian ad litem would offer continuity.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): When replying to the debate later, it may be helpful if I am clear about what the hon. Lady is proposing. Initially, there was slight confusion about the reference to a guardian ad litem in terms of the appeals system, given that the role of that guardian is to give advice to the courts. Is the hon. Lady proposing a greatly extended role for the guardian ad litem, so that in a sense he or she becomes almost a new statutory caseworker for the child? I am slightly confused about the role that she sees for the guardian ad litem and how that relates to the appeals system.

Mrs. Spelman: I am not trying to confuse the Minister. I am sure that he is aware that the Children Act 1989 lays out an appeals system. At present, the law focuses very much on the court process. The guardian ad litem does not see the case through to its conclusion, and it is that which I am trying to achieve. I hope that I have made things clearer. My proposal is not to be confused with the special guardianship that the right hon. Gentleman will know is in the Government Bill. That is a completely different concept.

Clause 3 deals with a completely different subject, which is the fast tracking of younger children. The Government's Bill, which was introduced on Monday, does not make a distinction in respect of children, although it introduces the concept of time limits, which we support. The purpose of introducing time limits is to speed up the process, which we all want to achieve.

The House may be surprised to learn that, perversely, it is sometimes taking longer to place younger children following on from care than older children. If someone in social services knows that there are a significant number of older children who will be quite difficult to place, he or she will do everything possible to encourage prospective adopters to take the children who are harder to place. That person will know that it will be easy to place babies and young children. Naturally, those in social services departments are trying hard to place older and more difficult children.

The tragedy is that it is detrimental to very little children to make them wait longer for adoption. Every parent knows that within a year a baby has bonded closely with its parents and other siblings. That is the way of nature. It is then detrimental to young children to be uprooted and moved. That is partly because their power of reasoning has not reached the point when it is possible to explain to them in detail why the uprooting has to take place. Yet it happens; I have seen it happen with my own eyes.

Some friends of mine are foster parents. They are now well beyond child-bearing age. At the request of the social services department, they took in a baby within the first six weeks of its life because mum was not well. That baby was still with them after a year. They felt that they could do nothing other than to adopt the baby. The child was talking and walking, and they knew that it would be detrimental to it if it were taken from them, and difficult for them, having bonded with it. They adopted the child and it has remained with them. However, there was probably an enormous queue of parents desperately wanting to adopt the baby. That opportunity has now been missed. And it happens again and again.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) spoke movingly on Second Reading of the Government's Bill on Monday about her experiences when working in a children's home. She said that she was horrified to find three-year-olds in dormitories of 12 children. That is not an appropriate environment in which to raise a child of pre-school age. I would encourage hon. Members to listen to her moving account if it is carried, after editing, by "Yesterday in Parliament" late tonight.

The hon. Lady said that children were described as five, six, and seven o'clockers because those were their bedtimes. With the best will in the world, in that environment there is not the intimate relationship of parent and child. It is institutional, and we must try to get away from that. I am attempting to do that by complementing the Government's intentions by introducing fast tracking for younger children.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I ask for clarification on the way in which the hon. Lady's proposals would change the situation that she outlined, with the foster family that proceeded to become an adoption family. I am not clear how her proposals addressed that case.

Mrs. Spelman: If fast tracking were introduced for under-threes, the foster family that agreed to take in a

baby or toddler would have a clear idea that that would be for a much shorter time than usual, and that efforts would be redoubled to find permanence for that child. They would not be faced with the predicament of having had a young child for so long that they felt almost duty bound to offer to adopt it. In practical terms, that is what my proposal would achieve.

It is understood that it is easier for foster parents to cope with younger children. If the law were changed in line with my proposal, it would be clear that in taking a baby or a child under three, social services or voluntary services would be making an extra effort to have that child permanently placed more quickly. It is an important practical point, which I hope I have made clear.

Mr. Gardiner: In a situation such as the hon. Lady outlined, the child has been placed with a foster family specifically because there is every intention and hope that the natural mother will be able to take the child back after her illness. It was by force of circumstance that the original foster arrangement was extended. By fast tracking the adoption process, we cannot automatically get round such cases, which relate to individual circumstances and perhaps the prolongation of the natural parent's illness.

Mrs. Spelman: If I believed that all delays were due to the legitimate reason that I gave in my example—that the return to the birth family was unclear—I might have more sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point. The truth is that that is not the only reason why young children experience delays in the system. The example of a child in institutional care given by the hon. Member for Stockton, South is just one illustration of that.

The parting process from the birth family is one of the most difficult and fraught areas of adoption. On Monday, moving and practical speeches were made by hon. Members who have worked on the placement of children. They would be the first to acknowledge that the protracted parting and to-ing and fro-ing that sometimes occur when a decision is being made about whether children should be parted permanently from their birth parents can cause the greatest damage. It is difficult to legislate for that, and I am not seeking to do so; it is down to the expertise of those who are qualified to work with the birth family to make the process better. We would legislate for that only clumsily, if we tried, but the time limits under the Adoption and Children Bill should help a bit. There is more than one reason for little ones being delayed in the system. Because of the attachment that they form at such a young age it is important and humane to have a legislative incentive to move more quickly with them. We therefore need to address the question of babies and very young children.

At the outset, I said that the reform of the Adoption Act 1976 has a lot to do with addressing changes in society over the past generation. One change is that, for want of a better phrase, adoption has gone out of fashion among young mothers, who may formerly have considered that route. There are various reasons for that, to which I have referred, including the loss of stigma attached to raising a baby alone. However, it is still not easy to do that, and I am sure that, like me, hon. Members have followed cases in which young women have found it extremely difficult to manage raising a baby on their own.

When we talk about the number of children in poverty, often we are talking about young women who find themselves in a spiral of deprivation. Having got pregnant young, they miss out on their education, cannot get work and end up at the bottom of the pile. I know that the Government and Members on both sides of the House are trying to address that social change, which is a source of genuine difficulty.

Talking to those young women, I realised that adoption is nowadays promoted far less often as an option for them when they are pregnant. There is some history behind that; more than a generation ago, the reverse may have been true, and it was dealt with clumsily. All of us will have had contact with women who feel that their babies were taken from them in an uncaring manner, but now we have gone too far the other way in not presenting young women with the plausible option of having their babies adopted by families who very much want them and will give them a good life chance. As part of the discussion of reforming adoption, I hope that adoption will be promoted more actively to young women.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): When that issue was touched on in the debate on Monday, I thought that it would be regarded as controversial. However, I was surprised—as I am sure my hon. Friend was—by the unanimity across the House, including especially the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), who was strong on that particular point.

Mrs. Spelman: That is a helpful intervention, and I should like to pay tribute to several Members who spoke with practical experience and a lot of common sense in our debate on Monday night.

On that note of unanimity, I should like to conclude my remarks on the Bill. There is no question but that there is a broad degree of support for adoption reform. I have tried hard not to present my Bill in a partisan way this morning, as that would not be appropriate. I am really pleased that we have got to the point at which a major Bill has had its Second Reading. Given the proximity of the election, we all know that there is probably little chance of its proceeding even to the special Select Committee. However, it is important that it has been introduced, because it means that the subject is out in the open and the debate can develop.

It may be too late for the 58,000 children already in care, but we owe it to those brought into care daily to help them in the search for a permanent family and loving home by reforming the existing adoption law to ensure that they have that life chance. We also owe it to couples who, in many cases, have had to wait a long time for the privilege and pleasure of having children to call their own. I believe that both sides of the House are united on that; I hope that we can weave together my Bill and the Government Bill, and that the outcome will be the best that we can possibly achieve for the children, their prospective adoptive parents and the birth families from whom those children have been severed. That should be our aim, and I hope that my remarks have contributed to achieving it.

10.36 am

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on the subject that she has chosen for her private Member's Bill and the way in which she presented it to the House? I listened with great interest to all of her speech,

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especially her closing remarks; I am sure that there is widespread agreement on the kind of suggestions that she made. Regardless of whether there will be an election soon, the subject is such that, if a Member on either side of the House seeks to reintroduce a Bill on it, he or she will have wide support.

I wish to discuss clauses 2 and 3. I declare an interest as a member of the British delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. For a long time, I have been the rapporteur on the European strategy for children, which deals with a range of issues concerning the care and welfare of youngsters. We have produced reports on child abuse, child labour, refugee children and disabled children. We work closely with the 43 member states of the Council of Europe, have a close relationship with UNICEF and have published a major report on adoption. As the hon. Member for Meriden and others know, legislation on adoption varies enormously from country to country.

This has been a good week in the House for children. On Monday, we had Second Reading of the Adoption and Children Bill and this morning we are debating the hon. Lady's private Member's Bill. I am sorry that I was not here on Monday to seek to take part in the debate, but from reading the speeches it was clear that there was widespread support for the issue of adoption, irrespective of which side of the House participating Members sat on. We all know that adoption is an important issue, but it can often be complex and, at times, emotive. I am sure that, for all of us, the principal concern of adoption is the welfare and rights of the child. From time to time, I read about disturbing cases of adoption—as I am sure all hon. Members do—including how children become available for adoption. Whether we are Members of Parliament or members of the public, we are all distressed to read, as we have done recently, about cases of children changing hands for money. That is to be deeply deplored.

From time to time we hear of the difficulties facing a person who wishes to adopt. We would all agree that the principal consideration should be placing the child in a warm, loving family relationship. When I was in local government, I chaired the children's committee of the London borough of Hammersmith and served on many adoption panels. I can well recall the anxiety of prospective adopters when we interviewed them. I believe that we have a perfect right to ask questions and to make inquiries of people who seek to adopt. Our concern at all times should be for the future of the youngster whom we are considering placing with an adoptive parent or parents.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden on her wide-ranging speech. She mentioned the Prime Minister's comments about adoption. He is to be congratulated on his deep concern for the matter, and I support much of what he has said about it in recent months. Having read Monday's debate, I share many of the views expressed by the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), and by others who spoke, about the need to speed up the process and reduce the time that it often takes for a youngster to be adopted. We all know that some local authorities have good records and others do not, but I would not want any local authority to feel that it was being put under pressure to meet the wishes of the Government or the Department. The overriding consideration must be the welfare of the youngster.

The hon. Member for Meriden touched on another important issue—the number of youngsters who, sadly, remain in care for a very long time. All of us who have been involved in such work know how difficult those cases can be; they can also be tragic. As I have seen on my visits to European countries, one immediately recognises that those youngsters are crying out for love and warmth. In her speech, which I found very moving at times, the hon. Lady emphasised the need for us to work as hard as we can to ensure that youngsters who have been in care for a prolonged period are helped into a loving, tender, caring relationship, to which every child is entitled.

With reference to clause 2, I am involved in the adoption case of a young girl. Her father is serving a prison sentence in Wandsworth prison, which is in my constituency. His relationship with the child's mother has ended, and the mother wants the child placed for adoption. The case is being dealt with by a London borough authority—not my own, Wandsworth. The father does not want the child adopted, but he feels that as a result of the break-up of his relationship with the child's mother and the fact that he is in prison, his views are not being taken into account. I have great sympathy with his views.

From the correspondence that that man has been sending me from Wandsworth prison, my impression is that he and his daughter have a warm relationship. The fact that he is in prison is obviously an issue, but who can say that when he is released, he will not be capable of bringing up his daughter? From what I have learned from the correspondence, I believe that he has a right to be concerned about the possible adoption of his daughter. It would be interesting to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Meriden on the case, should she catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In the work that I do in the Council of Europe, I have always made it a policy—which is overwhelmingly supported by members of the committee there—that wherever practicable, the young people's views should be sought. When we are dealing with youngsters in care awaiting adoption, their views are not often sought.

As Members of Parliament, all of us visit schools in our constituencies. I find that a wonderful experience, especially visits to junior schools, because the children are so inquisitive and ask so many questions. I believe in being frank with youngsters. They often ask me how much I am paid as a Member of Parliament, and I tell them. That leads to great discussion of the fact that I am earning far more than their fathers, and they wonder how that is possible. That is how one treats youngsters with respect. We should be much more actively involved with youngsters who are in care and waiting to be adopted, to find out what they think and what vision of the future they have. Too often, sadly, that does not happen.

In my constituency I have a large ethnic community, and I deal with a great many immigration cases. There is clear evidence that there are certain solicitors and so-called immigration consultants—I see in the Chamber a former Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who during his time in office will

no doubt have come across some of those people—who have little knowledge of immigration law, but rip off my constituents.

There are also adoption agencies that rip people off. The way in which they operate and promote themselves should be much more closely scrutinised. From time to time I hear of cases that make me wonder what right they have to be involved with young children, when their sole consideration is the money that they can make from such cases. I deplore that.

I turn to clause 3. The hon. Member for Meriden and my right hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of the Hague convention on adoption. It is interesting to note the number of countries that follow it. I listened with interest to the way in which the hon. Lady presented clause 3, as I believe that it could have a bearing on my comments. In March, I tabled a written question to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, asking him

"how many children were allowed into the United Kingdom from overseas countries for adoption by United Kingdom residents . . . and if he will list the countries from which those children came."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2000; Vol. 365, c. 618W.]

I was surprised by some of the 26 countries that were listed in the reply. I shall list some of them now, to give the House an indication of the enormous range of countries from which youngsters come into Britain for adoption. As I said, my work in the Council of Europe mostly involves countries that have similar forms of government, but even their adoption legislation can vary enormously. The list that I was given included China, Guatemala, Iran, Jamaica, Libya, Nigeria, South Africa, Ukraine, the United States of America and Vietnam, and those are only 10 out of the 26 countries on the list.

I put it to the House and to my right hon. Friend the Minister of State that the adoption laws of those countries must vary enormously. For example, what are the exact procedures that must be followed by somebody who seeks to adopt a child from Iran, Libya or Ukraine? We should be told far more about that. I have been to Ukraine as the chairman of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee of the Council of Europe, so I have seen the appalling problems that exist there. I have visited orphanages in Ukraine where the conditions are utterly deplorable. To their credit, some improvement is now being made, but one can well understand why some countries will say "If we can get our children adopted, our burden will be eased."

There may be some merit in that approach, but I believe that we are entitled not only to question deeply people who are seeking to adopt children and to obtain as much information as we can about their background, but to find out a great deal about the youngsters who are entering this country. We must know not only how they come here, but what information about them is available to social services in the areas where they live. Sadly, we hear time after time about appalling cases of child abuse in which social services say "We really knew very little about this youngster."

The Committee stage is a great advantage for Bills such as this one. Indeed, it will also benefit the Adoption and Children Bill, whose Second Reading was opened on Monday by the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness, as we shall have the opportunity to table amendments and new clauses. As the hon. Member for Meriden said, the House rarely has debates about adoption, so I hope that she, the Government and the party managers get together to ensure that the two Bills marry up. It would be a great disaster if anybody said "Well, we have this Bill and we're not interested in yours." We learn from each other, so I hope that the business managers will agree that the two Bills are linked.

All hon. Members who participate in debates such as this share the same overriding concerns. Today is a good day for Parliament, as was Monday. Our discussion will not get a great deal of coverage, but we know that people outside will follow it with great interest, as they did on Monday. This debate is an example of Parliament at its best, because we are discussing a matter that is very precious: the lives of young people, and our duty as the law makers of this country to introduce legislation to ensure the best possible safeguards for them. The Adoption and Children Bill and the hon. Lady's comments go a long way towards achieving that goal.

The hon. Lady made a number of important remarks. She referred to one matter that I thought was very important, and which I see from another angle because Wandsworth prison is situated in my constituency. I refer to contact between birth parents and an adopted child. I ask youngsters about these matters when I visit schools. Of course, some of them will have been adopted. I ask, "If you were adopted, when would you like to know about your real parents and their background?" They say, "When I want to know." I do not believe that youngsters have to be told until they ask.

I take the hon. Lady's point about the need for contact between the birth parents and the adopted youngster, but as she said, costs can be a determining factor in that respect. In Wandsworth prison, I see families who want to keep in contact with somebody who is serving a prison sentence in different part of the country from that in which they live. Their travelling expenses can be horrendous. We all know that it is not cheap to travel in the United Kingdom, and the hon. Lady made an important point about the costs that are involved.

I am about to use an expression that we do not hear much in the House these days. I see on the Opposition Benches colleagues who, like me, have been here for a number of years, so they will know that the phrase "nuts and bolts" was used a great deal in past. I believe that the hon. Lady has put some of the nuts and bolts onto this important issue. I congratulate her on that and wish her Bill success.

10.57 am

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for the compassionate and thoughtful way in which she introduced her Bill. I congratulate her on a dual success: she has not only introduced her Bill, but has helped to provoke the Government into introducing theirs. As she pointed out, her Bill complements the Government's. She has played an important role in moving forward legislation on adoption.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) for exemplifying in his contribution the bipartisan nature of this week's debates on adoption. He made important remarks about the international dimension of adoption and the diversity of sources from which children are adopted into this country—an issue to which I shall return in a moment.

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

Let me explain my interest in this subject. One of the most common mistakes that was made about me when I was Secretary of State for Social Security was the assumption that I was a Secretary of State for social services and that I was therefore responsible for all social services matters. Of course, that was not the case; I was responsible only for social security. When I was investigating and trying to understand the problems that created a need for social security, as well as the characteristics of those who are dependent on the help of the state, I found the same problem time and again. It arose in respect of many people who had been in the state care system, with many different needs and various problems that brought them into contact with the social security system and that could require much more intimate involvement with social services at a local or national level. I became convinced that a major problem arose from the public role in loco parentis. The more I examined the problem, the more severe the failings of our system appeared. The figures are appalling and dramatic.

Between half and three quarters of young people who leave care are unemployed—four times the rate for 16 to 24-year-olds in the population as a whole. Almost three quarters of those who leave care have no qualifications—12 times the average for the population as a whole. Between a quarter and a third of homeless people on the streets of London come from residential care or fostering—60 times the average for the population as a whole. A quarter of all adult prisoners have been in care in their lifetime, and almost 40 per cent. of prisoners under 21 come from the care system. Forty per cent. of young girls who have been in state care become mothers while teenagers, many, alas, while still in care—eight times the average for the population as whole. Their children are 66 times more likely than other children to find themselves in state care. The process is therefore self perpetuating; it is what Keith Joseph called "a cycle of deprivation."

The state has failed as a parent, and we are ultimately responsible for the performance of the state when it has to step in and take over as the parent of children in need who suffer deprivation because of the inability and sometimes unwillingness of their parents to look after them. By contrast, adoption is a success.

It is easier to measure failure than success, and difficult to think of measures of success that are not demeaning. However, by all the standard measures such as success at school, getting jobs, forming settled relationships, getting married and bringing up children, adopted children do far better than those who remain in care, those who are brought up in divided families and even those who are brought up in normal birth families. The dedication and commitment of adopted parents mean that they are often able to bring greater success in life to their adopted children than ordinary parents bring to theirs.

There are 58,000 children in care at any one moment. Many are in care for brief periods before returning to their natural parents. In most cases, that outcome is desirable. However, some 28,000 children have been in care for two years of more. Despite the failure of the state care system and the success of adoption, barely 2,000 children a year are adopted. We must ask why and ascertain what is going wrong.

The care system has been blighted by several scandals, which have been investigated. Ultimately, blame lies with the individuals who have abused the children in their care physically, sexually and psychologically, but blame also lies with us for not being sufficiently rigorous in ensuring that homes were better run.

There is an institutional hostility to adoption in our system, and we need to investigate and overcome it. Until recently, there was a preference for returning children in care to their parents. That is desirable when the parents are able to take them back, but fostering or retention in institutional care has also been preferred to adoption. The processes of adoption, the attitudes prevalent in the system and the incentives built into it are hurdles that discourage or delay adoption.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden pointed out, delays are endemic in the system. She related some telling cases and gave other evidence for that. The British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering study of some 1,600 children who had been adopted from care showed that, contrary to expectations, more than half entered care before their first birthday; more than half of those entered care within a month of being born. Many adopted children have therefore been in the care system since they were very young, yet the average age of placement is three-and-a-half years, and that of adoption is five-and-a-half years. There are long delays in the system for even the minority of children who are adopted.

The reason for the delay is not periods in care punctuated by periods with the birth parents. Eighty per cent. of adopted children never return to their birth parents. The excuse that children may return to their birth parents is often used for retaining children in care and not placing them for adoption, but 80 per cent. never do. They are in care precisely because their parents have proved unable or reluctant to look after them. The desire to return them to the birth parents is therefore often an excuse for retaining them in the system.

There is bureaucratic delay in the processes that my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden described, and a lack of urgency. As she pointed out, that is partly caused by the perhaps understandable desire to place the children who are more difficult to place—those who have been in care for a long time and suffer the most disadvantages—in adoptive homes. Emphasis is therefore placed not on the youngest children but on older children who have been in residential or foster care for some time. I believe that that approach is mistaken.

The evidence that the hon. Member for Tooting gave of people's willingness to adopt from abroad, often so that they can adopt a young child, suggests that plenty of people would adopt young children from care, but cannot do so because of the delays and processes that are inherent in our system. They therefore resort to going abroad to look for children, and even try to enter into commercial arrangements. I condemn that as wholeheartedly as the hon. Gentleman did.

Another institutional process that is so damaging to the young children who are ultimately in our care is the shuffling from pillar to post, whereby they are moved from foster family to foster family. Almost one in five children have more than three placements in a year; one in seven have more than six. Fewer than half of those who have been in care for four years or more have spent two years continuously with the same foster parent. We are

putting children in care at an added disadvantage, on top of all the problems that they experienced in their early life before they came into care. There has not been enough urgency in trying to overcome that.

For many, if not most, children in care, adoption—permanent placement in a loving household whose members are committed to them—is the most desirable outcome. We must speed up and simplify the process of achieving that happy outcome for many children, and remove the processes that delay it.

Another reason for my interest in this issue is that, by coincidence, I know a number of people who have been involved in adopting children. I spoke to a small number of them before this debate, to draw on their experience. They emphasised that adoption is not for parents; it is for children. Adoption takes advantage of the fact that there are parents with an unfulfilled desire to love children, and we are happy to have that supply of parents to meet the children's needs. That unfulfilled capacity to love exists in society through, for some, the misfortune of being unable to have children, and, for others, a willingness to take on children in addition to their own birth children.

Among the experiences that I heard from other people—I am just reporting what I heard; I am not suggesting that they are a random, representative sample—was what was referred to as, at best, mistrust and, at worst, hostility among some social workers towards potential adoptive parents. There was almost a presumption of guilt on the part of adoptive parents, who seemed to have to prove that they were innocent.

One parent described a sense that the social workers with whom he had dealt were too risk averse. Prolonged checks were carried out into the parent's background, attitudes and approach. That process is never gone through with birth parents, or with those receiving fertility treatment. Nor, apparently, is that thoroughness applied to those working in the care system—or certainly not as thoroughly as we now realise is necessary and desirable—or to the social workers who make these judgments.

One parent referred to the patronising approach that had been taken, citing a three-day parental tutoring course that he had been required to attend. He was already bringing up a child—his wife's child—but, none the less, he had to go on that course and indulge in role playing, some of it offensive, much of it demeaning. The participants were asked to undertake odd scenarios led by social workers who, in large part, were not married, had no experience of bringing up children and had little training but a lot of ideology. Such procedures have, unfortunately, been prevalent in local authority departments.

Another parent had adopted two children. The adoption processes had overlapped for the two children, and a social worker or guardian ad litem had been appointed for each child, in addition to a social worker being appointed in respect of each child to work with the parents. Four social workers were involved. I happened to know those parents while they were going through that process, and they said that three of the social workers had severe social problems. The adoptive parents had the added burden of coping with the social problems of the social workers who were meant to be helping them to adopt the children. That was a serious matter.

We are creating additional problems for adoptive parents. One or two of them said that other potential adoptive parents had been put off by the processes. One practical point noted by an adoptive parent was that, although social workers had been appointed to help with the process and to follow it through and ensure that the children were well placed and settling in, there was no out-of-hours contact with social workers. There was no helpline to call out of hours or at weekends. If there were crises—which seemed to happen at weekends—there was no way of getting in touch with social workers, not even an emergency helpline.

It would be a monstrous imposition to expect all social workers to be available 24 hours a day, but a helpline in the local authority social services department might be a desirable supplement to the help that we give adoptive parents to deal with the crises that can erupt at inconvenient times.

Other parents said that there was a presumption in the system that state care was the default option, and that it was not open to criticism. It was assumed to be positive and desirable. The adoptive parents had to prove simultaneously that they were exceptionally able—that it would, therefore, be worth taking a child out of care or foster care to give to them for adoption—and that they were not exceptional. If they were exceptional, they might be thought odd. If they were too clever, too bright or too motivated, that could often be taken as a negative factor. Parents had to prove that they were simultaneously exceptional and unexceptional to get through the process.

Class and anti-racist ideology were also mentioned. I have friends who are a mixed-race couple. Their attempts to adopt a child were refused. They were not fussed about the colour of the child whom they adopted, for obvious reasons, but when asked about their attitude to racism and racial intolerance in our society, they said that, yes, they had suffered direct personal experience of it and that it was a bad thing, but that ultimately it did not really disrupt their lives. That was not a satisfactory answer; it showed that they were insensitive to the problems of racism in society, and they were refused acceptance as adoptive parents by the local authority. Happily, they subsequently moved elsewhere and successfully adopted a child from a more enlightened local authority.

Attitudes hostile to the smooth and sensible operation of adoption have been built into the system. We must ensure that they are eradicated. I am sure that they are not universal, and that there are many dedicated, sensible social workers who are experienced in bringing up children in their personal lives, and who bring that experience and help to adoptive parents, but there are all too many exceptions, and those attitudes can become institutionalised. It is important that we eradicate that institutional hostility to adoption.

One very difficult point was mentioned by a parent to whom I spoke—the feeling that there is over-emphasis in the system on encouraging birth parents to demand and exercise a right of on-going contact with their child. That is a difficult issue for adoptive parents. No one wants to break the link between the child and his or her birth parents unnecessarily.

I am merely reporting the case that was put to me, which was that if the birth parent has been thoroughly unable to look after the child and has agreed that it should

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

be adopted, it is in many cases—perhaps not always—easier for the adoptive parents to have unique parental responsibility, rather than suffering the sporadic interventions of a birth parent who is encouraged by the system to pay occasional and sometimes disruptive visits.

I do not have an easy sense of how one strikes the balance between the possibility of retaining a link with the birth parents, and not doing so. On certain occasions, however, we should allow—as I believe the courts have—a clear run for the adoptive parents when there is a danger that contact with the birth parents might be disruptive, at least until the child nears adulthood.

All those problems can discourage prospective adoptive parents from coming forward. That is sad, when there are children in care who would be better off in adoptive households, and for whom no adoptive parents are available.

What are the remedies? My hon. Friend's Bill provides some important improvements on the present system, particularly the fast-tracking procedure that she emphasised for younger children. If those younger children are clearly not to return to their birth parents, they must be speedily placed in adoptive homes so that they do not have a disrupted early childhood and can rapidly bond with their new parents at an early stage. All the evidence is that they will be much more likely to have happy and settled futures ahead of them if that happens. We must cut out unnecessary delays.

The passporting of finance is also important. One or two parents whom I spoke to said that there appears to be a financial incentive to keep children in the system: the greater the number who are satisfactorily moved to adoption, the more the institutional handling of such children will shrink. That causes a subconscious feeling that the financial incentives built into the system discourage adoption. We do not want that to be exacerbated when a child is moved between local authorities. Therefore, if finance can be passported to remove any disincentive and to ensure that there is adequate provision for aftercare, help and support for an adoptive family, that will be a good thing.

The appeals mechanism is important and my hon. Friend's proposed ombudsman system for all the parties involved would help to smooth over some of the problems. It would also probably help to change attitudes, and I emphasise that point. Change is happening spontaneously and I hope that the Government, through their Bill, take forward that change of attitude in the service to achieve a much more positive approach to encouraging adoption and encouraging parents to come forward and adopt.

That is a matter not only for Members of the House and the Government, but for Churches and community groups, which should encourage people with an unfulfilled capacity to love children to take them into their homes, not least in the case of some of the most difficult and damaged, who would otherwise remain in the care of institutions.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing her Bill and welcome the Government's. I believe that the measures are complementary and I hope that they represent the point in our generation at which we can improve the provision for children whom otherwise we have lamentably failed.

11.22 am

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I never thought that I would stand up in the Chamber and say that the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) reminds me of the Sundance Kid, but all that has changed this morning. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, will remember that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were employed by a Mexican miner to protect his shipment of gold, which was going up the hill, not down it, as he had to point out to them.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): Was he not a Colombian miner?

Mr. Gardiner: As the hon. Gentleman is far more expert than me not only on cinematography but on Latin America, I am happy to accept his correction.

The key fact is that, when interviewed for that job, the Sundance Kid was told to shoot at a coin that the Colombian mine owner threw on to the ground. Sundance felt very uncomfortable about that. He got out his gun, aimed and fired. He got pretty close to the coin, sitting there on the ground, but he missed. That was probably the first time in his life that he had missed anything with a bullet. Then he said, "Now can I move?" The Colombian said, "Yes, you can do what you like." So he moved, drew his gun, fired at the coin as it flew through the air and hit it several times before it landed. That is the point of the story: the hon. Member for Meriden is unique in choosing to go for a moving target rather than a standing one.

The hon. Lady's measure is a Bill to

"amend the law on adoption."

The question is, which law on adoption? Is it that which is in force or that which may result from the Government's introduction of a Bill whose Second Reading we debated on Monday? Their proposal is a Bill to

"restate and amend the law about adoption and amend the Children Act 1989."

It may pass through the House and become law. Why has she chosen a moving target? I find it absolutely inexplicable. Usually, if one disagrees with a Bill, one ensures that one makes a speech on Second Reading and tables amendments in Committee. That is the normal procedure in the House.

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that when my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) entered the ballot, the Government had not announced in the Queen's Speech any intention to introduce an adoption Bill. She offered the Government the chance to use her Bill, but they did not take that up. Indeed, they published their own Bill very late in the day. My hon. Friend has introduced a useful measure and I hope that he agrees, like other Labour Members, that it complements the Government's Bill.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. However, he must know that the Prime Minister announced that he would personally lead a review of adoption policy in February 2000—not this year. He commissioned the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit to assess the evidence and prepare a report making recommendations for Government policy. The Cabinet Office report, entitled "Prime Minister's Review: Adoption", was published for consultation in

July 2000. A White Paper entitled "Adoption: a new approach" was published in December 2000. It included a commitment to introduce new adoption legislation in 2001. That is the Bill that we discussed earlier this week.

Mrs. Spelman: There is an important distinction here and the point about 2001 was made very clearly when we withdrew our new clause during debate on the Care Standards Act 2000. The hon. Gentleman is ignoring the fact that the election was likely to be announced, and had it been called for 5 April the Government Bill would never have received a Second Reading.

Mr. Gardiner: I listen to what the hon. Lady says and my purpose is not to be obstructive and destructive, but the positive work of engaging with the Government and, to use a word uttered many times by Opposition Members, weaving the changes proposed in her Bill into the Government's legislation would be far better done in the Standing Committee considering the Government Bill. I have made my point.

Every Member of the House would agree that amendment of the adoption law is long overdue. The Adoption and Children Bill introduced to Parliament by the Government on 15 March is substantially the most important such measure for some time and it will thoroughly reform adoption law in England and Wales. It represents the most radical overhaul in about 20 years and follows the adoption White Paper published in December 2000.

The new legislation will play an essential part in underpinning the programme that we set out in the White Paper to encourage greater use of adoption and to deliver our target of a 40 per cent. increase in the number of adoptions from care by 2004-05. It will transform adoption services and put the interests of children at the centre of the adoption process.

On Monday, the whole House was shocked to hear the statistics that the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), proclaimed to the House:

"At any one time, local councils look after almost 58,000 young people, seven in 10 of whom leave care at 16 without an educational qualification of any sort. Almost four in 10 male prisoners under the age of 21 have been looked after at some stage in their lives and 25 per cent. of the people sleeping rough on the streets of London have been in care."

As my hon. Friend went on to say:

"That is a failure not of the children in care, but of the system of care."—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2001; Vol. 59, c. 698.]

That is why it is right for this House, in its deliberations earlier this week and in future on the Government Bill, and in its deliberations today, to pay particular attention to that issue.

As quite a regular at our Friday morning debates, I must say in passing that I was overwhelmed to see how full the House was this morning. I know that normally Fridays are sacrosanct for many hon. Members, who like to spend them in their constituencies—*[Interruption.]* I am sure that they are taking surgeries and doing other very important work.

The fact that our Chamber is fuller today than it normally is on a Friday must be a testimony to the hon. Member for Meriden and her Bill, and her capacity to engender support for it among her colleagues, many of whom are supporting her this morning. I would hate to think that it had anything to do with the second Bill on the Order Paper—the Secret Societies (Registration of Membership) Bill, which would

"Require that a person elected to public office shall register with the public body to which he has been elected his membership of any secret society",

such as the freemasons.

I can, of course, register that—

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): Is the hon. Gentleman a freemason?

Mr. Gardiner: No. I can register that I have no such connection with any secret society.

I hope that it is not because of any desire to obstruct the Bill to be introduced by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) later this morning that we see such a large body of Members on the Opposition Benches. I hope that, like the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), who is not in his place at the moment, but has been attending closely to the debate most of the morning, those hon. Members all have a long-standing commitment to child welfare in this country. I know that that is an interest that the hon. Gentleman, like the hon. Member for Meriden, has pursued on many occasions.

Mrs. Spelman: I wrote to all 659 Members to encourage them to attend the debates when I originally decided to introduce the Bill. When the Government Bill was introduced, many Members wrote back to me, and more than 40 people said yes, but the hon. Gentleman was not one of them, so he did not receive my billet doux earlier this week containing the draft Bill and an explanatory note. Had he done so, he would have seen that I redoubled my efforts with those who said that they would be able to attend, but unfortunately, he did not receive the briefing.

Mr. Gardiner: The hon. Lady's efforts have clearly not gone unrewarded, and she is well supported.

By modernising and overhauling the adoption law, the Adoption and Children Bill will play a vital role in the drive to transform the adoption service and get many more looked-after children adopted. The Bill will support the White Paper programme in five key ways.

The Bill puts the needs of the child at the centre of the adoption process by aligning the Adoption and Children Bill with the Children Act 1959 in making the child's welfare of paramount concern in all decisions concerning adoption. It will encourage more people to adopt looked-after children, by ensuring that the support that they need will be available, and local authorities will have a clear-cut duty to provide an adoption support service and a new right to an assessment for new adoptive families, as promised in the White Paper.

In clause 1, the hon. Lady seeks, as she puts it, to make the allowances follow the child, to ensure that the cost of taking care of the child when adopted should be able to cross local authority boundaries. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)—I apologise to him for having caught only the latter part of his speech, because I was temporarily out of the Chamber when he began it—referred to the disparity between what happens when a new child is received into a natural family and when a child is received into an adoptive family.

[Mr. Gardiner]

As the parent of four children, I echo that sentiment. I well remember taking my first child home, being presented with him on the hospital steps by the sister, and thinking, "Well, is that it?" There was no induction procedure, whether for three days or any other length of time. Natural parents have got to get on with it. *[Interruption.]* Yes, there is often a crisis at weekends in my house—but there is no hotline for social services to send someone to sort it out.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said that we must begin to treat adoptive parents more like natural parents and say, "They are parents now; let them get on with it." That applies equally when considering what the hon. Lady suggests in clause 1—

Mr. Heald *rose—*

Mr. David Davis *rose—*

Mr. Gardiner: I would be happy to give way on that point—as soon as I have finished making it.

It seems to me that a child adopted by parents in a local authority area becomes, not the child who came from local authority A and is an import to local authority B, stigmatised by having some awkward financial relationship tailing back, but simply a child of that area, as any other local child would be. The hon. Lady must consider carefully the potential stigma for the child funded by a distant local authority—although I understand her reasons for wanting the money to follow the child.

As for allowances following the child, the hon. Lady talked about capital allowances whereby, perhaps, if a family were accepting siblings together, their car could be upgraded from a saloon to a people carrier. I found that part of her speech somewhat strange. We could have been forgiven for thinking that the Conservative party had proposed to increase the social security budget rather than refusing to match the Government's spending proposals. The idea that adoptive children will bring with them large enough resources to upgrade the family car is strange.

Mr. Heald: I was surprised by what the hon. Gentleman said earlier, because when people adopt older children, many come with a host of problems from their earlier lives. I suggest that training for adoptive parents is important in such cases, and that the sort of financial support that my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden talked about is vital too. I invite the hon. Gentleman to reconsider the points that he has been making. If people take on a child who has been placed in short-term foster care on numerous occasions, especially if an attempt is being made to re-establish a disintegrated family, with the child moving backwards and forwards, they will certainly need some help.

Mr. Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands me. I do not propose that there should not be allowances available when a child comes into a new family, but that they should not necessarily follow from the old authority. My objections related to the transfer from one authority into the new area.

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman has been a distinguished member of the Public Accounts Committee, and has been a signatory to a number of reports in which we have highlighted perverse behaviour by local authorities. Housing benefit is an example that comes to mind. Local authorities can behave perversely because they would lose out as a result of a proper action. My hon. Friend's proposals are designed to prevent such perverse behaviour. How would the hon. Gentleman's proposals achieve that?

Mr. Gardiner: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point, but perhaps he did not listen carefully enough to what I said. I said that I thought there was another aspect that the hon. Member for Meriden should consider. I did not say that there was not good reason in principle to ensure that money follows the child: support must be provided.

I appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman said about perverse incentives, but it is important for the new local authority providing care to have a sense of ownership of the child in the new community, and a sense that this child is different. The existence of a funding stream relating to the previous authority may create an artificial distinction between the children in the new authority's remit. I am not saying that the point about perverse incentives was not fair, but there must be some way of overcoming the resistance of authorities to the transfer or acceptance of children into adoptive-parent structures.

Mr. Davis: Might not the same end be achieved by a ring-fenced direct change in standard spending assessment? That would have exactly the same effect.

Mr. Gardiner: In many respects, that might indeed be a better way around the problem.

The existing adoption legislation needs to be changed, and the Adoption and Children Bill, which we discussed earlier in the week, will help that. It will support efforts to build confidence in the adoption process—efforts whose importance has been stressed by Members on both side of the House today—by encouraging more people to come forward to adopt, and enabling the Secretary of State to establish an independent review mechanism for applicants who consider that they are being turned down unfairly. It will help to cut harmful delays. We have already set challenging time targets for decision making in the application process in the draft national adoption standards that were published with the White Paper. The Bill provides for the Secretary of State to establish a national adoption register to reduce delays for adopters and children waiting to be matched, which must be a good thing. It also includes measures requiring the courts to draw up timetables for adoption cases, to help cut delays in the legal process.

The Bill that we are now discussing deals with an important topic, which all Members think the Government should address and which the Government have rightly addressed. I believe that the best way of ensuring that we have the best legislation for our children is for the Adoption and Children Bill to receive widespread and all-party support, for Members to engage in constructive discussion of that Bill both here and in the Standing Committee, and for sensible amendments—such as those contained in the hon. Lady's Bill, which make important points and may well improve the Government's legislation—to be made in that Committee. I do not

believe that the hon. Lady's Bill, as a free-standing private Member's Bill, is appropriate at this stage of the parliamentary process.

11.44 am

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): Let me begin by declaring an interest. As a solicitor, I practised for some years in the field of family law and adoption, before moving on to a career in crime—[*Laughter.*] Perhaps that is the wrong phrase. In due course I sat, and continue to sit, as a recorder in the Crown court, and as a district judge in the magistrates courts.

Putting children's needs at the centre of the process: that is a laudable aim. The Government Bill sought to achieve that aim, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on her Bill because it complements the Government's Bill. As the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) said earlier, Friday mornings can show the House at its best, when Members are not arguing with each other but trying to be constructive.

I believe that adoption should be very high on our agenda. I ask Members to accompany me on a journey. Let them come with me to the courts where I sit day after day—perhaps to Camberwell Green, or to the south-western court of Clapham; perhaps to Greenwich, Woolwich, or the Thames court at Bow in Poplar. Let them sit with me on the bench, and look at the court in front of me. They will see 50, 60, 70 defendants, all to be dealt with that morning. Many are aged between 18 and 21. They are there for crimes of violence involving drink—quite often—or drugs—quite often.

The defendant may be black, or he may be white. He is young: he is certainly young. Before we sentence him we read the pre-sentence report, which reads as follows. "This defendant has a very troubled background. His father was violent; his mother was an alcoholic. When he was two his home life broke up, and he was taken into care. He spent some time with foster parents, then went back into care, then went back to the foster parents. Between the ages of five and 17, he was in care. He never had a settled background; he never acquired a qualification. He was in care, in care, in care."

If Members look up from the bench, they will see the young man in front of them. He represents a real problem: the link between a family background that is non-existent—a really troubled childhood—and crime. As was said earlier today, some 40 per cent. of young criminals have been in care. I do not often read a report that tells me that a young man, or woman, was adopted at the age of one and brought up by a loving couple. Oh no: I read "in care".

Let no one be under any illusions about the crisis that faces a nation in which, as I am led to believe, nearly 60,000 children are in care. That is the future criminal generation—and who is to say that it is their fault? Did not my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) say that the state was not a good parent, or words to that effect? How right he was. That is why this is such an important debate. Was it the Jesuits who said, "Give us a child until he is seven, and we can always keep him thereafter", or something like that? Do we not all know that those are indeed the most formative years of a child's life?

I understand that there are some 4,000 adoptions per year in England and Wales. I would be interested to know the number of children available for adoption, and whether that 4,000 figure represents as small a proportion of the available children as I believe it does.

Mr. Swayne: The 4,000 figure represents a fall from the figure of some 25,000 in 1975.

Mr. Malins: I did not know that. It is a telling statistic, and it must have something to do with the problems of the young in our society today.

I should also like to know what proportion of the 4,000 children are aged between nought and two, what proportion are aged between two and four, what proportion are between four and eight and what proportion are between eight and 12. If adoption is to be effective, it is surely terribly important for a young child to be very young when adopted—no older than eight or nine.

I want to comment on one or two aspects of my hon. Friend's Bill and compare it with the Government's Bill. Under clause 96 of the Government Bill, the Secretary of State can establish and maintain a national adoption register containing some prescribed information—so far so good—but we all agree that there is a need to ensure that the process of matching children and parents should become much more effective and efficient. One feels—dare I say it?—that the dead hand of bureaucracy and paperwork, which is daily and irresistibly increasing in our lives, needs to be kept in check as much as possible in the adoption process. We all agree that the process of matching children and parents should take a much shorter time. Every day or month that slips by can delay the much needed arrival of the stability and security that adoption can bring.

Most usefully, my hon. Friend's Bill focuses on the need to passport the money. Currently, a disincentive exists, as an authority that receives a child from another authority will be liable for all payments connected to it. Under her Bill, the authority responsible for the child—the one under which the adoption plan for the child was made—will have financial responsibility too.

I move to the appeals system and an omission in the Government Bill which I believe most of us recognise. Currently, appeals go into the system. Often, a complaint against an authority is dealt with by the director of social services. It has been pointed out that that is not always a satisfactory situation. My hon. Friend's Bill widens the appeals process. It refers to the ability of an adoptive parent or prospective adoptive parent to appeal against any decision by an adoption agency. It goes further; it states that the guardian ad litem for a child may appeal against any decision by an adoption agency that materially affects the interests of that child.

The role of the guardian ad litem is important and should perhaps be extended considerably in time, noting as we should his obvious ability to articulate complaints that the child or young person could not so readily do. Should there not be provision for those who may be concerned about a child to make a complaint on behalf of the child—for example, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, a paediatrician who may have a lot of contact through his or her professional life with a child and who may have any number of concerns? The Children's Commissioner

[Mr. Malins]

for Wales and the children's rights director in England could be given power to oversee the whole process of adoption and to act as ombudsman. They could and perhaps should be given unrestricted access to the child in care to establish at the point of delivery whether proper care is being provided and whether the adoption process is proceeding fast enough.

I move to what we call the fast-tracking of babies within the adoption system. It is dealt with in clause 3 of my hon. Friend's Bill. We all know that it is much easier to place a baby for adoption than an older child such as a teenager. In recent times, much emphasis has been placed on the tricky placement of those older children. That is all very well, but has that been at the expense of placing babies and very young children?

Some children are growing up in a succession of foster homes. It is difficult for them to form a stable and permanent relationship with any adoptive family. That is doubly bad, for we all know that the younger a child is, the more easily it will settle into a new family. Equally, if younger children are placed more efficiently and quickly, there will be fewer older and, by definition, more difficult children to deal with. A fast track for adoption of babies and young children where time limits were lower than for older children would thus help to reduce the problem. The main point is that it is critical that a young child should have the chance to settle into a family as soon as possible.

Let us never forget that the needs of the child are paramount, and that that child is already—do not forget it—damaged by the fact that its home life is in some difficulty. Next and most importantly, as institutions, the family and marriage are still vital to the safe continuance of a free society. It saddens me that they are both institutions that in today's climate are often sneered at and undervalued. All research confirms that the best, although not of course the only, environment for children to be brought up in is marriage. A stable home based on marriage and the family, and the influence of a mother and father, are the best guarantees against a child turning to crime—I should know that.

Let me ask hon. Members to look up from their desk in Camberwell court and see the young man aged 19 who is standing trembling 10 yd away, and who, for the 14th, 12th or 10th time, is before us for sentence. He has never been adopted. He should have been adopted as a baby because then he would have had a chance. He was in care. Which of us dares look at him and tell him to go to Feltham young offenders institution for over-18s, the biggest hell-hole I have ever seen, for six months? That is why I say that adoption should go right to the top of our agenda when we think about young people.

11.57 am

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), first, on being successful in the private Member's Bill ballot last December, secondly, on choosing adoption as the subject for her Bill and her excellent presentation this morning, and thirdly, for revealing a serious omission in the Labour Government's legislative programme that was outlined in the Queen's Speech. I am sure that the Minister is aware that many of us were extremely disappointed that adoption was not given priority by the Government at the beginning of the parliamentary Session, but I am pleased that that has now been corrected by the Government's recently published Bill on adoption and children, which had its Second Reading last Monday.

Unfortunately, I was unable to participate in that debate owing to other parliamentary commitments, but naturally I welcome any measures that focus on the interests of children throughout adoption procedures. I know that Opposition Front Benchers have indicated their support for the principle of that Bill. I also, of course, welcome my hon. Friend's Bill, which addresses additional adoption issues.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) for their contributions to today's debate. I think that they have clearly demonstrated the consensus on both sides of the Chamber on encouraging adoption by means of the measures that the House is considering.

Hon. Members may know that I was Chairman of the Select Committee on Health for five years, from 1992 to 1997, in which time the Committee undertook an inquiry into children's health. It was the first time such an inquiry had been conducted. The inquiry was very wide ranging, and it was broken down into reports on specific headings—such as the health needs of children and young people; health services for children and young people in the community, home and school; child and adolescent mental health services; and hospital services for children and young people. Unfortunately, the 1997 general election interrupted our programme of investigations.

Following that general election, I was no longer a member of that Committee. However, I am delighted to say that the new Committee members continued the unfinished business and, in July 1998, produced a report on children looked after by local authorities in which, of course, adoption featured.

The report endorsed the view that the Children Act 1989 is correct to presume that the best possible outcome to episodes of care is the child's successful reunion with a loving birth family which receives appropriate support to enable it to cope with the child. None the less, in some cases, there is no realistic prospect of a child ever returning to his or her birth family. In those circumstances, adoption is one of a number of options that should be considered.

Adoption should proceed only when, first, it is judged that there is no realistic prospect of reconciliation with the birth family; secondly, when adoption is in accord with the wishes of the child, assuming of course that the child is old enough to reach a decision on such matters; and thirdly, when the would-be adoptive parents have been assessed as capable of coping with the demands that the child will place on them.

A social services inspectorate report, with the evidence that the Health Committee took from others at that time, made it clear that local authorities too often fail to take adoption sufficiently seriously as an option, that unnecessary delays occur and that insufficient support is offered to adoptive parents. When a looked-after child is adopted, it is important that the decision-making process should proceed without undue delay, and that appropriate support be offered to adoptive parents during and after the process of adoption.

In 1996, the social services inspectorate found that serious delays frequently occurred between the forming of a plan for the adoption of a child and the making of a placement. Those delays were found to be attributable partly to the absence of a sense of urgency on the part of the social services department or an unwillingness to commit resources to the cost of inter-agency placement. Of course we know that some local authorities discharge their duties competently. However, several of the witnesses who came before the Committee claimed that social services departments and social workers can display an irrational hostility to the concept of adoption.

The organisation Adoption Forum stated that the

"presumption that all children are better off with their birth families . . . is palpably lacking in common sense when so many children are mistreated, abused and neglected by those families",

and claimed that

"linked to this presumption is the practice of returning children time and again to their abusers or those who have been seen to be unable to deal with life as a parent . . . functioning biology does not make a person a good enough parent".

Adoption Forum argued that a child who has been "looked after" continuously for six months is unlikely to be successfully reconciled with his or her birth family in the long term, that in such cases adoption should be considered, and that it should be a statutory requirement for adoption to be considered in the cases of children who have spent more than 18 months in the care system.

A group of adoptive parents also gave oral evidence to the Health Select Committee. They claimed that many social workers were biased against adoption and that, when mothers were unable to cope with very young children and wished to have them adopted, undue pressure was often brought to bear on them to change their mind.

Sir William Utting said that his review team, reporting on the safeguards for children living away from home, had found evidence in 1987 that

"authorities are too careful and painstaking in their regard for parental rights and are less active in protecting children against known or suspected harm . . . some children told us that one of the worst things for them was actually being made to go home at weekends to families where they had been abused".

The Parent to Parent Information on Adoption Services body agreed with the Adoption Forum that

"delays and too stringent criteria"

in the current care system made it unnecessarily difficult to adopt. However, it added that an improved system would still not turn thousands of young, inexperienced, infertile couples who long for a baby into parents immediately able to take on board the needs and behaviour of an 18-month-old who has been severely neglected from birth, an eight-year-old who has been rejected by his birth mother, abused by his mother's partners and moved 26 times through the care system, or a group of four brothers and sisters who need to stay together and to recover from years of sexual abuse.

Clause 3, which deals with fast tracking for the adoption of babies and young children, is particularly relevant to the points that I have raised. There is no doubt in my mind that it is in the best interests of a child to settle as young as possible into a new and permanent family unit. Let us make no mistake about it—influences on small babies and young children can have a profound effect on how they develop and mature. A warm, stable and, importantly, loving environment in which to grow up from the earliest moment is essential for laying the foundations of a well balanced and happy adult—an individual who will take their place in society as a contributor to the well-being of their community and give their own families, in due course, security and the knowledge of the meaning of loving care.

The more disruption there is in a child's life, the more difficult it may become to place that child as it grows older and to heal the damage from which it may have suffered, both physically and mentally, during the course of its early years.

12.8 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I support the Bill of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and I am delighted that it has been introduced. Just like waiting for a bus, we have waited ages for such a Bill, and now two have come along at once. It is ironic that we have had what seems like Bill after Bill on this subject in the past couple of weeks.

I should like to declare two interests. The first is formal: I am a member of Stockport metropolitan borough council's social services committee, which is an adopting agency, so I see some of these issues from the local authority's angle. It has been a matter of intense concern to members of the committee to ensure that the life chances and educational chances of children in our care and protection are handled sensitively, and that we provide them in full measure as best we can.

My second interest is informal. I have five children, two of whom are adopted and of mixed race. They would probably be a little insulted to be described as children; they are both in their twenties and are making their way, very successfully, in the world. One of the facts of life in the adoption culture is that we would not have been permitted to adopt them if we had begun to do so five years later than we did because of their mixed racial background. I therefore have a particular perspective on the debate.

As my earlier intervention on the hon. Member for Meriden showed, I think that preserving young people's life and educational chances is absolutely fundamental. That is the why I strongly support the changes to the adoption laws proposed in the Bill and in the Adoption and Children Bill, which the Government have introduced. The delays, the multiple placements, the changed physical locations, the different relationships that children have to form, the different schools that they attend, the different school friends that they have to make and the damage to a young person's emotional development that all that implies are precisely what creates the circumstances that the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) outlined in referring to his court experiences. We must recognise the tremendous damage that we do simply because we try too hard to ensure that the care and the parents are appropriate.

If the revised laws, which I hope will soon be introduced, have the effect that their promoters, including the hon. Lady, want them to have, and if we can do anything to reduce the disruption and emotional betrayal, we will have done young people a tremendous service and, incidentally, produced real benefits for society. The fact of the matter is that children who slip through the adoption system are exactly the people who turn up in court later on.

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

As an adoptive parent, I am perhaps in a good position to make a couple of points. Children are not a commodity. We are not simply trying to produce a more efficient supermarket so that the goods reach consumers as quickly as possible. The proposals are not about making it easy for adoptive parents; they must never be seen as a way to fulfil the wishes of middle-class couples in the shortest possible time. I say in all sincerity that, like every other hon. Member, I deal with people seeking adoption and a variety of matters relating to adoption, and people's expectations can be based on their own wish fulfilment, rather than on meeting the needs of children and young people.

Having said that, I want to turn to the remarks of the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner), who spoke about the training that adoptive parents undergo and the lack of training that he had as a natural parent. My wife and I had two natural children before starting our programme of adoption, if that is not too grand a title. We were aware of the stark contrast that existed. We did not have to ask anyone, and no one asked us, about our two natural children, but as soon as we wanted to adopt, people started to ask questions. When we had the first two, no one knew whether we were alcoholics, drug abusers or child abusers, and no one asked.

Luck was on our side and everything was okay, but as soon as we sought to adopt, every question was asked and every examination carried out. I do not resent that at all—in fact, it has brought my wife and I to a conclusion that is the reverse of that reached by the hon. Member for Brent, North: it should be rather more difficult to have natural children.

Mr. David Davis: Has the hon. Gentleman any proposals?

Mr. Stunell: I am well aware that a bit of levity does not go amiss, but we need to ensure that our young people have the parenting skills that make them effective natural parents, as well as ensuring that those who seek to become adoptive parents have the requisite skills. The level of skill needed is not lower for natural parents; it is the same. We make real efforts to ensure that adoptive parents have those skills. We test their skills before we let them loose. Parenting skills should perhaps be another subject in the national curriculum.

The hon. Member for Meriden needs to do a little more work on two or three points. She talked about extending the role of guardians ad litem so that they play a supervisory role for longer. The Minister asked precisely what she meant, and I hope that she will not mind my saying that she was a teeny bit woolly in her response. Does she envisage an extra six months, six years or 16 years? My experience as a member of a social services committee is that guardians ad litem are like gold dust. They have to be qualified social workers from outside the area. In Stockport, a number of our senior social workers already spend a good deal of their time acting as guardians to children in other authorities, and vice versa. There is a problem about expecting senior qualified people on loan from other authorities to provide the service for an extended period. That is not to say that behind her proposal there is not a good idea, but the hon. Lady perhaps needs to take a second look at it.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) made a point about the life experience that social workers bring to the job. My experience of adoption is many years ago now, but the social worker whom we dealt with was a young, unmarried woman. There was no harm in that; she was excellent. I have no complaints, but I hear stories that suggest that social workers sometimes come to the task with little idea of what bringing up children is about and carry out tests as though from a book. Some parents who have more experience of children and of life find that pretty tedious, especially if they are rejected. There is an issue not so much about social work training as about ensuring that social workers have the life experience that will fit them for their role.

I do not want to nit-pick with regard to this Bill or the Government's Bill. I am delighted that we are at last making progress in an area that cries out for reform, and I wish the Bill well.

12.17 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): There is in my part of the world a rather apposite proverb, which is that good ideas have many parents and bad ideas have none. By that measure, the proposed adoption legislation is a good idea, because many claims have been made to its parenthood—to its maternity and paternity rights. I will not revisit the spat that we had on Monday, but my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) has done a good job of midwifery on the legislative programme in encouraging what may be one of the most important pieces of social legislation of the decade. Her Bill highlights and corrects gaps in the Government's Adoption and Children Bill that were recognised by hon. Members on both sides of the House, including the Minister, on Monday.

It is clear that the Government's Bill was rapidly drafted. That is why the Government sensibly took the route of a special Select Committee, which no doubt will run into the next Parliament, whichever party wins the general election. Notable omissions were picked up in Monday's debate, and my hon. Friend has corrected them all in her Bill. We should be careful with social legislation, especially if it is important and is supported by Members on both sides of the House. Such legislation is most prone to being enacted without sufficient care and attention to detail. The Bill to create the Child Support Agency, to introduce care in the community and a series of other Bills are examples of that.

I am sorry that the Minister is not on the Bench, but I hope that the Government will adopt my hon. Friend's proposals in the special Select Committee that will consider their Bill. That is their best chance of making the statute book.

It is difficult to follow the many excellent speeches that have been made, including from the past Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), a magistrate who has dealt with the victims, if that is the right word, of the current system, a past Secretary of State for Social Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), and my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden. I shall be brief, and take up one point on each of the three clauses.

First, I refer to the passporting of money, on which there was some argument across the Chamber. The best example of the need for it was highlighted when the

British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, which represents most of the local authorities involved in adoption and fostering, tried to introduce a national adoption scheme of its own, by circulating pictures and details of children to many parents throughout the country. That scheme was thwarted by local authorities refusing to allow parents in their areas to cross borders. They had spent money on selecting parents. That simple resource shortage thwarted the first voluntary attempt to set up a national adoption register.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden is entirely right when she says that we must have a capitation scheme. It does not matter whether that goes through the standard spending assessment directly or whether it is a legislative scheme, as is proposed. It must be clear, and it must apply to voluntary agencies. There are quite serious problems even between the voluntary sector and local authorities in this context.

For example, most local authorities think that it costs about £3,000 to recruit a new adoptive parent. Voluntary agencies have to find £14,000 for each parent. There are real problems in terms of how much to pay and where the money will come from, which thwarted the previous attempt to set up a register. These problems apply also to the various types of children who are passed on, and include age and the extent of damage. Those factors should dictate different levels of capitation. Therefore, the system will need to be carefully thought through.

My hon. Friend was right when she spoke about the appeals system. The White Paper contains several paragraphs that start with these words:

"The Government will legislate to revise the review mechanism for assessments, to establish a new independent system."

That is taken up in some detail in paragraph 6.23. The matter is important in its own right. As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said, there are some difficulties. However, it is necessarily important, not only because it will provide justice within the system but because it will change the behaviour patterns of local authorities.

One of the difficulties within local authorities is the lack of oversight. In a non-transparent system, the pressures to behave properly and justly, with a view to the right outcome in the long term, disappear. They are often subsumed by matters such as resource shortages or the department having only untrained youngsters to put into the adoption and fostering sector. We are talking of a necessary requirement for justice and for a change of behaviour.

The Bill contains a proposal to fast-track babies, which arose on Monday. There is no doubt that it is an extremely important issue, as the Minister recognised on Monday. It is dreadful that the Association of Directors of Social Services does not recognise that. It does not regard fast tracking as one of the most serious issues to be taken on board. That is why legislation is required, or strong legislative guidance.

It is obviously assumed that fast tracking is the right thing. It is clear that a year in care for a one-year-old does more harm than a year in care for an 11-year-old, who perhaps has already been in care for 10 years. Statistics show that break-up rates for older children are much higher than those for younger children, but that does not pick up the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, which was that the qualitative nature of the bond with a one-year-old is different from the bond with an 11-year-old. One knows that if one has teenage children, let alone if they are adopted. The Minister has accepted that argument, but directors of social services departments do not, and we must make that clear.

Finally, record keeping is extraordinarily important. Again, it is not dealt with in legislation, but it is important to recognise it from the perspective of social services directors and local authorities. Do social services directors know about all the children who have been moved six or seven times or even, in the case I cited on Monday night, 60 times? If a child dies in care from a drugs overdose, having been moved 60 times, social services directors must know how many times the child had been moved, and must have that drawn to their attention; the information must be easily available. Furthermore, everybody in their department must know that the figures will be available to the world at large—not information about individuals, but overall statistics on how well the department has done and what has happened to the children in its care.

If we do not have those records, the situation will continue; the placing of children will be driven by resources—how many foster parents are available—and the expediency of having to solve a problem by the end of the week, rather than solving it properly. My hon. Friend is right to put record keeping in her Bill.

May I repeat to the Minister what I said at the beginning of my speech? I hope that he will take note of the points that I have made, none of which is partisan, and virtually all of which were made on Monday by Members on both sides of the House, including the chairman of the all-party adoption group, a member of the Minister's own party. All those points are important and are perfect items to be considered during the special Select Committee stage of the Government Bill. That is the best way to ensure that the Minister gets a good Bill and that my hon. Friend's Bill makes it into law.

12.27 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on introducing a timely measure? I pay tribute to the work that she has put in during the lead-up to the presentation of her Bill, especially in the past week, not least since the publication of the Government Bill. A tremendous effort is involved in putting together and introducing a Bill that is in order, especially when there is short notice as a consequence of the introduction of a Government Bill on the subject.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the impact that she has had in expediting the Government measure. She sounded a cautionary note on the necessity of staying in order when debating her Bill, given the existence of the Government Bill; I took that as a warning that I should not be tempted to repeat the speech that I made on the Government Bill on Monday. I shall endeavour not to repeat myself but, given the number of Members who did not speak on Monday but have had a second opportunity to address the House on an important subject, it will be difficult to avoid much of the same agenda, even if I avoid making the same speech.

In her exposition of her Bill, my hon. Friend was extremely lucid about the importance of passporting finance and the question of an adoption allowance. If any

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

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12.17 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): There is in my part of the world a rather apposite proverb, which is that good ideas have many parents and bad ideas have none. By that measure, the proposed adoption legislation is a good idea, because many claims have been made to its parenthood—to its maternity and paternity rights. I will not revisit the spat that we had on Monday, but my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) has done a good job of midwifery on the legislative programme in encouraging what may be one of the most important pieces of social legislation of the decade. Her Bill highlights and corrects gaps in the Government's Adoption and Children Bill that were recognised by hon. Members on both sides of the House, including the Minister, on Monday.

It is clear that the Government's Bill was rapidly drafted. That is why the Government sensibly took the route of a special Select Committee, which no doubt will run into the next Parliament, whichever party wins the general election. Notable omissions were picked up in Monday's debate, and my hon. Friend has corrected them all in her Bill. We should be careful with social legislation, especially if it is important and is supported by Members on both sides of the House. Such legislation is most prone to being enacted without sufficient care and attention to detail. The Bill to create the Child Support Agency, to introduce care in the community and a series of other Bills are examples of that.

I am sorry that the Minister is not on the Bench, but I hope that the Government will adopt my hon. Friend's proposals in the special Select Committee that will consider their Bill. That is their best chance of making the statute book.

It is difficult to follow the many excellent speeches that have been made, including from the past Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), a magistrate who has dealt with the victims, if that is the right word, of the current system, a past Secretary of State for Social Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), and my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden. I shall be brief, and take up one point on each of the three clauses.

First, I refer to the passporting of money, on which there was some argument across the Chamber. The best example of the need for it was highlighted when the

British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, which represents most of the local authorities involved in adoption and fostering, tried to introduce a national adoption scheme of its own, by circulating pictures and details of children to many parents throughout the country. That scheme was thwarted by local authorities refusing to allow parents in their areas to cross borders. They had spent money on selecting parents. That simple resource shortage thwarted the first voluntary attempt to set up a national adoption register.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden is entirely right when she says that we must have a capitation scheme. It does not matter whether that goes through the standard spending assessment directly or whether it is a legislative scheme, as is proposed. It must be clear, and it must apply to voluntary agencies. There are quite serious problems even between the voluntary sector and local authorities in this context.

For example, most local authorities think that it costs about £3,000 to recruit a new adoptive parent. Voluntary agencies have to find £14,000 for each parent. There are real problems in terms of how much to pay and where the money will come from, which thwarted the previous attempt to set up a register. These problems apply also to the various types of children who are passed on, and include age and the extent of damage. Those factors should dictate different levels of capitation. Therefore, the system will need to be carefully thought through.

My hon. Friend was right when she spoke about the appeals system. The White Paper contains several paragraphs that start with these words:

"The Government will legislate to revise the review mechanism for assessments, to establish a new independent system."

That is taken up in some detail in paragraph 6.23. The matter is important in its own right. As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said, there are some difficulties. However, it is necessarily important, not only because it will provide justice within the system but because it will change the behaviour patterns of local authorities.

One of the difficulties within local authorities is the lack of oversight. In a non-transparent system, the pressures to behave properly and justly, with a view to the right outcome in the long term, disappear. They are often subsumed by matters such as resource shortages or the department having only untrained youngsters to put into the adoption and fostering sector. We are talking of a necessary requirement for justice and for a change of behaviour.

The Bill contains a proposal to fast-track babies, which arose on Monday. There is no doubt that it is an extremely important issue, as the Minister recognised on Monday. It is dreadful that the Association of Directors of Social Services does not recognise that. It does not regard fast tracking as one of the most serious issues to be taken on board. That is why legislation is required, or strong legislative guidance.

It is obviously assumed that fast tracking is the right thing. It is clear that a year in care for a one-year-old does more harm than a year in care for an 11-year-old, who perhaps has already been in care for 10 years. Statistics show that break-up rates for older children are much higher than those for younger children, but that does not pick up the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, which was that the qualitative nature of the bond with a one-year-old is different from the bond with an 11-year-old. One knows that if one has teenage children, let alone if they are adopted. The Minister has accepted that argument, but directors of social services departments do not, and we must make that clear.

Finally, record keeping is extraordinarily important. Again, it is not dealt with in legislation, but it is important to recognise it from the perspective of social services directors and local authorities. Do social services directors know about all the children who have been moved six or seven times or even, in the case I cited on Monday night, 60 times? If a child dies in care from a drugs overdose, having been moved 60 times, social services directors must know how many times the child had been moved, and must have that drawn to their attention; the information must be easily available. Furthermore, everybody in their department must know that the figures will be available to the world at large—not information about individuals, but overall statistics on how well the department has done and what has happened to the children in its care.

If we do not have those records, the situation will continue; the placing of children will be driven by resources—how many foster parents are available—and the expediency of having to solve a problem by the end of the week, rather than solving it properly. My hon. Friend is right to put record keeping in her Bill.

May I repeat to the Minister what I said at the beginning of my speech? I hope that he will take note of the points that I have made, none of which is partisan, and virtually all of which were made on Monday by Members on both sides of the House, including the chairman of the all-party adoption group, a member of the Minister's own party. All those points are important and are perfect items to be considered during the special Select Committee stage of the Government Bill. That is the best way to ensure that the Minister gets a good Bill and that my hon. Friend's Bill makes it into law.

12.27 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on introducing a timely measure? I pay tribute to the work that she has put in during the lead-up to the presentation of her Bill, especially in the past week, not least since the publication of the Government Bill. A tremendous effort is involved in putting together and introducing a Bill that is in order, especially when there is short notice as a consequence of the introduction of a Government Bill on the subject.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the impact that she has had in expediting the Government measure. She sounded a cautionary note on the necessity of staying in order when debating her Bill, given the existence of the Government Bill; I took that as a warning that I should not be tempted to repeat the speech that I made on the Government Bill on Monday. I shall endeavour not to repeat myself but, given the number of Members who did not speak on Monday but have had a second opportunity to address the House on an important subject, it will be difficult to avoid much of the same agenda, even if I avoid making the same speech.

In her exposition of her Bill, my hon. Friend was extremely lucid about the importance of passporting finance and the question of an adoption allowance. If any

[Mr. Swayne]

works. In so far as anything works, only a substitute family seems up to the task of bringing troubled children into adulthood. That bears testimony to the therapeutic effects of the love of the new family. I suggest that the tremendous ability to overcome early disadvantage is evidence of grace working through our modern world.

Adopted children have fewer problems than non-adopted children from similar circumstances. It is important to bear that in mind, because in a telling intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), we learned that only 9 per cent. of adoptions fail. The figure is higher for older children who suffer with a number of particular disadvantages such as learning difficulties and special needs. Nevertheless, even for older children with special needs, the adoption failure rate is only about 20 per cent and, overall, adoption is successful in 90 per cent. of cases.

Of course, the younger the age at which adoption takes place, the more successful it is. Therefore, as I said on Monday, there is, to an extent, a possibility that adoption delayed is adoption denied, so our purpose must be to fashion a public policy to allow more children to benefit from adoption, and to benefit from it sooner, by tackling the delays. That is the context in which I consider the Bill.

The local authorities are the instrument through which adoption takes place and their performance is patchy: some are very good or exemplary, others not so. We have heard about the differential rates at which adoption is achieved, which are highly variable. We must find ways to get the worst to perform as the best and we must attack the endemic and systemic delays in the process.

We must also tackle the perception—I choose my words carefully—of political correctness, which hon. Members dealt with not so much today as on Monday. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) made a brave attempt, and certainly the only one made on that occasion, to defend what some people would regard as political correctness, pointing out that, in many cases, it represents common sense. There is some force in what he said, but the risks in being adopted by fat people or smokers are very, very much smaller than those attendant on a child who is not adopted, but left in care.

It is important that we devise methods, such as those suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden, to ensure that more children are adopted and adopted more quickly. We must also ensure that the decision-making process involves appropriate decisiveness and minimum delay, and at various points we need sanctions against bureaucratic inertia.

Schools make public their performance tables annually. It would not be unreasonable to expect local authorities to publish—say, within 30 days of the year end—the number of children in care, the time that they have been in care and the number who are free to be adopted, but who have not yet been put in pre-adoptive placements. The provision of such statistics and the collection of that information would in itself provide incentives for the less-well-performing local authorities to perform better.

Given the increasing court time taken up by child protection and adoption cases, a culture of delay in family justice also has to be tackled. Time limits should be built into the regulations to enable proceedings to be expedited, as far as possible, with fast-track procedures such as those to which my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden drew attention. Is it unreasonable to expect an adoption application to be completed in, say, three months, subject to the consent of the natural parents? Some cases are difficult, but in many examples it would be reasonable to expect that to be achieved. There is, of course, a wider argument about separating children's cases from the generality of court work.

Mr. Denham: Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on whether the existence of difficult cases perhaps places a question mark over including time limits in regulations rather than in best practice guidance?

Mr. Swayne: That is a forceful point. I would certainly want a framework of regulation to allow fast-track procedures. Even if we did not specify in regulations the timetables involved, I would want to see a framework there to achieve that. I look forward to discussing that with the Minister in the Committee that I am sure will follow our deliberations—

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): For months.

Mr. Swayne: Yes; this one will run and run.

As a cautionary note to what I was saying just before the Minister intervened, we would not want family law and adoption cases to be separated from the generality of court work and the judicial mainstream, and become simply an arm of social services departments.

Social services departments have not emerged from many reports and investigations as particularly efficient. Rather, they have often been seen as confused over their roles, with a lack of openness and accountability, and inexperienced and unqualified staff at both ground and supervisory levels. Obviously, problems concerning the prioritisation of adoption work have flowed from that. I refer in particular to the Murch and Lowe study, "Pathways to Adoption", which was published by the centre for family studies at Bristol university.

In contrast, workers from voluntary agencies are likely to have specialist training in child placement, small case loads and good supervision. The review of adoption law commissioned by the Department of Health and the Law Commission questioned whether local authorities should continue to have the primary responsibility for adoption practice at all, and in 1996 the social services inspectorate questioned whether the nature and volume of adoption work justified local authorities continuing to provide in-house services. It said that all the indicators pointed

"to a need for better managed and properly resourced network of adoption agencies. They possibly indicate the need to remove adoption work from . . . local authorities altogether—an option which at least should be considered. Whether improved management could best be achieved by a consortium of local authorities say on a regional basis, or by voluntary agencies acting on behalf of the local authorities, or even entirely separate from them, is not for us to say."

The 1996 draft Bill preserved the role of local authorities. Indeed, the Government's recently published Adoption and Children Bill, which we debated on Monday, also preserves that role. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden, however, has suggested some measures that would provide a useful means of gingering up the performance of local authorities in the discharge of their responsibilities.

Some of the inertia would be broken by providing passporting for finance in clause 1(3). The case for fast tracking was drawn movingly to our attention on Monday by the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), who gave an exposition of the importance, for small children in particular, of being sped through the system. What my hon. Friend suggests in subsection (3) is important in that respect.

An independent and transparent means of adjudicating on complaints—an appeals system, as provided by clause 2—is vital for providing a check on the conduct of the local authority.

In clause 3(2) my hon. Friend draws attention to the collection of data. The lack of routine data places a constraint on the ability of Government and organisations to monitor what is happening, and to be alert to changes. That important point was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. Only by having such data can people recognise shortcomings, and realise that certain things must be investigated. Even when records are kept, there have been considerable differences in format and coverage among different agencies.

Accurate and relevant information is essential to the management of any process, and to the wise development of policy. There has been some improvement—I welcome the recent statistical reports of the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering and the Office for National Statistics—but such initiatives rely on the care with which data have been collected locally, and that is dependent on how clear staff are about what information is to be kept, in what format, and for what purpose. It is dependent on the training of clerical staff, and on standardisation. We should learn from the example of Scotland, which has a much more comprehensive approach to the collection of adoption statistics. All that is in keeping with what the Secretary of State said in a letter about quality protects, which he sent to all elected members of social services committees at the end of 1998.

The quality of service to the individual is also affected by the quality of the information available. Those who make professional decisions about adoption must possess detailed and accurate histories of the children in question. Should a child be adopted, and when? Should it be placed with brothers and sisters? What kind of family is most likely to meet its needs? What support is required? Wise decisions about adoption also depend on a detailed and up-to-date knowledge of birth families, and the families with which children have been placed or might be placed. The assembly of that information must be selective and purposeful. We must identify the key information.

The Thomas and Beckford study "Adopted Children Speaking", a British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering publication of 1999, reveals that many children felt they had been denied details about their past, as well as information about the adoptive families to whom they were going. Although valuable information in the form of "life story" books can be available, many such books have not been available, and a great deal of information has been missing because it had not been kept up to date. I think that children should be able to obtain a full picture of their histories, albeit perhaps later in their lives, and such history needs to be kept in trust for them. The Bill addresses that issue.

The study also reports considerable dissatisfaction among adopters with the information they are given about children. They also complained about lack of information, court procedures and adoption allowances, but the two main complaints related to insufficient information about children's backgrounds—particularly their medical history—and the fact that some information was incorrect. The hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) made some powerful points in the House on Monday about the need to provide information so that adoptive parents know what they are taking on.

Birth parents cannot be ignored. After all, it is from them that essential information must be obtained, and recorded accurately and objectively. If adopters or children receive a negative picture of the birth parents and their way of life, attitudes can be created that prejudice the child's view of his or her history and origins. Although this morning's debate has not focused on it, the question of the recording of information—to which my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden has so usefully drawn to our attention—is a vital part of the overall equation.

The Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness, had compliments heaped upon him on Monday from hon. Members on both sides of the House, including many Conservative Members, regarding his commitment to his Bill and the way in which he had brought it forward and was striving to maintain a bipartisan approach. I hope that his ministerial colleague at the Department, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), will be able to share in those plaudits through the way in which he addresses the Bill today.

Many foster children discover that it is an embarrassment to be a foster child and experience that embarrassment at a very young age. Those children like to pretend that they have real parents because they have a strong desire to have a proper family. This Bill, together with the Government's Bill, offers many of those children the potential to make their pretence a reality—to make their dreams come true, in effect. It is down to those of us who are close to the levers of power—indeed, we are getting closer by the day—and those who have the levers of power in their hands at the moment to adopt a bipartisan approach and, to use the Prime Minister's phrase, to strain every sinew on behalf of those children. I commend the Bill to the House.

1.7 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on her success in the private Member's ballot and on her choice of this topic for a private Member's Bill. I acknowledge her consistent interest in the issue, which she has shown again today. I would like to recognise and to pay tribute, as, in effect, hon. Members on both sides of the House have done, to the personal commitment of the Prime Minister to the issue of adoption. I do not think that anyone would question that he has been instrumental in ensuring that not just in my own Department, but in Departments across Government, issues of children's welfare and adoption in particular have been driven forward. I also pay tribute to the work of the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), who has done the hard slog in producing both the White Paper and the associated national standards and the Bill.

[Mr. John Denham]

We have had a good debate, as we did on Monday. The House can therefore be confident that our proceedings will be comprehensively ignored by the media and the world outside, which concentrate on affairs here only if we are having a big row with each other. We can draw some confidence from the debates on Monday and today that, as the Government Bill proceeds through the House, there is a commitment on both sides of the House to the proper scrutiny of that Bill and the many issues that have been raised today, including the issues raised by the hon. Member for Meriden, so that we get the legislation right.

Reference was made on Monday—I am afraid that, sitting here this morning, I have been unable to track it down in *Hansard*—to the dangers of legislation that has cross-party support. Someone referred to the Child Support Agency as a not terribly impressive example of both sides of the House basically agreeing with what the measure was about and not managing to get the detail correct. It is essential that, as the legislation on adoption goes through the House, we make sure that it is properly scrutinised, that all the issues are dealt with and that the right amendments are tabled and adopted.

We can be fairly certain that there is considerable expertise among hon. Members on both sides of the House—much more than I personally would claim to have on the issue. A number of hon. Members have been pursuing an interest in the topic over several years. Provided that we can bring that to bear on the legislation, we can make the once in a generation step forward to which hon. Members have referred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner)—replying to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), who suggested that adoption was a relatively recent invention—offered me a list of literary references, from Shakespeare to the Brontës and Dickens, to comparable arrangements. However, as my hon. Friend also thought that the final scenes of "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" took place in Mexico, I shall not share those references.

Mr. Wardle: It was Colombia.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman is wrong, and I am sure that he would not wish to mislead the House. I am sure that the combined wisdom of the Treasury-Bench quiz team is right in saying that the final scenes took place in Bolivia.

The hon. Member for Meriden quite rightly said that there are precedents for private Members' legislation being considered so speedily after the Second Reading of similar Government legislation. However, there was perhaps more of an edge to the disability discrimination legislation, because the sentiment behind that private Member's legislation was to make the Government's legislation much more radical. None the less, it is quite appropriate that we should have a second debate on this type of legislation.

The hon. Lady explained that her Bill had been written essentially between Monday night and Thursday lunchtime. She will forgive me if I say that, on a first reading, that shows. However, she explained the procedural reasons why the Bill had to be framed as it has been and the need to concentrate on issues that have not already been discussed by the House.

I should like to reply to most of the points that have been raised today by hon. Members. Then I hope to address any remaining issues and, in particular, to indicate the Government's initial response on the Bill's key provisions. I think that the hon. Lady and the whole House will accept that those proposals should be considered as issues for discussion and as possible amendments to the Government's Adoption and Children Bill as that legislation is considered by the House. Therefore, although my comments will indicate our initial reaction to the Adoption Bill, which was printed yesterday, I am sure that the House will wish to consider the Bill's proposals in more depth and detail than we shall be able to give them today.

On several occasions, the hon. Lady mentioned social services spending, particularly adoption allowances—which I shall deal with later. It would have been helpful to know whether the Opposition were committing themselves to sustain even current projected levels of social services spending. As the Opposition have failed so far to do that, I think that one is allowed some scepticism when they mention the need for additional spending.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox)—who has given his apologies for having to leave the debate to return for his constituency surgery this afternoon—spoke with great experience as a parliamentarian both in the House and internationally in the Council of Europe, and based on his constituency and local government roles. He stressed the importance of putting children's needs and interests at the heart of the adoption process.

My hon. Friend expressed some concern about the scrutiny of adoption agencies. In the United Kingdom, however, unregulated adoption agencies are unlawful. Only local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies approved by the Secretary of State can make arrangements for adoption. Currently, voluntary adoption agencies are inspected and approved by the social services inspectorate.

From 2002, however, the National Care Standards Commission will regulate voluntary adoption agencies and local authority adoption services. The commission will conduct regular inspections of services against new national minimum standards. I therefore hope that, if there are any shortcomings in current arrangements for the regulation of voluntary adoption agencies, they will be effectively addressed when the new arrangements are implemented.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting was the only hon. Member to talk at any length today about international adoption issues. I do not intend to dwell for long on those issues today. However, on Monday, in introducing the Government's Adoption and Children Bill, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health informed the House of that Bill's provisions to strengthen the safeguards on international adoption. We are taking measures through other legislation to sign up to the Hague convention. Once we have done so, not only can other safeguards be put in place but it will enable us to consider, if necessary, whether the existing bilateral arrangements are the right ones. I therefore believe that those concerns are being progressively addressed by the measures that the Government are taking.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) made a wide-ranging and constructive speech. He discussed the costs and causes of delay in the

system. He also highlighted the possible danger if everything was concentrated on dealing with the hardest cases of placement, and described how delaying placement for children who were easier to place would, in turn, become a problem for those children. We have acknowledged that; the White Paper that we published before Christmas drew attention to the success that some councils have had in establishing a permanence team to allow them to reduce the length of time that children have to wait for adopters.

The White Paper referred to my local authority of Southampton, which established a permanence team in 1997 covering all aspects of adoption. Contingency planning is now established practice. It provides a virtually seamless transfer between the teams, with the plan for adoption being considered by the adoption panel prior to the final court hearing. The experience has been that the waiting time has been reduced, especially for babies with no special placement needs. I endorse the right hon. Gentleman's call for best practice to be spread so that we can tackle problems as effectively as possible.

An interesting part of the debate has been the difference in emphasis put by right hon. and hon. Members on the process of deciding whether it was in the best interests of the child to go for adoption. From his local government experience, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting justified what he considered the reasonable inquiries that should be made before a child is placed with adoptive parents, while the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was critical of some of those inquiries.

I believe that the answer lies in the way in which the Government Bill attempts to set out clearly the process that should be followed, the time scales that should be worked towards, the issues that should be taken into account and, to support all those factors, the training that should be made available to the professional staff in each case to make sure that the decision taken is in the best interests of the child. None of us believes that we can make sweeping statements about what is in the best interests of children, aside from a proper consideration of each child and his or her needs. The standards and issues identified in the Government Bill clearly put the interests of the children first.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North referred to children who are placed into adoption out of their local authority area. A number of right hon. and hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Meriden, spoke about where the financial responsibility lies in such a situation, how funds are transferred, and so on. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North was making the point that an adoption should be seen as a successful placement of a child with a family, and that it is not desirable to have links for ever and ever with the history of that child and hence with the local authority from which the child comes.

It is clearly important to have a financial arrangement that facilitates adoption, including adoption out of the child's original local authority. After all, the whole point of having a national register is so that children can be matched with prospective adopted parents. In an earlier intervention, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) referred to placing children outside their own local authority area.

I shall deal with a number of those issues together. In our view, it is normally better to place children in their own local authority areas, except where they would be at risk, and it is for each local authority to find the best placement for each child, although that may be outside the child's local authority area in some cases. The House will know that one of the priorities in the quality protects initiative is to improve placement choice, and we are working closely with local authorities and other key organisations to ensure that the substantial funding provided by that initiative is appropriately targeted.

In a related intervention, the hon. Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) asked whether children would be the responsibility of the local authority that had originally placed them for adoption, or that of the new, home local authority, if an adoption broke down. At present, the position varies. If the placement breaks down before adoption, the child is still the responsibility of the placing authority. If it breaks down after adoption, when the child is, by definition, no longer in care, the responsibility tends to fall to the receiving authority.

We shall develop the new framework for adoption support in consultation with the Association of Directors of Social Services, the Local Government Association and others. That will include how money flows around the system to support the objective of having a national register for adoption, which will be accessible to adoptive parents and children who need to be placed for adoption. That is, in part, a response to the hon. Lady's initiative in clause 1.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. With some difficulty, I have just obtained from the Vote Office the document issued by the Department of Trade and Industry entitled, "Mirror Group Newspapers PLC", which has just been published and is available through the Stationery Office. On making inquiries, the very helpful young man in the Vote Office told me that he did not expect any further supplies of the document from the Department of Trade and Industry because someone there had said something along the lines of "Not us, guv. Nothing to do with us. You'll have to go elsewhere."

I should like to ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to cause inquiries to be made into the status of that document and into whether it should be made freely available to Members through the Vote Office in the normal way; there should be no question whatever of the Department of Trade and Industry seeking to limit supplies of the document to Members.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is not a matter for the Chair to comment on directly. Those on the Government Front Bench will have heard what he has had to say, and it is to be hoped that the matter will be put right as quickly as possible.

Mr. Denham: As I was saying, in developing the new framework for adoption support, which will include post-adoption support and the financial allowances, we want to consider how our objectives of making a national register available to prospective adoptive parents and children who need to be adopted can be satisfactorily achieved. We will want to make regulations, under clauses 3(8) and 4(8) of the Adoption and Children Bill, to set out clearly the financial responsibility of placing and receiving local authorities.

[Mr. Denham]

We are, of course, generally providing more money—more than £60 million over the next three years—to support the promotion of adoption. That will help to tackle the disincentives relating to resources that have been mentioned. The hon. Lady proposes a particular mechanism to link the money to each child, by which she seeks to achieve the objective of creating a system with no disincentives. We are not convinced that that is the right way forward. We recognise the need to tackle the issue, and propose to do so through regulations, but I am sure that the detail of how money flows around the system will be properly discussed when the Adoption and Children Bill is considered in Committee.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) spoke about the cost to individual children and society of failures in the child care system, as did several hon. Members on both sides of the House. He drew from his experience in discussing the link between failures of the child care system and involvement in crime. He went through several provisions in the Bill—on finance, which I have dealt with, on appeals, which I shall come to later, and on fast-tracking younger children, which I have dealt with in part but shall come back to later.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) referred to some conclusions drawn by the Health Select Committee, including conclusions drawn during her distinguished chairmanship. She used the expression "absence of urgency" in referring to the procedures of some social services departments in dealing with adoption, and talked about problems of resources. I hope that the Government's Adoption and Children Bill will deal with both issues by establishing a framework that will include time scales within which local authority social services departments will be expected to consider whether a child should go for adoption and within which adoption should successfully be achieved. We will also invest new money in adoption through quality protects. We will help to tackle both issues.

The hon. Lady suggested that there was an over-emphasis on returning children to the birth family, irrespective of other options. The point of the Government's approach—I think that there is cross-party consensus on this—is that the best interests of the child must be the overriding and governing principle. We are setting down in our Bill a set of issues that must be taken into account, subject to the test that any action must be in the best interests of the child. That means that one cannot have a fixed preconception about what is in the interests of a child before he or she has been assessed.

Mr. Stunell: Does the Minister accept that there is sometimes a professional search for perfection that leads to the very delays and difficulties that undermine a satisfactory outcome?

Mr. Denham: The point was made effectively by the hon. Gentleman when he talked about his personal experience, and by several other hon. Members, that purely assessing the absolute merits of a course of action rather than the choices available to a child can lead to a difficult situation. Several hon. Members spoke of their concerns: it is as though the best becomes the enemy of the good. Such an attitude should be challenged if the process of considering the child's best interests has been established. By logic, considering the best interests of the child will lead people to consider the options that are practically open in the circumstances, and which one of those is best.

Mr. Heald: Does the Minister have any concerns about social work practice? Does he agree that adoption is seen as a draconian last resort? Is it not necessary for social workers to take far more account of the fact that continually trying to re-establish a child in a family where the parents are hardly able to look after themselves may be draconian in itself?

Mr. Denham: I accept that things have been done with the best motivation but have turned out to be wrong. I am not one of those who will indulge in a sweeping attack on the social services profession. Although occasionally—as in any other profession—we see examples of incompetence and bad practice, people have for the most part genuinely believed that what they were doing was in the best interests of the child, even where things have gone wrong. As a Government, we are saying that that has brought us to an outcome that we do not want.

We have heard all the statistics about the failures of children in care in education, their failure to establish relationships, their involvement in crime and so on. The process that we propose, with the expectation that adoption will be properly considered within a reasonable time scale, will begin to change those attitudes and failures.

I would not underestimate the need to back up the legal and procedural changes proposed in the Bill with the need for continued professional training of social workers. We have made substantial sums available over the next few years for improved training of social workers, which is extremely important.

Rather than blaming individuals, I like to recognise attitudes over time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said on Monday, over an extended period it was thought that sending children to the other side of the world would be in their best interests. We have learned since that some horrific mistakes were made as a result. I am sure that the vast majority of those involved genuinely thought that they were acting in the children's best interests. I hope that the consensus that is reflected in the Chamber now, as it was on Monday, on the important role of adoption and the way in which we should approach it will lead to better outcomes for children than we have seen in the past. That is our commitment, and I think that it is shared throughout the House.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) spoke in part about his own experience. I think that he shared some of my concerns about the role set out in the Bill of guardians ad litem. There is a sign of slippage from their current and specific role of giving advice towards a wider role in the system. I shall return to that.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) raised a number of issues, including the importance of record keeping and the need to know what is happening to children. I share his view that it is important to know what is going on within a system. I have no doubt that one of the reasons for a fall in the number of long trolley waits in accident and emergency

departments over the past year or so is that we have insisted that chief executives should know whether they are happening. People should know what is going on within their organisations. It is a prompt to take action if standards are not being met.

The Government are taking action to improve planning and record keeping for children. Over the next year, we shall develop an integrated record keeping system, which will bring together planning and record keeping for children in need in the community, and for those who are looked after by local authorities.

We want to improve local authorities' information and record keeping so that they can track the progress of the children for whom they are responsible. That is a key theme of the quality protects programme. Implementation of the new time scale targets in the national adoption standards will drive this process. It is worth noting that each year we publish figures by local authorities on the numbers of looked-after children who are adopted. It is a national social services performance indicator. We shall want to review performance indicators to ensure that appropriate indicators are in place to support the measures that are set out in the White Paper.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West rehearsed his concerns about some of the inappropriate established attitudes that might be brought to bear. I think that I expressed my views on that subject in an earlier exchange. Again, it is a matter of getting the process right, getting the measures right, getting the issues right that should be taken into account and ensuring that staff are properly trained.

I have a slight qualification to make. I am not sure that this is what the hon. Gentleman intended, but it sounded at times as though he felt that adoption was the only thing that could work for children in care. I think that we all recognise that that will not always be the outcome. He is aware of the Government's support for adoption and our support also for fostering. It will not always be possible to meet the needs of all children through either of the two routes. We must recognise that there is still a job to be done for children who cannot be cared for in either way.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the role of local authorities and referred to the earlier report, which questioned whether it should be a local authority role to handle adoption. The matter was considered in the performance and innovation unit report, and it has certainly been considered by the Government. It is our view that local authorities generally should be responsible for running the adoption service. The White Paper published in January held out the possibility that, if a local authority was simply unable to run an effective adoption service, responsibility could be transferred to another local authority or voluntary adoption agency. That is not dealt with directly in the Government Bill because the legislative power to make such a transfer is given to us in the best value legislation.

Finally, I turn to the issues raised by the hon. Member for Meriden and the specifics of her Bill. Clause 3 covers the assessment of children for adoption; the Bill also includes powers to make regulations setting out how adoption agencies should carry out their functions of making arrangements for adoption, placing children for adoption and keeping records. We are already dealing with the time scales for assessing children. The national adoption standards, which were published for consultation alongside our adoption White Paper in December, set challenging time scales for assessing children. Standard time scales will not suit all children; they need to be flexible to take into account the needs of individual children. Regulations are unlikely to offer the necessary flexibility. We shall take into account responses to the consultation on the national adoption standards when dealing with those issues.

As the House will know, one objective is that a plan for a child should normally be drawn up no more than six months after he or she has come into care—sooner, if that is appropriate for the child. If adoption is the plan, a best interest decision should be made in six weeks and a match with parents in a further six months. It is important for younger children that decisions should happen as soon as possible; for babies and infants, speed is extremely important. That is why the standards proposed where a parent requests that his or her baby be placed for adoption specify that a placement be identified in three months and adoption panels meet, with 48 hours' notice if necessary, to make decisions on babies and infants.

Mrs. Spelman: I have read the Government Bill carefully, and would be grateful for clarification. Will the two processes of placement and adoption take place one after the other, or does the Bill provide for twin-tracking where adoption is the likely outcome?

Mr. Denham: I am not entirely clear what the hon. Lady means by twin-tracking. Placement is part of the adoption procedure set out in the Bill. Perhaps I can write to her on that point. However, we share common ground in recognising that there are circumstances in which it should be possible to place a child for adoption successfully using a timetable faster than that set out for normal circumstances in the national standards. Regulations may tie things down too tightly, but I am sure that that issue can be examined in detail in Committee.

Adoptive families will benefit greatly from improvements to post-adoption support, for which provision is made in the Adoption and Children Bill. It is unacceptable that the provision of adoption services across the country is patchy and inconsistent; as many as one in five adoptive placements break down before the child is legally adopted. We cannot keep letting down children who have already gone through at least one family breakdown. Adoptive families need access to services that will support adoptive placements and help them to last.

Post-adoption support services that adoptive families may find useful include support groups, where they can meet adoptive families with similar experiences; counselling for adoptive children to help them understand their new circumstances; and support for adoptive siblings to help them to come to terms with a new brother or sister. That is why we want to place, for the first time, a clear duty on local authorities to make arrangements to provide adoption support services, including financial support.

Clause 1 deals with the provision of financial support. As I said earlier, we acknowledge the issues, but we believe that we should deal with them in regulation, and shall make those arrangements clear. Again, that can be worked through in detail when the Bill is discussed in Committee.

[Mr. Denham]

Clause 2 includes a right of appeal for adopters, prospective adopters and guardians ad litem. Our proposal is that we should build confidence in the adopter recruitment process by ensuring that prospective adopters are treated fairly at all times. We will take powers to set up a new independent review mechanism for prospective adopters who feel that they are being turned down unfairly. An independent body appointed by the Secretary of State will convene a review panel to re-examine the evidence and make a fresh recommendation to the agency. The adoption agency must then consider both the new recommendation and the recommendation of the original agency panel before making its final decision.

Prospective adopters will have a choice of review methods, but in practice most are likely to prefer the objective nature of the independent review mechanism. In some cases they may wish to go back to the original agency panel instead, to correct simple errors of fact.

There is a specific purpose behind the proposed mechanism. It will build confidence in the assessment process and encourage more prospective adopters. Adoption is a mainstream social services function, and it is appropriate for more general complaints about the adoption service provided by local authorities to be dealt with by the local authority social services complaints procedure. We are carrying out a thorough review of that procedure. We must make sure that it meets the needs of all of those who may need it, including those affected by adoption.

The hon. Lady's Bill is, as she said, much wider than the scope of the Government's Bill. She seems to be proposing a system under which any aspect of any decision at any point of the adoption process would be subject to independent review. That cuts across the principle that I set out earlier—that adoption is a mainstream local authority function and should be dealt with through those processes. A process whereby every facet of every part of every decision could be subject to independent review would hardly be likely to speed up the process of adoption and clear decision making. Again, I am sure that the matter will be examined in Committee.

The role of guardians ad litem is clearly set out in law. They are appointed in care order and contested adoption cases to provide the court with independent expert advice, and to represent and advise on the child's interest and welfare. They are not set up or empowered to act as some sort of independent inspectorate or regulator of social services, as the hon. Lady seemed to intend—although I may have misinterpreted her. There has been no call from guardians ad litem for an appeal mechanism such as her Bill sets out.

Mrs. Spelman: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Because of the existence of the two Bills, it is easy to be confused. When he says that the matter will be considered in Committee, is he saying that the provisions of my Bill will be considered in a special Select Committee, or is he speaking of the Government's Bill? I need to know that in order to decide whether to press the Second Reading motion to a Division.

Mr. Denham: The answer is that I have no control over the amendments that the Opposition might choose to table to the Government's Bill at the appropriate time. Clearly, all the issues raised by the hon. Lady are capable of being discussed as amendments to the Government's Bill. Procedurally, it is not possible to take both Bills forward at the same time, so it will be for her to decide what she wants to do with her own Bill. The issues that she wishes to raise could be tabled at the appropriate point in Committee as Opposition amendments to the Government's Bill, which received its Second Reading on Monday night. Beyond that, it is not for me to give advice on procedural matters.

We cannot commend the hon. Lady's private Member's Bill because we believe that adoption issues are better dealt with by the Government's Bill. As that Bill makes its way through the House, there will be more than enough opportunity for all the issues that were raised today to be discussed on the basis of amendments tabled by members of that Committee. I have no doubt that the Government will want to ensure that all those issues are properly considered, but I am afraid that I cannot commend the hon. Lady's Bill to the House.

1.45 pm

Mrs. Spelman: I was listening attentively—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must have the leave of the House.

Mrs. Spelman: With the leave of the House, I should like to respond to the Minister's speech, to which I listened attentively. I listened especially carefully to his final remarks, which dealt with the specific content of the Bill. Of course, I recognise that the existence of two Bills that deal with adoption—mine and the Adoption and Children Bill—can result in some ambiguity, but I hope that all hon. Members will accept that this debate will at least help to ensure that something will happen in the very near future. That is the important point. Furthermore, if my Bill was a catalyst for the Government's Bill, that would also make it worth while.

The fact that we are debating both Bills at what appears to be the 11th hour before a general election increases the chance of their prompt reappearance in the next Parliament. Obviously, it is arrogant of any Government of any persuasion to assume that they will be re-elected or to think that any business that falls before an election will automatically reappear afterwards. Such assumptions cannot be made, but we have pledged that when and if we are elected, we will announce an adoption Bill in our first Queen's Speech.

The Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), was asked about that on Monday night, but he could not make a commitment. As we heard today, however, the Government are obviously minded to roll their Bill forward into the special Select Committee that was mentioned in the programme motion that was debated on Monday, although it appears that their timing will be knocked asunder by the general election.

Some of the specific questions that were asked on Monday about the way in which the special Select Committee would work were not answered, but are pertinent to the position outlined today by the Minister,

who told me that I will have do this work all over again if I am still in the fortunate position of having my job as a Front-Bench spokesman on health with special responsibility for adoption. He said that the Government would not commend my Bill to the House and that we would have to try to introduce its provisions by tabling amendments to the Adoption and Children Bill. That is especially disappointing because I tried to address gaps in that Bill whose existence were acknowledged by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness.

In the bipartisan spirit that has been apparent today, it would have been appropriate for the Government to acknowledge the purpose of my Bill—if not its exact wording, which might not have been as refined as it could have been, because of lack of time—and to think about it, perhaps with a view to tabling their own amendments. It is perfectly possible for a constructive Opposition to provide the sort of nuts and bolts that were mentioned by the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox), and to make general improvements to the structure that has been put in place by the Government of the day.

I was not entirely satisfied that the Government understood what I meant about the importance of record keeping. The Minister sought to placate me by referring to the better statistical monitoring that the Government have established for adoption, but it is not so much the bare statistics about which I am worried. I am more anxious about the fact that those statistics concern individuals—real people and real children. We are all aware of the number of sad cases that have occurred. We all know the names of the children whose tragedies have been described in the press. For example, Rikki Neave was mentioned. Those names stick in our memory because we know that the system failed them. I want to ensure that a child is not lost in care and does not simply drop through the system. Statistical record keeping and monitoring are important but not enough. I am therefore disappointed that the Minister rejected that aspect of the Bill.

I feel strongly that the Government miss the point about independence in appeals. I was at pains to stress that, in a complaints procedure or an appeals system, it is vital for those who want to make a complaint to believe that it will be heard objectively. Simply saying that there is an appeals procedure that is run by the social services against which the individual wants to complain does not satisfy my quest for an independent appeals system for adoption.

I am not happy that the Government are unwilling to commend the Bill. I remain principally motivated by the child, for whom we are trying to eradicate damaging delay. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West used a phrase that stuck in my mind. He said that adoption postponed is often adoption denied.

The Government's unwillingness to accept or commend the Bill means that we overlook the fact that delays will remain in the system. The principal sufferers are the children whose cases several hon. Members have eloquently pleaded this morning. I therefore wish to press the matter to a Division.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 14, Noes 0.

Division No. 169] **[1.52 pm**

AYES

Baldry, Tony	Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*	Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*	Stunell, Andrew
Gale, Roger	Swayne, Desmond
Heald, Oliver	Wardle, Charles
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*	
Lansley, Andrew	**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter	**Mr. Eric Forth and**
Paterson, Owen	**Mr. James Paice.**

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Andrew Dismore and
Mr. Andy King.

It appearing on the report of the Division that fewer than 40 Members had taken part in the Division, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided, and the business under consideration stood over until the next sitting of the House.*

Secret Societies (Registration of Membership) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

2.5 pm

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I should explain that this is the first time in 18 years that I have succeeded in bringing a private Member's Bill to the Floor of the House, so if I am a little rusty on the procedure, it is because I have been sitting here thinking about other things.

This is a short Bill with a clear and narrow objective. It simply requires that anyone elected to a local authority, the House of Commons or the National Assembly for Wales who is a member of a secret society—for example, and perhaps most obviously, the freemasons—shall register his membership with that public body.

I am pleased to say that there has been cross-party support for the Bill. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) and for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body), and to the hon. Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker), for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) and for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). As has been pointed out to me, that is an eclectic bunch if ever I saw one. I am grateful for their support, and for the support and advice that I have received from many people both inside and outside the House, especially Mr. Martin Short, who wrote a best-selling book on the subject some years ago.

May I add—without straying out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—that, depending on what statement is or is not made on Monday, this may be my last opportunity to make a speech in the House? I am sure that I am not the only person on the Opposition Benches who has felt the excitement of a further career challenge, which in my case will involve a return to the business world, from which I entered the House 18 years ago.

I make it clear from the outset that I have come across freemasons throughout my adult life. An uncle of mine was chaplain to the Royal Masonic hospital, and when I worked in industry, many of my colleagues were freemasons. I have no hesitation in defending their right to privacy for the activities that they pursue in their private lives. I respect their sense of fellowship and admire their charitable good works.

However, I maintain that once a person crosses the threshold into elected public office, he or she should register that interest. That is the nub of the Bill. I am pleased to see in his place my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), who belongs to such a secret society, and who has for some time recorded that fact in the Register of Members' Interests.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): My hon. Friend's Bill applies to membership of the House, which is regulated by the Register of Members' Interests and the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. My hon. Friend did not give evidence to the Committee during its latest inquiry, and I do not know whether he has seen the conclusion of its report, which was published last week. It says:

"The Code does not, and the House should not, seek to regulate what Members do in their purely private and personal lives."

I consider my involvement in masonic lodges to be purely personal and private. If the Committee on Standards and Privileges does not consider that a matter for the Register of Members' Interests, why does my hon. Friend feel that registration should be a statutory requirement?

Mr. Wardle: Because I abhor the idea of secrecy among people who are elected to public office. I am presenting this Bill because I think it important, in the spirit of openness and accountability, for Members to be steered in that direction. If a statutory requirement is necessary, as I believe it is, the Bill is necessary. I shall enlarge on the subject shortly: I shall say something about Lord Neill's advice to his own Committee on Standards in Public Life, which I think is pertinent to what my hon. Friend has said.

It stands to reason that the Bill will not reach the statute book, not just because of the Minister's endeavours, but because it is being presented at a fairly late stage in the current Parliament. However, I hope that it will at least put down a marker, even if not every Member considers it appropriate.

A report on freemasonry published by the Select Committee on Home Affairs a few years ago found that suspicions about the influence of freemasonry were damaging, and that the main cause of those suspicions was the secrecy that surrounded freemasons. I think I am right in saying—provided that there is time, the Minister will no doubt correct me if I am wrong—that the Government have taken steps to bring about the establishment of a register of freemasons for the police, the judiciary, magistrates and other categories of public official. I understand that there has been some resistance from the Police Federation, which has involved the Human Rights Act 1998; but it may be significant that the Association of Chief Police Officers thinks there should be a register of all those in government who are freemasons or members of similar organisations in cases in which a conflict of interests could arise. Inevitably, both in local government and in Parliament, there are numerous potential conflicts of interest, and I think that that fortifies the argument for my Bill.

To set an example to other public officials, members of the Committee on Standards in Public Life have established their own code of practice, requiring them to register

"any private interest which might influence their judgement or which"—

this is the crucial part—

"could be perceived (by a reasonable member of the public) to do so."

The inevitable conclusion must be that, sooner or later, the need for openness and accountability in public life that I cited to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury will lead to legislation embracing that principle.

I have mentioned the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I wrote to its chairman, Lord Neill, asking whether, in view of paragraph 9 of appendix 2 of the committee's report, he or any of the committee's male members were freemasons. I received an oblique reply, in which the noble Lord said he believed that all members of the committee had complied with the requirements they had set themselves. Beyond that I was told absolutely nothing, which may come as no surprise.

For the avoidance of doubt, I should tell the House that I am not and have never been a freemason, nor have I sought to become one. Only in the past year have I developed a greater awareness of things masonic. It began with what I suppose was a mildly amusing cartoon in *Private Eye*, which lampooned me for having signed up to the employ of a well-known emporium in Knightsbridge. I did so, I may say, with the full clearance of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

The cartoon featured some masonic symbolism. In the same spirit of satire, I sat down and wrote a letter to *Private Eye* in which I said that I was not and never had been a freemason, but some of my ex-best friends were. It may surprise some Members that, as a result of that little exchange, I began to receive messages from constituents disclosing their concerns and reservations about freemasonry—constituents whom I have known for years, and whom I trust. One is a former mayor of Bexhill, an experienced former district councillor. He invited me to his house and told me that he had been a freemason most of his life, but was concerned about some practices. That increased my awareness of the subject. Until that *Private Eye* correspondence, no one had approached me about problems with freemasonry. When people did get in touch, the first comment was that they had found nowhere else to raise the subject or to seek redress and would I help. I suppose that that provided the beginnings of the Bill.

All those revelations persuaded me that, if I were to be successful in the ballot for private Members' Bills—

Mr. Baldry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Wardle: I will in a moment. I know that my hon. Friend will make a speech if there is time. I hope that he will let me just finish this point. All those revelations persuaded me that, if I were to be successful in the ballot, I should like to draw the subject to the House's attention.

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend says that there is nowhere to seek redress. Part of the Bill deals with local government. He knows that there is a local government ombudsman. Would it interest him to know that, over the past five years, the ombudsman has investigated some 76,951 complaints, that of those just 24 alleged some improper masonic influence, and that of those he upheld just two? Therefore, over the past five years, the ombudsman has out of 77,000-odd complaints upheld just two—that is 0.001 per cent.—as having anything improper to do with freemasons.

Mr. Wardle: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. I have no idea whether the ombudsman is a freemason. I do not in any sense cast aspersions at the ombudsman, but, if my hon. Friend, as a freemason himself, does not understand what the Select Committee on Home Affairs said some years ago—that the secrecy is worrying to members of the public—and that that fear of secrecy, that apprehension, prompts many people not to ask questions and not to make a complaint because they do not know who will react and how they will react, I fear that he has buried his head in the sand on this important subject. I am sure that that really is not the case.

I give some general illustrations of what I mean and why it is important that there should be a statutory requirement. One of the points raised with me by my constituents, including constituents who are themselves freemasons and let me know that they are, was that, of the five main committees on Rother district council, four were chaired by freemasons. Good for them. I have absolutely no doubt that they were the most suitable choices for those jobs, but what is important and pertinent is that just one of those four chairmen had previously registered his masonic interest. Two of the others did so only when the local Member of Parliament began to ask questions about the subject—questions raised by other constituents. They then put their names on the voluntary register. It is right and proper that there is a voluntary register. The other, who is chairman of the planning committee, to the best of my knowledge did not and has not yet registered his masonic interest, even though he is a past master of a lodge in, I believe, Battle.

I stay with that individual and talk about another situation that throws up the sort of conflict of interest that worries people who do not know enough about the subject and are nevertheless concerned. The individual to whom I have referred is also a member of the governors of the local high school: Bexhill high school. He was part of the process, as he should have been, in recruiting a new head teacher. I have absolutely no doubt that he approached that matter with evenhandedness and fairness, and I have no doubt at all that the governors made an excellent choice when they decided on the next head teacher. However, the fact is that that head teacher, who is doing a thoroughly good job—as is the councillor to whom I referred and who was a member of the governors participating in the selection process—was also a past master of a nearby lodge, in St. Leonards I think, just outside my constituency.

There is nothing wrong with any of that. However, it does raise a question on which I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury and the House will reflect. Should not the other governors, the teaching staff and the parents have been told that both those gentlemen belonged to that particular society? I am not suggesting for a second that they colluded in any way; I am sure that they did not—they are both honourable and capable men. Nevertheless, they did not report the fact and most of the parents are not aware of it. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury is sitting on the edge of his seat, but he will have to be patient. He has already had a big chunk of the time available for this debate, and I am sure that he will understand it if I want to make some progress.

I discussed the matter with the head teacher, and he said that some of the parents and some of the staff were aware of the fact because they had come along to ladies' nights. Although that is wonderful, the point is that not all the staff and all the parents had gone along to ladies' nights. It would have been so simple, in a spirit of openness, to declare the fact—to which, I am sure, no one would have batted an eyelid.

When I was successful in the ballot, I asked the grand secretary of the united grand lodge—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury will correct me if I have that wrong—to lunch at Westminster. As I had this Bill in mind, I said to him, "Let us have some lunch and discuss it." He gave me a little booklet, which states on page 9:

"In circumstances where a conflict of interest might arise or be perceived to exist, or when freemasonry becomes an issue, a freemason must declare an interest."

[Mr. Wardle]

As I understand it, freemasons argue that it is up to individual freemasons to decide whether a declaration of interest is necessary. However, as Lord Neill's Committee on Standards in Public Life advises that a person must register any interest that might influence or

"could be perceived (by a reasonable member of the public) to do so",

one has to ask how reasonable members of the public are to form a view if they do not have that information at their fingertips. The interest needs to be declared.

One of the arguments used against my proposals is that such declarations are not pursued by many other clubs and societies, such as golf clubs. People often say that golf club membership does not have to be declared to the council. However, I beg to differ. If a member of a local authority planning committee is a member of a golf club and discovers that a friend and fellow club member is presenting a planning application to the committee, he had better declare it or there will undoubtedly be difficulties. Openness and accountability are the order of the day.

Mr. Baldry: They are the order of the day also for freemasons.

I do not know whether my hon. Friend has addressed himself to the national code of local government conduct under the Local Government Act 1972, but it is perfectly clear and refers to freemasons. The councillor in those circumstances must obviously declare an interest.

Mr. Wardle: I hope that my hon. Friend will not mind me reminding him that I have told the House that the chairman of the planning committee of Rother district council is a freemason, a past master of his lodge, and has not registered that fact on the voluntary register that the council, quite properly, keeps. If my hon. Friend was trying to suggest—I am sure that he was not—that in the many years that this responsible councillor has been on the planning committee and has, indeed, been its chairman, there have been no applications from other freemasons who have not declared the fact, he and I have a different grasp of reality.

The grand secretary of the united grand lodge also had some comments about self-regulation. He assured me that freemasons deal with disciplinary matters involving wrongdoers that come up from time to time in any organisation. He said in the same breath that he would not know who was or was not a freemason in Sussex. I had asked about whether some individuals, whom I will not mention, were freemasons, and he said that he had no way of knowing, to which I replied, "If you do not have a central list of members at your fingertips, how can you assert that you have a system that can regulate itself?".

The Bill has had a little publicity, so it came as no surprise to me that I heard not only from my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury but from the Sussex grand master, although I may have the appellation wrong. He is a very important person at the head of the organisation in Sussex. I do not know him, but he dropped me a line saying that if I knew of any cases of wrongdoing—that is not my purpose here today—would I let him know so that he could take action? If the grand master of the society in Sussex does not know about his own membership, or flock, what price self-regulation?

I am aware that time is running out, but I have been sitting patiently, so I shall use the time available.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I, too, have been sitting patiently, waiting to contribute to this debate. Although I very much welcome what the hon. Gentleman is trying to do, if there is a shortcoming it is that the Bill does not go far enough. For example, it deals with this place but not another place, which is part of the legislature. It deals with local authorities but not local authority officers. In my days at Westminster city council in the 1980s, there was a lodge specifically for the council, where senior officers and senior councillors met together. I thought that that was a very serious abuse.

Mr. Wardle: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for what I am trying to do. A small step in the right direction may be the right way to start. A Minister in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, whose name I am not allowed to mention, introduced a ten-minute Bill on the subject several years ago and has provided me with some helpful information on the subject.

I mentioned earlier that there has been a little publicity for the Bill. I was intrigued at being approached, via a journalist I know, by Brian Boyce, a retired head of the crime squad from Scotland Yard. He said that he understood I was introducing a Bill on the subject. He is not a freemason himself, but my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury will be pleased that he was quick to say that in his work he found that many Metropolitan police officers who were freemasons never let that get in the way of their work.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 April.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

PATIENT CONSENT FORM BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 6 April.

ADOPTION OF SEWERS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

CROWN EMPLOYMENT (NATIONALITY) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 6 April.

EDUCATION (STUDENT LOANS) (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I beg to move.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): If the hon. Gentleman is attempting to move a motion, he should rise in his place.

Mr. Paterson: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 6 April.

COPYRIGHT, ETC. AND TRADE MARKS (OFFENCES AND ENFORCEMENT) BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

PRIVATE DENTAL PRACTITIONERS BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

RAIL PASSENGER SERVICES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 6 April.

PENSION ANNUITIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

CLIMATE CHANGE BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Second Reading what day?

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Friday 6 April.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. Gentleman speak with the authority of the Member in charge of the Bill?

Mr. Stunell: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yes, I speak with the authority of my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster).

To be read a Second time on Friday 6 April.

LOCAL ELECTIONS (FREE DELIVERY OF ELECTION ADDRESSES) BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

Internet (Criminal Offences)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

2.32 pm

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on this subject today. There has been a certain amount of interest in the fairly enigmatic title of the debate. For example, a journalist rang me up and asked whether I would use the opportunity to talk about a gentleman who had put a contract out on someone using the internet, but I shall disappoint people if they think that that is what I am talking about today. So I thought that it would be helpful to start by explaining that I want to concentrate on the problems caused by using a website to bully, harass or defame an innocent member of the public.

When I originally drafted the title of this debate, I was summoned to the Table Office and told that no Minister appeared to have responsibility for the subject. So I apologise to the Minister for perhaps getting him here under false pretences, but I hope that when he hears what I have to say, he will agree that some action is needed to deal with the problem that I am about to describe.

It would be helpful to outline the events that took place. I was visited at my surgery by the mother of a teenager. For reasons that will become obvious, I should like to keep the names confidential, so I shall call the teenager child A. Her son had been subjected to what can only be described as a particularly nasty form of homophobic bullying using the internet. Child B had set up a website in the name of child A and using child A's name as the domain name. The content of the website caused great concern as it portrayed very graphic pictures of naked men and the invitation, "If you think size matters—then call me."

Unfortunately, child A's phone number was also included on the website. Perhaps luckily, child B was so proud of his endeavours that he could not resist taunting child A at school the next day, as he was keen for his handiwork to be noted. So the outcome of the story was not as serious as it might have been.

Child A had a good relationship with his mother and alerted her to the website. It cannot have been easy for him to do so, because the material was the sort of thing that the average teenager would not want his mother to see or even know existed. The mother acted immediately, and the offending site was, thankfully, withdrawn quickly.

However, the outcome could have been very different. If child A had not felt able to show the material to his mother, nothing would have been done, the child would have been under considerable stress, and the house might have been telephoned. If child B had been even more malicious, he might have alerted other children to the existence of the website, which might in turn have led to taunting at school, and more phone calls. The life of the innocent child could have been made thoroughly miserable. There could well have been a tragic end to the story, and I do not think that I am being over-dramatic when I say that.

The mother of child A came to see me not only to tell me about the offence but to tell me that she was concerned because the police had told her that no crime had technically been committed and that they could not take any action. They mentioned that there was a file of similar offences at the local police headquarters, and that any action would have to be through the civil courts.

There have been other cases of people registering a website in the name of another person for mischievous purposes, although not quite so sinisterly. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) found that a political rival had set up an alternative website containing a host of material that was not approved by him. I hope that it will not be self-interest that moves politicians to act on the matter, but if that gets things moving, that may be for the greater good.

I read recently that an entrepreneur had used the name Billy Connolly to advertise the stud services of his Afghan hound. That sounds like a bit of a laugh, but Billy Connolly did not think so and successfully sued. Unfortunately, not everyone has the money to take legal action. I shall return to that point later.

It appears that the legislation surrounding the internet is a mess. Internet law is largely piecemeal, unknown or unwritten. Few laws deal specifically with the internet, the main exceptions being the Electronic Communications Act 2000 and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.

I am not here today to knock the internet. It has wonderful potential as a tool for education and business. It also serves a social function by keeping people in touch cheaply. My daughter even met her current boyfriend via the internet, so it is not all bad. However, the huge potential of this tool must not be jeopardised by the unpleasant use to which some users put it. It is imperative that the internet be allowed to be used to its full, positive potential. As a Liberal Democrat, I believe that freedom is a right, and that it must be guaranteed by any new legislation or guidance on the internet. So legislators must walk the tightrope between freedoms.

The right to free speech and expression must be balanced against the freedom to live free from slander and fear. Many of us believe that the Government have ignored the rights of the individual in recent legislation on the internet. The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act smacked of a patriarchal big brother state and was widely attacked by civil liberties groups when it was introduced.

I want my debate today to be about the freedom of individuals to be free from internet crime, and from harassment or bullying via the internet. I should like to start a continuing debate about how the individual can be protected from a malicious internet user. I have mentioned an example in which a person had no protection. I am also aware of a case in Bournemouth in which a man was jailed for seven and a half years for systematically harassing a young woman. There were similarities with the case that I described earlier; the material placed on the site included invitations to other net users to rape and abuse the victim. The Bournemouth case was slightly different, because hacking was involved and the matter was not dealt with quickly. The victim received abusive e-mails and telephone calls from around the world. The information posted on the website and the subsequent events mean that the victim is still receiving psychiatric treatment.

In general, one can say that what is illegal in current legislation is also illegal on the internet. A case of slander on the internet would take a civil action to

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correct, and would cost a great deal of time and money. Slander in the printed media is generally the preserve of the rich and famous and directed at the rich and famous. So it is not coincidental that, through civil action, the multi-millionaire pop star Madonna helped in establishing the idea of intellectual property rights over internet domain names. Current legislation is inadequate to protect the rights and dignity of citizens.

Home computer use is now increasingly common. I do not have the most up-to-date figures, but in August last year 14 million people in the United Kingdom were logging on to the internet at home. That constitutes 22 per cent. of the population. Legislation has not kept up with this change.

What can we do about it and what should we do about it? It would be helpful if a way could be found to allow people sole use of their own name. After all, we cannot open a bank account in another person's name. We need a means of ensuring that someone cannot set up a website in another person's name unless he has clear evidence that that person has given express permission. That simple action would stop cases that arise from simple malice.

It would be helpful also if the Government could increase their efforts to monitor illegal content on the net. I know that that can be rather like looking for a needle in a haystack. However, there are some bodies that deal with the issue. The Internet Watch Foundation is doing a valuable job. It is rightly concentrating its resources on child pornography. The foundation acts as a third party that receives notices of illegal pornography, establishes the illegality of the material and then delivers notices to the internet service providers that are posting the material to remove it.

The foundation is very good, and a quick-fix solution has been proposed: that it extend its remit to all illegal content. However, that would probably be difficult. I have thought about the matter carefully, and I am not sure that that is the right way to go. Currently, the foundation's staff receive specialist training and guidance from the police to enable them to make decisions on the legal status of material. Child pornography is illegal, full stop.

Claims that material breaches copyright law or is defamatory, slanderous, or incites racial hatred are rarely clear on first inspection. It is never clear whether a court would decide that the information was illegal. For these reasons, I do not think that it would be as simple as it seems to extend the scheme.

The public need an open and well publicised guide that shows how an individual can make complaints about internet sites. That would include investment in resources so that trained staff could examine complaints. It might be useful also to encourage ISPs to include links to a Government website that is dealing with the issue, in almost the same way as the Advertising Standards Agency places advertisements in newspapers and magazines. At the very least, people would then know how easily to complain.

I have been speaking to members of the Internet Service Providers Association, and they, too, are keen to get things right. They would rather the internet be used to its full, positive potential. They want to minimise the dark side of the net. They are calling on the Government to address the issue during the implementation of the e-commerce directive. ISPs believe that they are not liable for content on the internet. They have no obligations to monitor and they are not legally responsible for content.

The ISPs are keen for the current situation to continue, and are calling for the establishment of an improved system for removing illegal material. They need clear guidelines on what is acceptable and what is not. It is a matter that demands much thought and attention.

In a recent civil action—Demon *v.* Godfrey—the finding was against Demon, an ISP. It failed to remove material from a news group that Dr. Godfrey regarded as defamatory. As Demon did not remove the material, the judge found it in breach of the Defamation Act 1996. Although Demon was shown not to be a publisher, under the 1996 Act it could not claim innocent dissemination, as it had been put on notice of the existence of defamatory material.

A big worry for ISPs is that they do not want to take on the role of judge and jury, which brings us to the thorny issue of takedown. That is a procedure whereby the ISP becomes responsible for removing sites once a complaint has been made against them. That sounds good, and the procedure would have helped my constituent who faced the original problem that I described. However, if ISPs take down they risk legal action by the customer who owns the sites. If they do not take down, they risk legal action by the complainant. The complainant is generally under no obligation to prove the illegality of the material.

The ISP is put in the invidious position of being judge and jury in these matters. Presumably the relevant legislation applies also to companies. I give a hypothetical example that relates to a topical issue. There could be a site attacking Nestlé, making allegations that its aggressive marketing of baby milks in the third world was adding to infant mortality. Obviously, the company would not like that. It could easily put pressure on the ISP to remove the site. ISPs are likely to think carefully about who is most likely to sue them. The system is weighted against small charities and pressure groups and favours large multinationals and those with clout, so the issue is therefore developing into an argument about freedom of speech.

Such issues need to be tackled in the short term so that the public are protected from the incidents that I have outlined. I should like a number of things to happen. Individuals should have the right of control over the use of their names as domain names. The Government should consult widely and work with ISPs to establish a clear procedure to deal with notice and takedown, even if, initially, that is a voluntary arrangement. The Government need to co-ordinate notifications to the Internet Service Providers Association, which currently receives different information and guidelines from different Departments. It would be good to see some joined-up thinking.

Once the Government have their own house in order, they should take a lead on co-ordinating international action, as there are wide differences in the way those problems are tackled across the world. For example, in the United States, ISPs remove material only on receipt of a court order, and in Belgium ISPs automatically pass complaints to a judicial police body, which makes all the necessary decisions. The web is world wide, and eventually we must have worldwide thinking. The public need a guarantee of their freedom to use the internet and be free from child pornography, fraud, slander and harassment.

2.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) on obtaining this opportunity in the ballot and succeeding in her representation of the interests and concerns of her young constituent? I am delighted to respond, both as the Minister of State, Home Office and as the Minister with responsibilities for young people.

The hon. Lady rightly raised the issue as one that has had an adverse impact on a young person in her constituency. What happened to him was a form of abuse and, had it not been handled with support from a parent and good sound common sense by the young person himself, it could have had extremely damaging effects.

The issue of the internet and its impact on society today, for good or ill, is one that the Government are addressing. Only on Wednesday, the Home Secretary called together key representatives of the internet industry, child welfare organisations and the police to tackle child abuse and paedophilia, fuelled by a combination of new technologies—digital photography, streaming video, audio data and the internet. We are committed to tackling that abuse of the internet, as we are committed to tackling all criminal misuse of new technologies.

We want to make the United Kingdom the best and safest place in the world to conduct e-commerce and surf the net. There is no doubt in our mind that the growth of the internet offers huge benefits for society, commerce and education. It is rewriting the rules on how we all communicate. Alongside those huge legitimate benefits, the internet offers opportunities for criminals to abuse modern technologies for their own ends. That is why we have introduced legislation on the internet.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady spoiled an otherwise excellent contribution by characterising our legislation in a simplistic and uncharacteristically naive and misplaced way. It is not authoritarian or big brotherish and it is certainly not patriarchal—I think that she used that word. If I may so, that is nonsense; the legislation was none of those things. It deals rigorously and effectively with a genuine mischief. However, the hon. Lady outlined an area worthy of examination, and I shall certainly ensure that the case that she brought to light receives the attention that it deserves.

We should not forget the real benefits that the internet offers. Launching UKonline last September, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set the Government the objective of working with industry to ensure a safe and secure environment for e-commerce and to help people trust the internet. We want to work in partnership with UK industry to clean up the net and make it safe for UK users.

Should we use the criminal law to do that? The Government, in common with many other Governments, take the view that what is illegal offline should be illegal online. Possession and distribution of child pornography is possession and distribution of child pornography, whether that is done on paper, by post, electronically or by e-mail. Fraud is fraud, whether it is a newspaper advertisement inducing gullible investors—there are always some of them about—or a website that seeks to do the same and entrap the same sort of person, preying on a combination of greed and gullibility.

Technology changes, and we want to keep the criminal law technology-neutral; otherwise we risk coming back to the House every time some new invention intended for some harmless pursuit is used and abused by innovative criminals to carry out their criminal purpose. The challenge for Government is to ensure that harmful and unlawful activity is addressed by the criminal law, however that activity is conducted. We think that we have the balance right, but that is not to say that we are complacent. The hon. Lady's case is an interesting one; we need to keep offences under constant review, and examine them to see whether further action can be or needs to be taken to strengthen the law, when offences are conducted wholly or in part using computers or computer networks.

We have already acted in a number of areas. I took the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 through the House. In January, we increased the maximum penalties for child pornography offences—for possession from six months to five years, and for production and distribution offences from three years' imprisonment to 10 years.

We raised the age threshold in the Indecency with Children Act 1960 from 14 to 16. Conspiracy, incitement or attempts to commit gross indecency with a child under 16 are all offences under the Indecency with Children Act, whether they are committed over the internet or not. They carry a penalty of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

Safety in chat rooms is another complex issue, and a crucial one for parents. The hon. Lady mentioned that her own daughter had entered into a happy and successful relationship with a boyfriend through the internet. The outcome may have been happy for her, but, sadly, that is not always the case. The recent report from the Internet Crime Forum, "Chat Wise, Street Wise", made a number of recommendations for industry, Government and children's charities to consider. The recommendations suggest practical ways to protect children from the risks that chat rooms can pose, the most extreme being exposure to paedophiles who will, as we have seen, incite young people to go against all their instincts to secret assignations, with the most appalling consequences.

Some seek to add "entice" to "incite" in the 1960 Act and widen the scope of the offence. My advice is that the change would not achieve that end. The courts have held that the word "incite" involves some form of persuasion or encouragement. It does not matter that the incitement is unsuccessful. Courts would also be bound to give "entice" its ordinary meaning—

"to persuade by the offer of pleasure or reward".

In other words, the ambit of the offence would not be extended at all.

We cannot be complacent. Protecting children from sexual abuse and the theft of their childhood and their innocence, and breaking what can become a cycle of abuse as the abused become abusers, must be a clear priority for Government, and it is. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary took decisive action this week and established the taskforce, which is chaired by my noble Friend Lord Bassam. I shall ensure that the hon. Lady's case is referred to it. It includes representatives of the internet industry, child welfare organisations, the police, the Government and others. It will review internet content rating systems, develop a kite marking scheme for internet chat rooms that provide child-friendly services, develop and promote a safe surfing education and awareness

campaign for parents and children, and enhance co-operation between police and communications services providers in the investigation of crime. It will also review existing legislation to ensure that it continues to protect children from grooming and other forms of abuse, and that it keeps in step with changes in technology. That is where the case raised by the hon. Lady comes in, because, as she told us, her constituent experienced a form of abuse. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will review the work of the taskforce in the summer.

We have legislation in place to deal with crimes against computers, such as hacking and the spreading of computer viruses. The Computer Misuse Act 1990 is now 11 years old, but it was ahead of its time and it has stood the test of time. We want more use to be made of that legislation now. We have ensured that the Public Order Act 1986 can deal with the distribution of racist material, whether over the internet or by pen and paper.

The UK is not an island in the electronic world, however much it is one in geographic terms. We have recognised the threat that electronic attack poses to our critical national information infrastructure. That is why we established the national infrastructure security co-ordination centre to work with Departments and private sector organisations to protect critical national infrastructure against electronic attack.

We know that there is no room for complacency in these matters, on which we are working closely with our international partners in the G8 group. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) went to meet G8 Ministers, specifically to work with our partners to develop co-operation in tackling child pornography on the internet. We are investing in law enforcement to ensure that personnel are properly trained and equipped to investigate and prosecute high-tech criminals. We are also taking steps to ensure that we keep apace with technological development. We must give law enforcement agencies the statutory provisions that are necessary to enable them to investigate high-tech crimes. That is what lay behind the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, about which I hope the hon. Lady will change her views.

It is our objective to ensure that any victim of a crime in which computers were involved, be it a multinational corporation or an individual, can report that crime to police in the knowledge that it will be dealt with effectively and professionally by officers who are trained and equipped to deal with the task.

I must conclude my remarks as I began them. Child abuse on the internet is deplorable. It is also depraved in every sense of the word. We owe it to victims to locate and prosecute the abusers and the people who use the internet for criminal purposes. We owe it to children to protect them from abuse of the technology. The Government, industry, parents and carers must together maintain the real and sustained progress that we have made in tackling criminal abuse of the internet, so that as a society we can reap the full economic and social benefits and so that our children can surf the internet in safety.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing the debate and I fully appreciate the action taken by her young constituent to gain some protection for himself. That was entirely commendable and we shall ensure that the case is referred to the taskforce, so that it can learn the appropriate lessons.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 March 2001

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Food Policy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

9.30 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I welcome the opportunity to introduce this debate. Although it is being held in the midst of another food crisis, I do not want to dwell for too long on foot and mouth. The Minister of Agriculture is coming to the Select Committee on Agriculture tomorrow, and no doubt he will give us an update on events.

I would like to examine four key themes. First, one cannot ignore the difficulties that we are having with our food chain, and their implications not just for the immediate future but for the longer term. Secondly, I would like to examine possible alternative strategies for bringing some balance back into the production and consumption of food. Principally, that would involve the localisation of production and, let us hope, of consumption, following on from some of the excellent work that has been done through the farmers markets. My farmers market in Stroud was, until recently, flourishing. Like every other farmers market, apart from a couple in London, it has had to shut down. I will say more about the implications of that, and the markets' future prospects, later. Thirdly, I want to examine food poverty, which is sometimes talked about without being understood. Significant moves have not been made to eradicate it. Last, but not least, I shall make some comments on the animal by-products industry—I think that the Minister of State would expect nothing less of me.

In putting those ideas together, I have gratefully drawn on the expertise of various people. At a national level, my principal sources have been Tim Lang, for whom I have great respect, Erik Millstone, Toby Peters and Mike Rayner. Locally, I have talked to the key person involved in introducing the farmers market in Stroud—Clare Gerbrands—as well as Robert Rees and Carol Endicott, who have worked with her and have pursued the educational benefits of the scheme through the education business partnership. I want to discuss education, because that is the key not just to what we eat but to what we think about what we eat, and what the next generation will think about what they eat.

We meet at a grave time. Two farmers in my constituency have been affected by foot and mouth, and I pass on my condolences to them. More than anything, I hope that we can learn from some of the problems that have arisen in regard not just to this particular crisis but to others. It is wrong to say that there is one overriding cause for all the problems. The situation cannot be explained by a conspiracy theory; it has arisen through a combination of different factors.

However, we must learn from what has happened. The events can be interpreted in different ways. There are the gradualists, who stress the need for small changes—more regulation in one area and less in another, perhaps. Then there are the structuralists, who would like much more fundamental change in the evolution of our food chain. I tend towards the second camp, but I accept that it is not always easy to implement radical reform in the midst of a crisis, or over short periods. Nevertheless, we have a number of problems. I think not only of the well-known problems of BSE, bovine TB, classical swine fever and foot and mouth but of other problems that we have suffered over the years, including salmonella and E. coli O157.

We must remember also that people do not want their food to contain additives such as BST—bovine somatotrophin—or other hormones. I know that the Government and I have slightly different views on the subject, but consumers are starting to question what is in their food. The vast majority want to eat good, wholesome food, although we must cater for the fact that some people are still attracted to junk food. All manner of issues arise from that, including environmental factors, food poverty, health and allowing people to exercise choice.

The number of food poisoning cases has risen dramatically in recent times, and estimates suggest that it costs us about £1 billion a year. That may be more to do with how food is prepared than with how it was grown or produced, but it is clearly telling us that something is going wrong. On the back of that, much of our food, by its very nature, is not as healthy as we would want it to be. We continually receive guidance—not lectures, but thoughtful guidance—from the Minister for Public Health on what we must to do to overcome some of the poor eating habits that still kill people. I shall discuss the figures later, but there is evidence of a link between poor diet and cardiovascular problems. I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) is here. He will doubtless want to say more about such health problems.

I believe that the Government are fit and able to take up the challenge of evolving a more coherent and clear-cut food policy. After all, it was a Labour Government who set up the post-second world war agricultural system. I know that that system has been fundamentally changed by the common agricultural policy, but aspects of it still exist.

We started to grasp the nettle in our manifesto for the 1997 general election. We made some important pledges, the most obvious and most successful of which was the introduction of the Food Standards Agency. People have strong views about how it is grappling with the way in which we move around food that is produced not only here but internationally, and some would like to see the role of the FSA widened. For instance, if it was a food agency, it could deal also with education and nutrition, matters on which it seems to have only a watching brief. Unfortunately, because the agency has been hived off to the Department of Health, the Minister cannot answer on behalf of the FSA; we need joined-up responses as well as joined-up thinking and action.

Last September, the Government and 50 other countries signed up to the World Health Organisation European region's four-year programme, which is based on the three pillars of nutrition, food safety and sustainable food supplies. We must make sure that those three subjects are to the fore in our policy evolution.

[Mr. David Drew]

Everyone agrees that the overhaul of the CAP is long overdue; we must ensure that it becomes more of a food policy than a purely agricultural policy. Many farmers would now support such a change because, although the CAP principally supports farmers, it is not the best way of doing so. We must ask some serious questions. Is the subsidy regime right? Do subsidies go to the right people? Are there better ways in which support can be developed?

Tackling food poverty will be another of my key themes. All the research suggests that poor people's food costs are high, for reasons of what they buy and where they buy it. It might be a question of education or of lack of access to quality food. The system militates against their having access to the right food in the right way.

Any reform of the common agricultural policy should aim towards more sustainable farming practices. I am not here to take onward the baton of organic farming. I am on record as supporting the Organic Targets Bill, and I argued vigorously in favour of organic farming when the Select Committee on Agriculture last reviewed it, but that does not necessarily mean that other forms of farming should be precluded. It is the way that the consumer wants to go, and we must provide a mechanism to facilitate it. If that means improving food quality, so be it. It is important that it be based on local food production, as I can foresee that, if organic farming is allowed to become just another ratcheting-up of the globalisation of the supply chain, the basic opportunity to grow, to supply and to consume food on a more localised basis will be missed.

It is said that there is no possibility of re-engineering a system of localised food production. I do not believe that. There are many indications that people want to source locally and to buy in farmers markets. Anything that we can do to help in what Tim Lang calls "reducing food miles", to lessen the environmental damage involved and give people access to the food that they want, is a jolly good thing. We must make it happen.

Local retailing is about joined-up government. It is about providing alternatives that people seem to want. It is, if we are honest, about protecting the rural way of life, which has been undermined by the centralisation of the food chain, by the placing of supermarkets and by supermarkets' demands. I am not necessarily here to attack supermarkets, but I would, at least, like them all to clear some of their shelves tomorrow and to put local produce on sale, as happens in other parts of the world. The centralised food chain has evolved, in part, at the cost of the healthy and sustainable rural quality of life that most of us want.

We should recognise that there is a policy vacuum. We must fill it with action, not just local but regional. Regional development agencies can play a key role, and I am pleased to see that they are already trying to make money available to deal with the current crisis. They could become key drivers for change. They could use some of their investment streams to go into the food production and processing industries to ensure that local food chains operate.

It is time that we stopped sticking plasters on the problems and looked for more radical solutions. We should not talk glibly about local shopping and local food chains, but should put time, money and effort into rebuilding neighbourhood stores and looking at ways in which we can lock into developments such as farmers markets.

I am grateful to Clare Gerbrands who was the driving force behind the Stroud farmers market. The joy of the enterprise is that, as well as recycling funds in a localised area, it ensures that farmers receive a true share of the value-added economy. The profits are channelled directly back, which should not be underestimated as a benefit to farmers. The money enables them to go on to market more effectively and to provide consumers with even more choice.

What is being done is a question of access to fresh food and of economic benefits. Many changes can follow from it. An estimated 30 to 40 per cent. additional footfall comes to Stroud on farmers market days. That is a hint of what might be possible in the future. There is a belief—although it may not in every case be justified—that we can further improve animal welfare standards. People want to know how food is sourced, and to learn more about the countryside and animal rearing. I do not suggest that they should go out to do that at present, for obvious reasons, but there are ways to achieve the benefits in question.

In Stroud, we have built on our achievement, by trying to make some of the relevant knowledge more applicable and available to younger people. We have a flourishing education-business partnership. Among the activities of young people in the past year has been a study of the food chain, and evaluation of the benefits of local food chains and farmers markets, as against more centralised food chains. The great benefit of that is that it educates people about the countryside and about the realities of food. It makes them think not just about where they buy food and where it comes from, but about what they do with it.

I have worked with Robert Rees, a chef who has worked closely with Carol Endicott, who leads the education-business partnership in Stroud. They have done innovative work, involving not merely talking about the food chain as a general concept but getting children to prepare food and think about its natural cycles. Such work makes the children think much harder about what they eat and its effect on them, in the context of healthy eating. The distinctiveness of local produce and the effect of that on the local economy, as well as consumers, is another issue to be considered. The project is exciting and deserves high praise. It shows that there is life in the localised food chain. However, as always, work on that idea must start with the next generation, in view of some of the mistakes that we have made.

Public health priorities certainly arise in this context. I referred earlier to the work of Dr. Mike Rayner of the university of Oxford. He alleges that there is a considerable correlation between the incidence of coronary heart disease and cardiovascular problems and poor eating. About 250,000 deaths result from those conditions, and it has been proved that that is to a great extent due to diet. There is an enormous monetary cost, but more importantly there is a cost in people's lives. We should encourage people to think more about what they eat and what it does to them.

We need also to think about the structures of the industry. I do not intend to argue against supermarkets or caterers, but we should realise that some of the poorest paid jobs are those in the food business. That fact implies that we do not invest sufficiently in those who are being trained for such work, or in the industry itself. The minimum wage has had an enormous impact—and jolly good, too—but we must dwell on the need for future action.

I could say more about science, consumer protection and competition policy, but I shall pass quickly over those topics to give other hon. Members a chance to speak. I think that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State knows, because of the somewhat hard time that I gave her in a European Standing Committee debate on transmissible spongiform encephalopathy, that I think that we need to look hard at the animal by-products industry. The more that I have considered that industry in relation to the problems of BSE and of foot and mouth, the more that it appears not to be marginal to the production of food but to be something that must be properly evaluated in its own right. The Government have cottoned on to that; they have been working closely with our colleagues in Europe, but we must recognise the need not for less regulation but for better regulation. If we propose a bonfire of controls—unfortunately, other things are in bonfires at the moment—that will be at our long-term cost. We must be careful about how we monitor the food chain, because unfortunately, it takes only one or two people doing silly things to have not only an enormous economic cost but, more important, an enormous cost in people's lives, which is totally unacceptable.

I was lobbied effectively by a constituent who works for the Meat Hygiene Service, who was unhappy with proposals coming from Europe for hazard analysis and critical control points in local abattoirs to be at the cost of the role of the Meat Hygiene Service. My right hon. Friend may want to comment on that, but that must be carefully considered.

In conclusion, it is not that current food policies are not working, but we could have the best of both worlds—we could introduce alternative ways for people to buy food. We must consider what we do in this country in relation to the rest of the world. Although it is easy to talk about problems coming from abroad, I know someone who was recently on a trade delegation to the Netherlands, which I always thought was a moderate country. Besides meeting lots of nice people who were interested in what he had to sell—this was before foot and mouth—he received abuse from people saying, "You're the country that gave us BSE." We are not without our problems in selling our message internationally.

We need to consider price and what is introduced into the food chain. I hope that we can have joined-up thinking, consider opportunities and revisit different ways in which the food chain can operate. If that process starts now, that will be one advantageous thing to come from the depths of a deep crisis.

9.53 am

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): We meet today to discuss food policy in the most difficult and testing of circumstances. We have a national emergency, a national crisis, with the epidemic of foot and mouth. We all share in having foremost in our thoughts the anxieties and distress of farmers and all those concerned with the rural economy and the British countryside. If it were in order, which it clearly is not, I would ask for us to observe a minute's silence for all those who are going through such a difficult time. I am sure that that sentiment will be shared throughout the Chamber today.

Farmers in Eddisbury and across wider Cheshire were devastated by the foot and mouth outbreak in 1967. It is with them in mind that I have been keen since I entered the House 18 months ago to find the food policy issues that tie together the interests of producers and consumers. It has become clear that consumers properly demand quality, choice, reliability and a fulsome supply of the food that they need and enjoy, which forms part of their standard of life, as well as being a staple of life.

In addition, there are public safety and public health issues, but it is important to stress at this difficult time in the countryside that foot and mouth is not a public health issue and not a disease that is a danger to human beings. In trying to tackle these difficult issues as best we can—I am at one with the whole House on this—we must be careful to dissect the issues so that we do not send out any alarmist messages.

In focusing on food policy, we must recognise that we live in a country where, by any relative test, the highest quality of food is produced and made available to consumers. We can be proud of that, but it is no accident; there has always been a commitment in this country to producing the highest quality food. However, our debate would not be completely honest if I did not record that I believe that the Government are generally inimical to tying together the interests of consumers and producers. I mean no disrespect to the Minister, who has made time to be here to reply to the debate when, as part of the Executive team dealing with the foot and mouth crisis, she has so much on her plate. However, while the subject of food remains in the title of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Government have assigned the Food Standards Agency and food policy generally to the Department of Health. Why, therefore, has a Health Minister not come to reply to the debate? I can only suppose that, although responsibility for the FSA as a quango has been assigned to the Department of Health, there is a lack of expertise and knowledge in that Department about the issues surrounding the responsibilities of the FSA. That would make it right for the Government to send an Agriculture Minister, who is likely to have received the best briefing and to have most knowledge. Of course, we met in the House in March last year when I promoted the Food Labelling Bill as a private Member's Bill.

It will be interesting to hear the Minister's justification, not for being here but for why the Government have deployed someone from MAFF rather than from the Department of Health, given the changes that have taken place in responsibility for this area of policy. If the subject is hybrid, we need clarification of who in Government has responsibility for food policy. Is it MAFF or the Department of Health? Is the Department of Health focused on the more alarmist danger signals relating to food and public health and MAFF more concerned with the supply chain? If so, that reinforces my point—this has certainly

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been my experience in dealing with such issues on behalf of my constituents—about the essential need to tie together the interests of consumers and producers, in order not only to maintain the high quality of food in this country but to ensure accountability. Accountability is the key to confidence—an important word—on the part of the consumer and producer in the food industry. That may be at the ultimate end, when the purchasers make decisions, or initially, when the relevant issues are for farmers and others. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) made farmers' reasons for wanting a rural way of life clear, but that must be based on economic justification. That is why some producers take investment decisions. Their interests must be protected.

As part of our important considerations of the country's food policy, I intend to review the position that we have reached on food labelling. I was able to promote a private Member's Bill on food labelling, so, naturally, I have studied the subject greatly. When I framed the Bill, I was glad to gain the support of the National Farmers Union and the National Pig Association. The Bill proved not only that honesty in food labelling is of high public interest, but that it is important to tie together the interests of producers and consumers on food labelling, rather than to drive a wedge between them.

The Bill called for labelling to state both country of origin—that should be clear, simple and honest—and standards of production. Of course, there were all sorts of complications. As we said on the Floor of the House late last night, when we were discussing the Select Committees on European Scrutiny and on Defence, the devil is in the detail—not that we received many answers. Pre-prepared foods are likely to combine ingredients of different origins. How is a regime to deal with that? We tackled it in the Bill by saying that the country of origin would have to reflect all the ingredients that constituted more than 25 per cent. in weight of a product. I accept that it became clear during the debate on 3 March last year that the Bill needed amending if it was to become law, but it had the right strategy and employed the right series of policies.

We are not yet clear about the source of the current foot and mouth outbreak, and—who knows?—my Bill might have helped to prevent it. It would have recorded constituent ingredients sourced from another country if they made up more than 25 per cent. by weight of any product. It is well known that our armed forces have changed their policy of being supplied exclusively with British food and are allowed to be supplied with food from abroad. Questions are being asked as to whether scraps from food fed to the forces at Catterick were in pigswill that ended up at the farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall. That could be a source, given that some of the food came from South Africa. We know that foot and mouth disease is endemic in parts of South Africa. That is supposition, and I am anxious that none of us should be alarmist. However, had there been a better regime on labelling the country of origin and production standards of food, we might have had the necessary information and certification on foodstuffs, in the private or public sector, to have had a chance to prevent foot and mouth from entering the country. Of course, that is pure speculation.

As the Minister recalls—she was present—the Government chose to talk out my Food Labelling Bill. We all know that hon. Members sometimes speak at great length on private Members' Bills so that they run out of time, and my judgment was that it was better to ensure that all the points were made. I made a fairly long speech because I was anxious not to give the time to those who had no interest in seeing my Bill on the statute book. The Minister dealt with some of the points that I made. She argued that the proposals on country of origin did not need the force of law, but subsequent events have shown that there is an issue of confidence for consumers and producers because country of origin labelling is inadequate. The proposals on standards of production raise more intricate details and difficulties. The Minister argued that that was fully covered by a series of regulations because it had been delegated to wider European Union responsibilities, and that the Government were seeking urgently to negotiate and advance the matter in those councils. It is worrying that we have heard little more about it, although there have been a number of reports.

An easy regime would be to display the country of origin simply with a letter, perhaps in large print. Such information appears on some products, but not clearly and obviously. On standard of production, there could be some form of kite mark certification. Some product labels include an essay of information on ingredients, including whether they are genetically modified, contain nuts and so on. That is confusing and unhelpful for consumers at the point of decision in a supermarket or a local shop. That is why the kite mark analogy was raised. It would be possible to arrange certification, and many European Union member states have an equal interest in the matter because they want to protect their regional markets. There are derogations in regulations and legislation to enable regional origin of products to be certified, but the only result to date is from the National Farmers Union, which, laudably, initiated the red tractor logo. Many consumers who want to buy British farm-assured quality food welcomed that. Many genuinely British food products sport the union jack on the packaging and many consumers prefer, if they have the chance, to focus their purchasing on such products.

I do not want to denigrate the NFU's red tractor logo. It has been extensively applied in many supermarkets and other outlets, but it does not guarantee that the product is British. It demonstrates that the food has been produced to British farm produce standards and many producers of imported foods have insisted through the distribution chain that their foods are labelled with that logo, so its meaning has been thrown into doubt. I shall not pursue the point too heavily because the logo should be encouraged rather than diminished, but it is not the same as a true country of origin label and it is not what can be achieved under the current law and regulations.

In the enactment of the Food Standards Act 1999, which led to the creation of the Food Standards Agency, we saw that this country has enormous expertise in food labelling and certification, but this has not been brought to bear domestically to the extent to which it should. That is part of the reason why I introduced my Food Labelling Bill, and why I argued a year ago that we should show leadership in the field. European member states are hungry to see us take leadership, as they

recognise our enormous expertise, as shown by the speed at which we have developed the quality choice that is available in supermarkets and other outlets. I join the hon. Member for Stroud in celebrating the farmers markets and all the other outlets for high-quality food. There could be a joint enterprise with the EU to ensure that our leadership and understanding of the issues is brought to bear.

I fear that there is a reluctance to go faster than the slowest pace set in the EU in achieving a significant uprating in honesty in food labelling in this country. After my Bill failed to be enacted, I had discussions with the Food Standards Agency, and although I received an extremely sympathetic hearing to the aspects of the Bill on country of origin labelling, there was considerable suspicion, indeed doubt, about my proposal on standards of production. It would be both irresponsible and inappropriate to try to introduce improvements in our food policy without introducing measures on standards of production. Our approach to food labelling would allow consumers to be confident about food, and farmers would know how the high-quality food that they produced was represented.

The importance of my proposal on standards of production was most clearly evidenced in the enormous concern expressed about the stall-and-tether method of farming pigs. There has been an admirable move away from that method, at huge investment cost to many pig farmers. That change has not been matched by our key European competitors. Denmark is a case in point. This country is a great consumer of Danish bacon. We do not denigrate its quality or availability, but there is concern at the lack of speed at which Denmark is abolishing stalls and tethers in pig farming. Denmark has sought a derogation under the EU directive.

It is important to note that we seem to be going at the pace of the slowest member state on certain issues, although we are going faster than other member states in policing the EU directives that apply to domestic marketplaces. That is why there is deep concern, and why we would do well to consider framing a law that reflects our domestic needs, rather than relying simply on EU regulations that are subject to interminable negotiations without result.

What has been done since we debated my private Member's Bill on food labelling a year ago? It is not apparent what has been achieved. I accept that the Minister cannot be blamed, but there is a sense that the Government have found themselves in hock to the supermarkets to a degree. At the same time, as soon as the going gets tough, the Prime Minister says that the supermarkets have the farmers in an arm lock. This is not a battle between two sides and it is unhelpful to regard it as such. As I have said, we must try to unite producers and consumers, and the Prime Minister was ill-advised in using the phrase "arm lock", even though it doubtless struck a sympathetic chord with the many farmers who continue to feel desperately blighted and let down by this Government.

Even though the Prime Minister's spokesman sought to backtrack on the use of that phrase the following day, it would be extremely helpful if the Minister could clarify what the Prime Minister meant when he used it in relation to supermarkets and farmers. I am reminded of the debate surrounding community health councils. The Prime Minister said that there had been no consultation on scrapping community health councils, but then asserted that in fact there had. He had to write to me to make it clear that the Government had already decided to scrap them.

One issue raised by the hon. Member for Stroud was greater public education on food policy. The Select Committee on Education and Employment produced a report on school meals and the availability of fruit and other suitable foods. In the light of it and the evidence taken, we must remember that there is no point in producing food for any sector of the population—particularly children and young people—that is not attractive to them. Food that they cannot be persuaded to eat, however worthy and nutritious, is simply not acceptable, and alternatives that are perhaps not as healthy must be used.

A local Labour councillor in my area successfully undertook a cross-party initiative, which I supported fully and publicly, to encourage the availability of free milk in schools. However, it is disappointing to note that very few parish councils have taken up the initiative. The problem is not a lack of will or initiative on the part of the local town councillor or, indeed, the local Member of Parliament, but the reluctance of parish councils and others to respond positively. To our great surprise, the few replies that we received were ambivalent. We must look again at how to make the right food attractive to young people and other elements of the community.

I am conscious that time is running out, and I shall try to bring my remarks to a close. The Conservative policy on honesty in food labelling picks up on the proposals in my Food Labelling Bill, although I recognise that those proposals need amending to some extent. We should not worry about the hurdles that we encounter. Like the hon. Member for Stroud, I have spoken to organisations such as i-Label, which has considerable expertise in respect of consumer access to ingredients, and to those who know how to put together a standard of production certificate that includes the country of origin.

One has only to access the internet and type a phrase such as "Swedishsafemeat.com" to discover that it is possible to trace every single pig, sheep and cow product in Sweden. Those who buy a joint of meat in a Swedish shop can determine from which animal it came by accessing the relevant website, and we should all copy that approach. If Sweden can manage that, it is surely not beyond the wit of this country, given our great expertise in food products and food regimes. It is important to tie together consumer and producer interests, including supermarkets, distributors, restaurateurs and those involved in public procurement, as well as securing the support of everyone involved in the rural economy, including farmers and producers.

The hon. Member for Stroud referred to joined-up government. The Government's proposals must be based on joined-up thinking. There is a proposal afoot to introduce a law on corporate manslaughter. If some absolute outrage took place in the food chain, the last thing that a director of a supermarket chain or distribution company would want is to find themselves liable for an offence of corporate manslaughter as a result of inadequate information and inadequate labelling. Every constituent member of the food chain should be required to have the relevant information about food, including its origins and standards of

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production. Perhaps the foot and mouth outbreak would not have occurred had that been implemented through domestic law rather than treated as a matter for negotiation under our obligations to the EU.

One saving grace about honesty in food labelling—which I should have thought that other parties, as well as the Conservative party, would wish to recognise—is that it is a completely cost-free option to the public purse. The burden could properly fall on those at the retail end of the food chain—not, for once, putting the squeeze on the farm gate.

I have spoken at length. I look forward to hearing the Minister respond to the points that I have made.

10.21 am

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on his excellent introduction; I am sure that no hon. Member would disagree with a word of what he said. I congratulate him and the people of Stroud on their local initiatives, which are a beacon that the rest of us might well follow.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) made an interesting point about the common interest between producers and consumers. However, over the years, the processes of distribution have come between producers and consumers. In respect of food labelling, I am afraid that the party that he supports so loyally spent 18 years actively destroying the local link between producers and consumers by allowing regulations to be used in such a way that local abattoirs and packing plants were frozen out, forcing producers to deal with one or two big players in their region. It is no accident that those involved in the big business end of the food sector supported the then Government. It is all very well to say now that labelling is the answer to everything. Of course, we all support labelling. One of the big issues in the debates on the Food Standards Bill was the remit of the Food Standards Agency. Many of us wanted the Bill to cover labelling.

I am pleased to see the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food here after her trips around the country. Food policy is a public health matter. However, we should not concentrate purely on the producer end of the food chain. As the hon. Member for Stroud said, food policy necessitates joined-up action by the Government. He saw that as a threat; I see it as a challenge and an opportunity. If we do not do something, we will end up like the Americans. There are two types of American: those who need three chairs to sit on because they are so grossly obese and those who are neurotically thin and eat hardly anything because they are so worried about their weight. I am concerned that we are drifting in the direction of larger seat sizes. It is not right to continue with the token actions that are being taken, because, as the hon. Member for Stroud said, food policy affects heart disease, cancers, and people's general fitness and productivity.

Despite the bad press that supermarkets have received, they have made a good job of delivering consistent quality at a reasonable price for most people. It is sad, however, that a small group of people cannot afford the bus fare to the big supermarket or to buy larger packs. Such people are trapped into using corner shops, which often sell goods of lower quality at higher prices, and are thereby put at a tremendous disadvantage. My home village is not unique in having to run a breakfast club at the primary school to ensure that children are given at least one decent meal a day. In the 21st century, that is not acceptable in a country as wealthy as ours.

However, unlike supermarkets on the continent, supermarkets here have not taken on board the idea of using local products. French supermarkets always source vegetables, meat and bakery items locally. Perhaps we could encourage that here, through negative taxation or tax breaks.

Every year, I speak to a combined meeting of members of the Country Landowners Association and the NFU on the Isle of Wight. Every year, I tell them that we need to move away from subsidising production through the common agricultural policy and towards supporting farmers in their stewardship of land and encouraging them to produce quality, identifiable produce to be marketed locally. On the whole, they listen to me tolerantly. This year, I spoke to them two weeks before the foot and mouth outbreak. They wrote to me saying, "Thank you very much. We had a stimulating evening. It is good for us to hear things that we do not necessarily want to hear."

It is interesting that since the foot and mouth outbreak, everyone is talking about the importance of keeping matters local. That will be difficult for some farmers. A pig breeder told me, "It's all very well having a local abattoir for some purposes, but we cannot sell all our products locally." It costs money to ship out refrigerated meat; it is much cheaper to ship livestock—on the hoof—across the country, or across Europe. That situation is unacceptable. There should be a way of influencing movement patterns to the benefit of animal welfare and quality of product. The less stress that an animal suffers before it is slaughtered, the better the product, and the better it is for us all. I will try to keep my remarks brief, Mr. Jones.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Barry Jones): Order. I invite the hon. Gentleman to consider referring to the Chair as Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. Brand: I beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have not caught up with the late night ramblings of the House. I sincerely apologise because I have been caught out in the other direction previously.

The issue of labelling has been covered by the hon. Member for Eddisbury and we agree that an initiative is essential. We also need to examine the producer end and consider giving more positive support to local co-operative efforts, for example, for dairy production or milk distribution. It does not make sense to shift bulk milk 200 miles, then shift the empty bottles back again.

We also need to consider whether our tax regimes are helping producers. My local glasshouse industry is unsure about the effects of regulations on combined heat and power plants. It needs them to produce carbon dioxide to grow its product and it uses the surplus energy to produce electricity. The regime to protect the glasshouse industry against unfair competition from abroad is unsatisfactory, which is not the case in other European Community countries.

Mr. Drew: I must declare an interest. I am both a Co-operative and a Labour Member of Parliament. Will

the hon. Gentleman accept that one good result of the new initiatives is the attempt to rebuild co-operation in terms of both the immediate food chain and its adjuncts?

Dr. Brand: Matters are progressing, but I am frustrated that they are not moving fast enough.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that the Government chose to overturn the recommendations of what was the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in its milk report. It recommended that there should be value added opportunities on milk products for effective co-operatives. However, the Government chose to split up the collection of milk, so I have six lorries going past my gate at home in Cheshire, rather than one. Co-operatives are now allowed to take value added opportunities, but there have been massive increases in the cost of distribution. The decision by the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to overturn that recommendation was wrongheaded and the hon. Gentleman will know its effect on the difficulties that he is exposing.

Dr. Brand: The Government sadly chose to go in neither of those directions. The current set-up does not allow true local co-operatives to function. Local farmers are still tied in because they fear that co-operatives will be established over which they will have no effective influence.

The Government's scheme to introduce fruit and vegetables in schools is laudable. However, schools also receive commercial sponsorship from the manufacturers of fizzy drinks and crisps, which sends a peculiar message to young people. We must restore domestic science and practical subjects to the classroom for boys and girls because many people cannot boil the proverbial egg. A whole generation finds the preparation of a Pot Noodle challenging, which is unhelpful if one is trying to promote good diet and sensible food policy.

This is proving to be an interesting debate because our minds have been concentrated by the emergence of problems caused by an over-centralised supply chain. I thank the Minister for making time to debate these problems because they lie within her remit. However, I hope that her presence does not mean that the Department of Health does not recognise the Government's broad responsibilities. Food policy affects the Treasury, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Department for Education and Employment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in addition to the Department of Health.

10.33 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on his success in obtaining this important debate. However, the number of hon. Members who want to participate will disappoint him. Food quality has been a high-profile issue for many years and it is disappointing that more hon. Members, particularly Opposition Members—

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Opposition?

Mr. Moss: I mean Government Members, who are opposite us.

In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for Stroud talked about difficulties in the food chain. He mentioned BSE, swine fever, bovine TB, foot and mouth and hormones in beef. Those affect the quality of meat products and bovine TB also affects milk. We could look beyond animals and consider pesticide levels in fruit and vegetables. Controls on the growing number of genetically modified crop trials and standards for organic food could also be mentioned.

Dr. Brand: Is the hon. Gentleman implying that food-related concerns may relate to GM crops?

Mr. Moss: I am talking about food production in general. The debate is about the end product and the quality of food. I am not saying that the food produced from GM crops will necessarily injure individuals' health.

The matters that I have mentioned are all within the remit of the Minister. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food still retains that title. However, no representative from the Food Standards Agency is here. I would also have expected a Minister, or other representative, from the Department of Health to be present today, as responsibility for the issue has been transferred to that Department from MAFF.

That lack of representation allows us to focus on a problematic dichotomy: the dissociation of food production from the end product in the shops. The process of control and regulation—from the farmer, through the farm gate, to the processor and the supermarkets—should be continuous and integrated. If we separate its stages too much, we do it a disservice. I would like the debate to take account of the fact that the process should be an harmonious whole. We should not isolate its different stages into pigeonholes.

Foot and mouth has been mentioned. I follow the lead of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) in reiterating that foot and mouth has no implications for the quality of beef, lamb and pork, or any knock-on effect on human health. That important message must be conveyed. However, the causes of the terrible outbreak have ramifications for animal welfare and, therefore, for food safety.

The closure of abattoirs, which the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) mentioned, and moves to slaughter animals in larger and more diverse geographic units, has caused greater movement of animals. When the report on the outbreak is published, it may indicate that that has been an ingredient in the more rapid spread of this especially malevolent disease. Following comments that other hon. Members have made, I welcome the Minister, and thank her for her presence at a time when she and her Department are deeply involved in the terrible crisis. We look forward to her remarks.

Milk prices have been mentioned. It seems unreasonable that farmers at the farm gate sometimes get a price for their milk that is lower than their production costs. Will the Minister comment on any plans that the Government might have to introduce legislation to prohibit products being sold in supermarkets at prices that are lower than producers' costs?

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury has talked brilliantly on labelling, about which he knows a great deal. I will not cover the same ground, but I urge the

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Minister to answer my hon. Friend's questions as he brought great expertise to bear on the subject. Although the Government pay some lip service to labelling, they have not, in the opinion of Conservative Members, done what they need to do to rectify the problems associated with it.

I will concentrate my remarks in the next few minutes on imports. Conservative Members feel that our farmers and producers are subject to greater regulation and red tape than many of their counterparts in the EU, to say nothing of the rest of the world. We feel that those regulations and that red tape should not bear down on them disproportionately so as to disadvantage them. We believe that food imports that do not meet the standards required by law for British farmers must not be allowed to undercut British produce and undermine British standards.

When we return to government, we intend to use article 36 of the treaty of Rome, which defines the circumstances in which cross-border trade can be restricted, to ban unfair agricultural imports. The obstruction of British beef exports by France and Germany has shown just how other EU procedures can be used to disadvantage unfairly British farmers. The Government have repeatedly refused to subject imports to the same standards that they impose on British farmers. Instead, they have assumed, without foundation, that restricting imports on the basis of animal welfare would not be admissible under article 36.

In 1995, when the Labour party was in opposition, the then spokesman on agriculture, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), spoke on the "Today" programme about Labour's plans to halt the export of veal calves. He said:

"We don't doubt that this would lead to a legal challenge. But we believe the British public would rather see this argued through the courts and a real attempt made to end this system."

Of course, in government, the Labour party has failed to take any action of that kind, on the basis of animal welfare or on that of other food standards, such as safety and hygiene.

One of the examples that we put to the Government was that of the French sewage scandal. A European Commission report exposed France as a nation in which animal and possibly human waste had been routinely and illegally used in farm feedstuffs. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was quoted in *The Daily Telegraph* of 26 October 1999 as saying:

"The EU's report describes practices which are illegal, highly undesirable and needed to be stopped but there is no immediate justification on safety grounds to engage in the withdrawal of products."

The Government chose to ignore the scientific advice at the time. Professor Hugh Pennington, who conducted the investigation into the Lanarkshire E. coli outbreak was quoted in the *Daily Mail* on 26 October 1999 as saying:

"If you are padding out animal feed with treated sewage, the likelihood is that the gunge will also include ground-up animal waste including nervous tissue. This means that there is danger of BSE in addition to the very real possibility of bacterial infections."

Then there is the more recent risk of BSE in French beef. The French Government have consistently excused their illegal ban on British beef on the grounds that BSE is common in Britain but rare in France. It is true that the epidemic in Britain has been much greater than anywhere else in Europe, but infection rates are now rising in France, at the same time as they are falling in this country.

For some time, British farmers have had their suspicions that cases of BSE in France have been under-reported. Those suspicions were spectacularly confirmed when the European Commission published a damning investigation into the failure of the French authorities either to contain or honestly to report their growing BSE epidemic. The Commission released the results of that investigation in February 2000. The final report exposed a catalogue of lax procedures that would be unthinkable in Britain, and which almost certainly resulted in massive under-reporting of BSE in France.

I shall cite five conclusions of the report. First, technicians rather than veterinarians performed inspections of suspect animals before slaughter. Secondly, there was poor compliance with rules demanding special certificates for possible BSE cases. Thirdly, animals with neurological disorders were instantly diagnosed as victims of non-BSE diseases. Fourthly, animals that died before slaughter were admitted to the food chain without inspection. Finally, cattle feed routinely showed traces of meat and bone meal—there is, of course, an EU-wide ban on the use of animal protein in cattle feed. So we have said for some time that we should carefully inspect the quality of beef imports from France and other countries in which the BSE problem is now increasing.

The Food Standards Agency has become something of a fig leaf. When during Agriculture questions we ask Ministers about any matter relating to food, the answer comes back, "That's not our remit; that's nothing to do with us. That is the Food Standards Agency's responsibility." However, never since the Food Standards Agency has been in operation has a question about food been asked during Health questions.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): So table one.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: We have tried.

Mr. Moss: My hon. Friend says that we have tried, but we are getting no clear answers.

Mr. O'Brien: It has been difficult to frame questions that the Table Office has been prepared to accept. Since a form of words on the Food Standards Agency for Health questions has been agreed with the Table Office, it just happens that, despite desperate attempts, we have been unlucky in the shuffle.

Mr. Moss: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for trying on so many occasions to ask such questions. We must keep trying because the Minister concerned admitted to me privately that she has not been asked one question on the FSA since she took over her responsibilities. That cannot be right.

In conclusion, two issues relate to the quality of beef imports. Cattle more than 30 months old are now routinely tested, we are told, in those EU countries that have BSE. It is admitted that the test is not foolproof, so

it is likely that over-30-month meat is still being imported in carcass form—and that, crucially, for many years, it has been admitted in processed form. Although we introduced the rule that no over-30-month-old animal would enter our food chain, we have discovered—I have questioned Ministers on this many times—that processed meat has been allowed into this country during the past few years that must have contained meat from over-30-month cattle. It may well be argued that now that over-30-month testing is being introduced in Europe, that problem will disappear, but that does not answer the question of why such processed meat has been allowed in during the past few years.

Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has several times denied that any over-30-month-old processed meat ever entered the food chain. The Department no longer claims that, but the last time that the Minister of State was challenged on the Floor of the House to say what was the truth, she ducked the question. I trust that she will not duck it today.

10.48 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) introduced the debate with a characteristically thoughtful speech that reflected the keen interest that he has taken in agriculture and food in his constituency and in his work on the Select Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In case anyone reading the *Hansard* report of our debate gets a misleading impression from the comments about attendance made by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), I should make it clear that three Labour Members, two official Opposition Members and one Liberal Democrat Member have been present. Otherwise, the impression that hordes of Opposition Members attended might falsely be given.

The debate takes place against the serious backcloth of foot and mouth disease. It is not surprising that all Members who have spoken have expressed their deep concern and strong support for those most affected by the dreadful outbreak. The Government are tackling the disease, first and foremost by slaughtering and destroying large numbers of animals. Also, we are already paying compensation to farmers and allowing movement of some animals, both to slaughter and on welfare grounds. I know that there is agreement on such matters among all Members.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) said that we should not be alarmist on food safety issues and foot and mouth disease. I strongly agree, and other Members also referred to that. It is wise to report on the gravity of the foot and mouth situation, but to avoid alarmist comments that could worry people unnecessarily. I feel that especially strongly, having been in Cumbria at the weekend. Some of the press reports, that all the skies were black, and that towns and villages were ghost places to which no one would want to go, were deeply inaccurate. Many in Cumbria said that they found such reporting upsetting and unhelpful as they coped with the actual situation.

I am sure that foot and mouth disease is already reinvigorating the debate on food policy, and more widely on agriculture policy. That comment fits with the broad thrust of the arguments and ideas proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud. However, we must recognise that a great deal of work has already been done. The Government have been actively engaged in devising a forward-looking strategy for agriculture, in seeing agriculture as a key part of the rural economy, and in seeing the link between agriculture and other parts of the economy. My Ministry takes co-operation and dialogue across the food chain seriously, and we have been considering the important issues that also affect other Departments and Government bodies. I commend that work. It has taken the domestic agenda on the issues forward, as it has the work that must go on at a European and a wider international level. When the foot and mouth crisis is overcome, I hope that some recognition will be given to the work that has already taken place. We can build a thoughtful debate for the future on it.

Understandably, the Food Standards Agency has been referred to a great deal during the debate. I do not accept that it is used as a fig leaf by Ministers, as the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire alleged. It is important that Ministers highlight the agency's work and responsibility, and where the ministerial line of accountability should be in relation to the FSA. That is simply to stress to the public that the creation of the FSA met a real need, and that we are keen that its work should be properly appreciated and understood.

I can think of no subject that can be neatly contained within the work of one Department of State. The problems of joined-up government, referred to by several hon. Members, are real. For example, I have been involved in the active promotion of the Department of Health's free fruit scheme for school children. I have tremendous enthusiasm for it, not only because it sends out an important message about healthy eating and nutrition, but because it offers help to the horticulture industry in finding new markets and customers. It makes perfect sense to take a joined-up approach. I was pleased to take part in promotional efforts at Hill Mead school in south London and other schools in the area; not only did they stress the importance of healthy eating but they increased awareness of rural issues in urban areas. That sort of joined-up work is important.

Mr. Moss: We are all in favour of joined-up government, but the Minister has not yet explained why she and not the Minister for Public Health, who is responsible for the FSA, is answering a debate on food policy

Ms Quin: The subject of the debate introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud includes a good many issues that are the responsibility of my Department, including the food chain initiative referred to by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), and reform of the common agricultural policy. The latter is a key element, because we are not divorced from Europe on agricultural matters. Those questions are extremely important for my Department. In the context of my hon. Friend's remarks, I must conclude that it was right for an Agriculture Minister to respond. In preparing for the debate, I have had contact with other Departments. Such matters are not hermetically sealed; nor should they be.

[Ms Quin]

The hon. Member for Eddisbury took me to task once again over his labelling Bill. A number of points need to be made in response. I find it rather odd still to be accused of talking out a Bill when less than a third of the time was made available to me—the rest of it was taken by the hon. Gentleman himself—and I did not have enough time to respond to the valid points raised in that debate. If he were to ask whether the Government were in favour of a Bill in that form, the answer would be no. It would have taken us directly into illegality in Europe. However, I hope that I can give him some reassurance.

Having promoted the idea of labelling to show country of origin in conjunction with the Italian agriculture Minister at a recent Agriculture Council meeting, I assure the hon. Member for Eddisbury that we are actively considering the matter. It is time to overhaul European Union labelling arrangements, because various directives are causing confusion. Fruit and vegetables have country-of-origin labelling, which is extremely helpful to consumers. Beef and wine are also now labelled with their country of origin. We also have regional appellations, which give more information to consumers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We now come to the next debate.

Planning Appeals

10.59 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I express my appreciation for the opportunity to debate this issue. As might be suspected, I have a hidden agenda, although I am not using the debate as a ramp to raise issues relating to specific planning applications—there is a time and a place for that. However, much of what I shall say is inspired by my experiences in my constituency.

Planning procedure is not only an arcane but a difficult area for politicians. I was told recently that there is a parliamentary convention that MPs do not get involved in individual planning applications. That was news to me because for a quarter of a century my predecessor diligently intervened in every planning application that arose in my constituency, and my constituents expected me to follow in that tradition.

Planning procedure is difficult for another, more subtle, but important reason: the problem is at the interface between law and politics. Most local councils are engaged in what is sometimes referred to as a quasi-judicial process, which few local people understand. They expect their councillors to respond to political pressures and do not understand that councillors are constrained by planning guidance and complex legal obligations. I appreciate that the Minister is bound by the same constraints, being both the guardian of the appeal process and the one who issues policy. One of the key policies that is germane to the debate is contained in planning guidance. Planning policy guidance 1, the predisposition to development, is probably the most important piece of guidance issued to my local authority, so conflict sometimes arises between policy and judicial constraints.

Before I embark on the essence of my speech, I shall take a slight detour while we are dealing with planning processes and appeals and ask the Minister for some clarification on a major departure in policy over the past few days. From reports in the press, I understand that the Minister for Housing and Planning has issued a new set of guidance relating to mobile phone masts. That will be of enormous interest to many hon. Members who have campaigned on that issue, either in general or in relation to specific applications. I shall be grateful if the Minister will clarify what will happen about that, given that I understand that no other ministerial statement on the subject will be made.

I understand that the scope of planning controls will be widened to encompass small masts of less than 15 m, which have hitherto been exempt from controls, and that public concern, presumably reflecting health considerations, will be taken into account. How important will public concern about health be in the new planning guidelines? Will that be a valid criterion for planning objections? If the balance has decisively shifted towards allowing public concern to weigh heavily in a planning decision, clearly, the Minister's desk will be flooded with appeals from developers in the mobile phone industry, which has invested massively in new technology. If the balance still lies with traditional planning constraints and if people may apply only on grounds of visual amenity, many people will be disappointed. I would be grateful for some clarification of where the balance will lie because it is germane to the sort of appeals that will be launched.

Finally on mobile phones, an enormous number of applications have been accepted and many masts have been erected without planning permission as a result of the size limitation. I assume that the new ruling will have no retrospective effect, but should be grateful for confirmation because many masts have been erected close to schools and blocks of housing.

The essence of my argument is the way in which the planning appeal process operates in suburban contexts such as Twickenham. Some of the problems that I shall outline may be particular to Twickenham, but in many other suburban areas of London and other big cities there is tremendous pressure for what we would call overdevelopment, although that might not be an accurate, scientific description. The false dichotomy between brownfield and greenfield development misses the problems associated with suburban areas. Those areas have lower density and are under tremendous pressure to increase it and to develop.

Developers are often blocked from greenfield activity, but there is growing demand for houses and, frequently, they do not want to build blocks of housing in inner-city areas, so they concentrate their activities on the suburbs, which often have distinct planning problems. In Twickenham and, I am sure, in many similar areas, no more major pieces of land can be occupied by large developments. However, the Government have set very tough housing targets and I understand that local authorities have little discretion to refuse them. They are obliged to incorporate them in their unitary development plans.

My borough has a target of 240 new houses a year, over 20 years. That is a relaxation of the target of 300 that applied under the previous Government. Nevertheless, it is still a demanding target when there are no vacant sites. It means that developers buy bungalows and houses with large gardens. They do whatever is possible to pack more houses on to a piece of land. That often results in extreme tension.

I received an e-mail a couple of days ago from a group of residents in Hampton road in Teddington, in the middle of my constituency. A gentleman went out one morning and found someone walking around his property, photographing it and taking measurements. He asked, "Why are you in my garden? What are you doing?" and was told, "We have been sent by the developer. We are preparing to buy your house." His reply was that he did not want to sell his house, but was happy where he was. The developer's representative said, "I have already agreed with your neighbours to buy, and either you sell to us for a good price or we are going to make your life rather miserable, because a development is going to go up next door that you may not like." My constituent checked with his neighbours and found next door that a very frightened old lady had been, if not exactly threatened, certainly intimidated, into the clear understanding that she had little option but to sell.

The same thing is going on throughout the area. Everyone with a bungalow is being approached by developers and encouraged, sometimes politely, and sometimes less politely, to sell. The economics are plain. Someone who buys a bungalow with a large garden for £500,000—which is probably the current cost—and is able to obtain planning consent for a block of six or eight flats, which will be described as "exclusive" or "luxury", will be able to sell the site for £3 million. There is a lot of money to be made. Under our tax system, there is no mechanism other than normal business taxation for taxing developers' profits.

There is an enormous amount at stake. Real pressures are being brought to bear and it is not overstating the case to describe what is now happening as a form of suburban Rachmanism. People are being winkled out of their property to enable such intensification of development to go on. Sometimes, it can be very unpleasant. A bitter conflict recently took place over a small infill development called Teddington Park. Following hostility between the developers and residents, the residents went out one night and found that their trees had been chopped down in an act of vandalism and malice. The police have not yet been able to track down precisely who did it, but clearly emotions are high and a lot of pressure is being brought to bear.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of another problem; I do not know how matters stand in his constituency. In my constituency, a problem arose over a covenant for non-development of a piece of land. In order to buy out that covenant, developers threw the telephone book at people. It came to silly money.

Dr. Cable: That is a helpful intervention. I am glad of confirmation that the problems that I have described occur elsewhere, albeit in a different context. The hon. Gentleman is right. A sophisticated industry is being developed by people who fully understand the legal loopholes through which they have to crawl, and are perfecting techniques to intimidate residents into complying with their wishes.

How does that feed into the planning process? Assuming that residents have been persuaded to sell their back gardens, their bungalows, or the little patch of land adjacent to them, an application will go to a local planning committee. Residents might object, perhaps because of the pressure on local infrastructure. A problem in my area is that schools are massively overcrowded. When new residents arrive and the demand for school places increases, there is no more land. In a typical, controversial case last week, a bit of playing field from one school had to be taken away to provide land for a new school.

There is pressure on infrastructure. There is pressure on streets. It would be desirable if everyone used public transport and pooled their cars, but they do not. A development of six or a dozen new houses brings six, 12 or 15 new cars into a street that is already choc-a-bloc with cars. It is difficult to see any social gain from that development.

It would be desirable for such developments to include affordable housing. I should like to see more. My council would certainly like to see more. We need a better housing mix; low-income working people should be able to have homes in the suburbs, but they are not. The Government's planning guidelines, which provide for developments of over 15 houses to include an affordable element, do not address the problem: the developments that I am describing are often deliberately under the 15 limit. There is a rash of applications for 14-house developments, so that they can be called "luxury and exclusive".

[Dr. Cable]

Therefore, there is very little social benefit from those developments and many of them impose severe pressure on the local infrastructure. Local council committees consider them, knowing that they are under pressure from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to meet housing targets. There is a planning guideline, giving predisposition to development, and the councils are often on weak ground if they try to resist applications. The matter then becomes highly politicised.

The hottest political topic in my part of London is planning. It is about infill development. Local Conservatives—although it could be another party elsewhere in the country—denounce the local council for being hand in glove with the developers and for promoting infill development. Of course, when they were in government, they had even more demanding housing targets. It is entirely opportunistic. Nevertheless, the pressures are there and the tensions exist.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I cannot resist the bait that the hon. Gentleman was dangling before me. Is he aware that it is Conservative policy to abolish national house-building targets in the first week of the next Conservative Government?

Dr. Cable: I was not aware of that. I know that the Conservatives' manifesto is a rolling programme, but it is difficult to see how they would do that while accommodating the other pressures for housing, especially in the south-east of England. There is enormous demographic change. There is pressure for more housing units. I understand that the Conservatives have lined up in opposition to greenfield developments, so where will the houses go? If targets are to be abolished, by what mechanism will the houses be built? There seems to be a lack of clarity and logic, which the Conservative spokesman will, no doubt, explain in due course.

I would like some feedback from the Minister about how the planning process, and particularly the appeal process, might be modified in order to achieve a better balance. How can we avoid the phenomenon that I experienced—namely, that residents widely believe that all the aces are in the hands of the developer and that they have few legitimate grounds for objection to developments that damage the local community and put it under pressure?

I have several suggestions to make. First, there is an eight-week rule on planning applications, which pressures local authorities to complete their work within eight weeks. It arose because people who want a modest house extension or their loft converted should not have to wait months and months for local planning officials to clear their application. That should happen speedily and efficiently and I understand why the Government have set relevant targets. However, there is a distinction between modest home improvements, which should take place quickly and be subject to a demanding target of perhaps even six weeks, and controversial middle and large-scale developments, which have a wide impact, but cannot be handled within a short time scale.

There is a cynical process by which developers submit applications in duplicate knowing that local authorities cannot cover the complexity of a major application such as a dozen houses within the time scale. They know that the local planning committee will not cover their application and that it will go to appeal, which sidelines the democratic process. I understand the origins of the eight-week rule and accept that the DETR must set efficiency targets for local government, but the process should be more sophisticated. There should be a more demanding target for house conversions and minor developments, which should be processed more quickly, and a relaxed target for substantial developments that have a wide impact on the community. Those are not unreasonable requests.

Secondly—I realise that this is better-travelled and perhaps more controversial ground—there is the issue of third-party appeals. A developer can currently appeal against a local council planning committee judgment. Indeed, some developers appeal time and again. Several developments in my area have involved a half dozen separate applications, all of which have gone to appeal. It may be that the process of resubmission and appeal produces a better application and I hope that that is the case. However, there is more than a suspicion that developers with deep pockets try to grind down the resistance of overstretched councils. The developers' motive is clear because enormous sums of money can be made out of building projects.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Another issue that I should like my hon. Friend to consider is the pressure exerted on planning authorities by planning officers who fear that members will overturn their recommendations. They argue that there will be punitive costs against the local authority should it lose an appeal. When a local elected member feels that there are good grounds for refusal, but planning officers have worked with a developer over a long period to cultivate an application that they consider to be acceptable, members are pushed into a no-win situation—refuse and be damned, which leaves the local authority with a huge bill of costs, or give way and back the officers' recommendation. Members are clearly subjected to unfair pressure.

Dr. Cable: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and he has eloquently described the process. A system of third-party appeals would introduce a better balance because it would relieve the pressure on council members. A resident who is currently concerned by pressure on local infrastructure, schools and traffic has no grounds for appeal. He or she could go to the ombudsman, but the ombudsman has a specific frame of reference focused on maladministration and cannot overturn a planning decision. He or she could go to judicial review, but that is complex and requires sophisticated legal advice. A better device would be to allow third parties to appeal under certain circumstances.

I appreciate that that could open the floodgates to many vexatious, trivial objections and I should not want the Minister's desk to be flooded by an enormous number of appeals. There would have to be a screening process to ensure that third-party appeals were not being abused, and preliminary tests to find out whether a genuine issue of principle was involved and whether

there were major planning concerns, as opposed to trivial objections. The principle of the third-party appeal, if properly constrained in that way, would be a useful addition to the planning process and would introduce a much better balance.

My third suggestion concerns retrospective applications. I have found that large numbers of developments are proceeding without approval or outside the approval that they have been given, exceeding the norms. That sometimes happens with good reason. Many people involved in small developments do not understand planning law, do not know when they have to seek permission and make honest mistakes. They should not be penalised for that. Sometimes, if they get it terribly wrong, they suffer the penalty of having their property pulled down, which causes a lot of expense and misery.

Notwithstanding that, many developers are making increasingly cynical use of the existing process whereby every case of retrospective approval is treated in precisely the same way as a new application. They often ignore the rules altogether, calculating that a relatively small breach of the planning rules is unlikely to bring the wrath of the development control officers down on to their heads. Moreover, those officers are severely overstretched and enforcement involves costs and complexities. As a result, developers often get away with it, further sowing the increasing cynicism that residents feel about the planning process.

I want to throw a couple of larger ideas at the Minister. Underlying many of the difficulties is the ministerial guidance, with its predisposition to development. It might help if the DETR were to employ a subtle variation on that—a predisposition to sustainable development. That would encompass many of the concerns that residents have about amenity, pressure on infrastructure and overdevelopment. "Sustainability" is an amorphous word, but so is "development". We should build into the principle the concept that the environment matters and ensure that all the aces are not stacked in the hands of the developers. I should be grateful for some feedback on whether that idea is being actively considered and what it might mean in practice.

My final point relates to the way in which the debate about the quasi-judicial role of planning authorities is evolving in the light of the recent High Court ruling. I realise that that will eventually have to be resolved in the courts, but it is not premature to ask the Minister how far the human rights considerations that are being brought to bear on the planning process are affecting the way in which future planning appeals might be considered. I know that there is much debate about the Minister's role and that, in future, she may have to step aside from the planning process in order to comply with human rights legislation. Such matters may have to be dealt with by an environmental court rather than by ministerial intervention.

A similar debate is beginning to open up about the effects on the roles of democratically elected councils. Can they continue to operate in the twilight world of the quasi-judicial function? Should they act politically or legally? Should they be pulled in one way or the other? I believe that it is important for planning to remain within the process of democratic control; for the same reason, I support the Government's initiative in bringing licensing within the ambit of local councils. The issue needs to be reconciled with the new legal rulings of the High Court. It would be useful if the Minister gave some preliminary indications of how that will be achieved.

Mr. Drew: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a further problem in respect of the appeal process? The degree of legalistic knowledge that an ordinary member of the public needs to have in order to grasp what is going on during appeals seriously disadvantages them in trying to oppose a development or a developer.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. That is why, as far as possible, we should try to keep the planning process within a democratic, rather than a purely legal, framework, and to build in safeguards such as those that I have described to enable objectors to have a proper say without the necessity for sophisticated and expensive advice.

11.24 am

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Hon. Members will be grateful to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) for securing the debate at such a relevant time. I echo many of the points that he made, which ranged through a veritable pot pourri of planning issues.

I begin by declaring an interest. I am a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute, although I have not received any fees, or undertaken any work for, some decades—I regard my duties in the House as a full-time occupation. I could even declare an inverse interest because I pay the institute more than £200 a year to remain a member.

I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the hon. Member for Twickenham and to the Minister because I have a long-standing engagement with a constituent that will require me to leave just after 12 o'clock. That happens to hon. Members of all parties from time to time.

I turn to the High Court decision on the role of the Secretary of State in determining planning appeals. Even if the House of Lords says that the present system is not affected by human rights issues, I can envisage that someone would take the matter to the European Court of Human Rights when the procedures of national law had been exhausted.

I suggest to the Minister that the Government consider whether the time is coming to make the planning inspectorate totally independent of the Government. I feel that it might be better if the Secretary of State had no fingers in the pie. That is not to deny that, at present, he observes honourably the fact that planning appeals come to him as sub judice cases and deals with them accordingly.

The hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned telecommunications masts. Will the Minister confirm that the proposal, on which there will be consultation, is not a material change in the law, but that planning authorities will have 56 days, rather than 28 or 42, to deal with applications? That is to allow better and fuller public consultation.

[Sir Sydney Chapman]

It is also proposed that school governors will have to be consulted about applications near to their schools or colleges. Another proposed change intrigues me. The local planning authority will be able to turn down an application for a telecommunications mast if it violates amenity grounds—I think that that is the phrase that is used in the document. I echo the question of the hon. Member for Twickenham: does that mean health grounds, visual grounds, or both?

The period for considering an application for a telecommunications mast is the same as that for a planning application. If such an application is turned down, will the applicant have the right of appeal?

Overdevelopment, or crowded development, in suburban areas is a problem in Chipping Barnet as well as in Twickenham. I do not oppose the policy of higher housing densities in certain areas. Housing can be well designed when its density is greater. However, I caution against overdevelopment, particularly in suburban areas—the late Sir John Betjeman referred to them as "Metroland" areas—which is destroying their suburban character.

Too many good Victorian family homes have been pulled down and replaced with characterless—I put it no less politely than that—blocks of flats. What is worse, in pulling down nice Victorian houses, for which there is great demand, developers too often put up blocks of flats and tarmacadam over the acre or so of green and pleasant back gardens that make an important contribution to such areas, simply because on-street parking is insufficient or is banned. We should have special measures and special powers to deal with applications that destroy the innate pleasant character of particular areas.

In talking about the need to develop brownfield sites or to recycle urban derelict land, we get into a numbers game that is typical of politicians. The watchword ought to be that we develop greenfield sites only as a last resort. We must concentrate on providing incentives to encourage the redevelopment of brownfield sites and that can be achieved only through significant tax incentives.

Section 106 agreements—in my younger days, they were section 52 agreements—enable local planning authorities to receive, before planning permission is granted, financial contributions to tackle infrastructure here or environmental improvement there that does not necessarily relate to the site in question. In this age of concern about sleaze or impropriety, that verges on the corrupt in that, if one hands over a bundle of money, one will get planning permission for something else.

I would far rather that the process were open. Where a greenfield site is developed as a last resort, a tax should be paid to meet the extra costs associated with decontaminating brownfield sites. It is essential that the Government give such incentives to get builders off greenfield sites and on to brownfield sites. The view has too often been taken that it does not matter if one cannot build on a brownfield site because greenfield site land is available. Perhaps local planning authorities should be required to permit building on greenfield sites only where no brownfield sites are available.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Barry Jones): Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman, who is a very experienced hon. Member, is about to discuss procedures for planning appeals.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Indeed. I was trying to point out—I shall cease from now on—that such issues will result in planning appeals. As well as getting the procedures right, I suspect that the Minister would like to know why such issues might result in planning appeals. However, I thank you for your comment, because I was beginning to run away with the subject.

So that the people of our country know where they stand, the policy of this Government, the next Government or any Government should be encapsulated in an easily understood slogan: "We ought to build as much as possible on brownfield sites, we ought to build as little as possible on greenfield sites, and we ought never to build on greenbelt land."

11.34 am

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on selecting for debate the interesting and topical subject of planning appeals and the problems associated with them. I should be in a bit of a mess if I followed the suggestion that Members of Parliament should not get involved in planning matters. Not a day goes by without someone in Portsmouth writing to me about one of the many planning applications that the city is considering.

I have been a member of Portsmouth city council for 30 years and was a member of Hampshire county council for 25. I have served on the planning authorities of both councils and was chairman of the city planning authority for some time. I therefore have a wealth of experience in dealing with both large and small planning applications. I remember meetings in which 100 planning applications had to be discussed. Such meetings could take 10 or 12 hours and sometimes spread over several days.

I was interested in the intervention of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) about Conservative policy. It is interesting to note that the Conservative policy for planning in Hampshire was not to have neighbour notification, not to support deputations to the planning committee and not to delegate by minority order, thereby allowing a planning application to be considered by one or two members before being taken to a larger group of members. All those policies went some way towards curbing the enthusiasm for planning appeals.

As a planning committee member, I had not only to exercise my responsibilities under the planning regulations, but to consider what was reasonable. I had to balance the planning responsibility against reasonableness. Would I want to live next door to, in front of, alongside, or down the street from a development that would inflict damage on my environment and life style, or that of my neighbours? I always tried to exercise that key element of reasonableness when considering planning applications.

There is now great pressure on members of planning authorities from developers who spend a long time talking to council officers to get their applications in

good order. They do so not necessarily for the benefit of planning authority members, but to get the nod from planning officials such as the planning officer, the development control officer, the environmental health officer and the city engineer.

The members are then faced with a difficult decision. If the application is controversial, many will have been lobbied by the people who oppose to it. Their colleagues will put on pressure by speaking against an application, but members will be told repeatedly, "The officers are recommending approval. The fact that you don't like it or think it is unreasonable is not sufficient ground to vote against it. We need good reasons." I have been in more than one planning meeting where members have voted against something and decided their reasons afterwards, in conjunction with the officers. They needed to prepare the groundwork for the appeal that would undoubtedly come.

In the past 10 years, the first suggestion or hint that members might vote against an application has been met with the legal officer saying, "Of course, without really strong grounds for refusal, we'll be on a sticky wicket in an appeal and there could be substantial costs. You know that this applicant has a track record of taking us on." I do not know whether that shows an officer's lack of confidence about winning, or whether he genuinely believes that members have made a bad decision. If we are giving local councillors responsibility, we must trust them to make decisions for the right reasons. They should be enthusiastic about an appeal because the democratic process allows such appeals to take place.

I shall deviate for a moment to refer to a couple of points that have been raised in the debate. The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) talked about section 106 agreements as if they were immoral. A developer must pay—must be made to pay—if the development has a knock-on effect on the community. It should not be for local council tax payers, the Government or anyone else to pay for road infrastructure and alterations. The cost should be borne by the developers, whether the work required is within their development or half a mile up the road.

Section 106 agreements have been used to good effect in the main. In many instances, they are a mechanism to prevent planning appeals: the development might have been refused had the developer not signed the agreement. I do not view that as blackmail. The developer must understand that, in a planning process, to prevent an appeal, one must sometimes go a little further down the line and deal with parts of a site that are not directly involved with the application. In many cases, if the section 106 agreement is properly brought together, it can prevent planning appeals from taking place and achieve a better decision for an area.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I do not disagree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said. He has raised the key issue: the procedure should be open and seen to be open, and it should be regularised.

Mr. Hancock: I have no problem with that. In 20 years of experience, I cannot remember a situation in which a section 106 agreement has not been openly displayed at the planning committee stage and, more important, as a public notice before it is discussed in the committee. There is a degree of transparency, which is a good thing. It helps during appeals if people's grounds for objections and the information that is required to put a planning application together are publicly available to anyone who wants to see them. That is to be welcomed.

I share the sentiments of the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet about the need for the Government to be one step removed from the process. Like him, I have long held the view that we should have an independent planning inspectorate. When I led the largest local authority in Britain, we faced huge planning decisions on new towns and the redevelopment of a sizeable chunk of the south-east, including two big cities. Many good decisions were overturned by Government involvement.

The Library's note on the Human Rights Act 1998 and planning is interesting. Although it agrees that the Secretary of State does not have the power to get involved, a little further on it says that there is no choice but for him to exercise that role. If the Government are to deal with the issue of human rights and planning applications, they must find a mechanism for divorcing the Secretary of State from the situation. Under current legislation, the Secretary of State is bound to act as he or she chooses. Our judges should not be in a position to say that the Secretary of State was wrong to get involved, but that he had to do so because there was no alternative. That is not the way forward.

It is about time the Government got off the fence over the issue of phone masts. They should make phone masts, whatever their purpose, subject to the normal planning regulation and appeals procedure. A company should not simply have to notify a planning authority; we ought to have the opportunity to say no. I want to say no to a phone mast in my constituency. As a member of the city council, I believe that I have a democratic right to say that placing a mast there would be bad planning. If I believe that it is bad on health grounds, why should I, as an elected official, not have the right to say no? If the applicant wants to take that decision to appeal, let him fight it out and prove that phone masts and radio communication masts are not harmful to the environment or to the health of the individual. A planning appeal should take account of those factors. The Government should not tinker with the law, but make fundamental changes to the law governing phone masts. Many hon. Members have campaigned for such changes.

I have examined planning applications in my city over recent months and have found widespread objections to applications. One application was for a McDonald's drive-through, which was very controversial. It attracted local opposition and 58 letters of objection were received at the planning stage. The objectors were given neighbourhood notification and many were given the opportunity to speak against the application. The city council made it clear that it opposed the application, but it was allowed on appeal.

The problem is that, once an appeal is allowed, it is the end of the game for the objectors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham said, the planning system is stacked heavily in favour of the developer and always has been. McDonald's, or whoever was fronting the application, appealed and won. The drive-through has been open for some time and nothing has changed. It is appalling for the local community to have to live with it.

[Mr. Hancock]

People are justified in feeling let down by the planning appeal procedure. They have to live next door to it, but that was never considered.

Another problem concerns an application for change of use to an amusement arcade, to which 494 people objected and about which 42 letters were sent. Local Conservatives in Portsmouth, South campaigned against it and the city council was unanimously opposed to it, but the decision was overturned on appeal and planning permission was granted. How can the planning system have any credibility when an application to which there is so much objection is allowed on appeal and the inspector fails to take account of objections? Reasonableness must be exercised in the planning appeal process, which, sadly, is deficient. It fails to grasp the real issue that local people must be given the same rights as developers.

Developers come armed with QCs and other expensive help to face perhaps half a dozen residents with no background knowledge of planning law to defend their rights. I sometimes wish that local authorities had the power to fund their case, or that the Government would allow opposition to developers to be publicly funded. There should be a legal aid system to allow local people to fight the supermarket giants and over-enthusiastic developers who want to rape our countryside and build on every piece of green space.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is moving closer to procedures for planning appeals.

Mr. Hancock: I thought that I was more than edging my way. I was suggesting significant changes to the Minister because a catalogue of issues must be dealt with.

I referred to the Conservative association in Portsmouth. It was suggested that councillors felt pressurised by the involvement of a political party and that they could have been in trouble under the code of conduct for local government, which the applicant could have used in his appeal. It is wrong that politicians cannot listen to the wider community and have a dialogue with developers; they should be given the opportunity to listen and to make judgments for themselves. Unfortunately, planning authorities are being pressurised by the way in which the appeal system currently operates, so bad planning applications are being granted. That cannot be in anyone's interests, least of all those of the local community, and it is unforgivable that Members of Parliament recognise that, but fail to do anything about it collectively. The Government will fail yet again if they do not deal with the matter.

I live in the second most densely populated city in Europe. It is highly overdeveloped in terms of the motor car, and it is now unreasonable for a planning application to be refused on car parking grounds. We have what is generally recognised as saturation car parking. Therefore, an issue that can be used in most planning appeals is no longer appropriate in Portsmouth because the city council has recognised that it has no solution to saturation car parking—either it turns down every application from now on or it does not exercise reasonableness. We want to try to exercise reasonableness.

A current application subject to a planning appeal is about a former club. It happened to be called the Landport Liberal club, but was nothing to do with the Liberal party. It went out of business, has been derelict for several years and is now in the hands of the receiver. There has been a spate of fires there, including a serious one last week at which I was on site. The divisional commander of the fire service told me that the building was so unsafe that he did not want his officers to go into it as that would put their lives at risk.

In such a case, one would make representations to the city council, as I did. I asked that the building be demolished. The response from the agent for the receiver was that the building would be knocked down if no reasonableness was exercised and the city council agreed to the planning application. Members of the council are being threatened and intimidated because the appeal process allows developers always to have the whip hand. That is unforgivable and unacceptable.

Later this week, the final Government decision on housing figures for the south-east will be brought into the public domain. It will probably be highly controversial and will undoubtedly lead to a number of appeals. I hope that the Minister will promise that the Government recognise flaws in the current system, whether on radio masts, on individual planning applications or on where development takes place. There must be changes. The one change that is crying out to be made is to take some of the power on planning applications away from developers and to give some of it to those who are objecting. Unless that happens, the planning system will be totally discredited and will continue to cause a lot of annoyance, anger and unnecessary heartache.

11.52 am

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): It is a great pleasure to participate in the debate, which I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing. The subject is important and it is slightly surprising that more hon. Members from all parties have not clamoured to take part.

We worry a lot about falling voter participation in local government elections. There is one solid and proven way to increase it, which is to have a controversial planning application in a ward or division. We are all prone to the concerns of our constituents on such serious planning issues.

The hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out the slight dichotomy between the quasi-judicial nature of planning committees and the fact that they are populated with politicians and so may be subject to political pressure. He rightly touched on the current issue of mobile phone masts, as well as health concerns and changes in the planning system. I am delighted that, to some extent, the Government appear to have taken note of the Conservative campaign on the matter, in particular the way in which Conservative-controlled councils such as Kent county council have taken the issue by the scruff of the neck in the absence of clear guidance from the Government. Perhaps we will hear more about that in a moment.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), who is a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. We are all indebted to him for his experience and knowledge of these matters, and I am personally grateful for his guidance on the formulation of our planning policy. He rightly spoke about the role of the Secretary of State and how it had been brought into play by a recent High Court decision, to which I shall return.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) spoke with experience of the pressures on planning committees and reminded us of the sterling role played by the Portsmouth, South Conservatives in major planning matters in his area. His speech gave us a clue as to why his planning committees might have lasted 10 to 12 hours on occasion. None the less, he spoke with some authority.

The hon. Member for Twickenham rightly made the point that, in areas such as Twickenham, Eastbourne and Portsmouth, there are considerable pressures for overdevelopment. One of the major problems in planning is the retention of national house-building targets. Although the Government have changed the description of the targets' purpose from "predict and provide" to "plan, monitor and manage", the reality on the ground is not much different.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the house-building targets for the south-east. The Government may well be trying to fudge the issue until after the next election, but those of us who represent constituencies in that region are dealing with the fall-out from an apparent insistence on anything up to 900,000 new houses in the region over the next few years. We can all point to examples in our constituencies of the consequences of that insistence. The hon. Gentleman mentioned 240 new houses f which space had to be found in Twickenham.

In my own area, on the border between Willingdon and Polegate, it is said that space will have to be found for 1,000 new houses. I find that difficult to support and have spoken against it at all levels. I already have a mailbag full of letters from people complaining that they cannot get their children into the school of their choice, that the roads are inadequate and that the local health service is under pressure. The question of how essential services will be provided to the people who live in those 1,000 new homes is a major issue in our area.

It is one of those typical situations, of which we have heard a number described today. The Government demand that space be found for the new houses, and the decision percolates through the system and translates into X new houses in a particular area or constituency. The local planning authority is under orders from the Secretary of State. The authority is in the process of drafting its new local plan. As someone who is an expert in these matters once said, there are only two sorts of local plan: those that are in preparation and those that are out of date. The shifting target for new housing in the area will somehow have to be fitted into the local plan.

I have heard no fewer than two Liberal Democrat Members speak this morning. Locally, the Liberal Democrats are talking tough on the threat to a large playing field and green space called Hindsland in my constituency. However, when the chips were down at a meeting of Serplan—the south-east regional planning committee—a few months ago, they voted with the Government for the higher target figures. That is an example of the pressures that are brought to bear because of planning applications.

One of the key issues to come out of the debate is the question of cross-appeals or third-party appeals. Conservative Members feel that that is a nettle that the Government have so far signally failed to grasp. There is no doubt that, sooner or later, under the human rights legislation and something called the Aarhus declaration, the system will have to recognise third-party appeals. The Government have already fallen foul of that problem in the High Court; the case has already been mentioned. The Minister should update us today on that case. I believe that the Government are appealing to the House of Lords. It would be interesting to hear when they expect the matter to be heard.

The role of the Secretary of State in the planning appeal system has already been brought into question because of human rights legislation. The Opposition are several steps ahead of the Government and, by definition, even more steps ahead of the Liberal Democrats in our planning policy. We believe that cross-appeals or third-party appeals are inevitable, so why do the Government not recognise the fact and allow them?

Other hon. Members have eloquently set out the apparent injustice to those who are not planning specialists of allowing wealthy, powerful developers to appeal against decisions, but not allowing local residents to appeal against the granting of what they consider to be wholly inappropriate planning applications. It is a familiar experience for those who serve on planning committees to be told by planning officers that it is possible to refuse a highly controversial application, but that the refusal will be appealed against, that the developers will probably win and that it will result in considerable cost to council tax payers. Those are the sort of pressures that are brought to bear on planning committees. We believe that cross-appeals should be permissible and that the number of appeals should be dramatically reduced.

We would remove the Secretary of State from the equation because it is a fiction. I would like to think of the Minister or her boss, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, sitting up for hours on end poring over the minutiae of such appeals, but we all know that a nice man from Bristol holds an inquiry and that, when he eventually reaches a decision, it is said to be the decision of the Secretary of State. I do not suggest any impropriety, but the system has been in force since the 1940s, is visibly and audibly creaking and fails to reflect local views. The Secretary of State should be removed from the appeal process and the planning inspectorate scrapped. Fewer decisions should be appealed against and those appeals should be heard by an independent appeal tribunal.

The majority of planning decisions should be made by the elected representatives of local people. I know the arguments that have been advanced about nimbyism—some people prefer to call it positive parochialism—and about political pressures, but at the moment we have the worst of all worlds. Local residents do not have ownership of their local plans. Nor do they feel involved in their preparation. The first that they may know of a planning application is a small sign stuck on a lamp

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

post—and they may not see that until it is too late. They may decide that the application genuinely affects them and their way of life, but all too often their attempts to object are frustrated by the system. A planning system in which most local people have no influence and that makes local councillors feel powerless in the face of applications—often multiple applications—by large, well-funded developers is no longer sustainable.

Those are the ways in which the planning system should be changed. Local communities should have a clear right to decide whether to allow new developments. Those making applications should know in advance whether they are likely to receive permission. There should be a limited right of appeal. Appeals should be made only on narrow grounds. The right of appeal should also be available to local residents.

This has been an excellent debate and one that will resonate with all right hon. and hon. Members. Again, I commend the hon. Member for Twickenham for securing it.

12.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing the debate and on giving us the opportunity to consider this subject. As the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) said—this is probably the only point on which I agree with him—it is not a subject that many of our colleagues regard as the most politically exciting, but it is important in determining land use and the quality of the environment of our electors.

We have heard several criticisms of the planning system. I remind hon. Members that, at all levels, the planning system must take decisions on issues that are often hotly contested on all sides, trying to find the best resolution and taking into account policy, development plans and the competing views of the different interested parties. It is an arena with potential for enormous conflict, for different views and for difficult decisions. On balance, we have a system that, although by no means perfect—we have been trying to improve it—does its best in what is a difficult and emotional area for people.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hughes: No, I shall make a little progress first. The hon. Gentleman spoke for some time and I want to set out some of my main points first. I shall certainly give way to him later.

The hon. Member for Twickenham feels that Government policy on housing and planning does not reflect the situation of people in suburbs, as opposed to towns and city centres. I disagree. Our policy to achieve a better quality of urban life speaks closely to the different needs of different areas.

I also take issue with the hon. Gentleman's claim, repeated in a political context by the hon. Member for Eastbourne, that the Government are ascribing housing numbers to local authorities. That is untrue. We have insisted that, at the regional level, there be a target—although it is subject to periodic review—but how that target is achieved and the contribution of each local planning authority to meet housing need over time are matters for local authorities, together with the regional planning body.

That is not an imposition by central Government. In fact, the whole thrust of our approach to housing need and to the planning system to provide houses to meet that need is that it should be a shared and corporate responsibility among the regional and local bodies charged with that duty. That differs from the policy of the hon. Member for Eastbourne, who would abdicate all responsibility and leave every local authority to do its own thing, with no shared ownership of the region's housing problems.

Dr. Cable: I recognise that the Minister is trying to summarise what she regards as a balanced arrangement, but, if a local authority's unitary development plan does not provide sufficient housing, cannot the Department's inspector reject the plan? At the end of the day, power lies with the Department, rather than with the local authority.

Ms Hughes: As I explained, that falls within the framework of the system requiring every local authority, in so far as it is able and taking into account a range of factors, to share ownership of the overall issue—to take responsibility with other local authorities for meeting the overall need for housing in a region. Clearly, if a local inspector feels that an authority is not fulfilling that responsibility to the degree that it might, he or she can say so, and rightly so.

The hon. Member for Twickenham told a story of predatory developers in his constituency trying to persuade local residents, by dubious means, to sell houses that could be converted or knocked down in order to build flats. Clearly, no one would support such activity. Such practice is not supported by Government policy and is to be abhorred. I accept his point that some residents are vulnerable, but they do not have to sell. Furthermore, the local authority does not have to grant planning permission, as he assumed.

Several hon. Members have painted a pejorative picture of all development as negative and unwelcome, but we must take a broader perspective. Much development is positive. It improves the quality of life and provides opportunity in areas; for example, suburban areas. The provision of smaller accommodation units can enable older people or younger single people to stay in an area, which they would not be able to do if only large houses were available. Development also has a beneficial impact on jobs, on the quality of the environment and in stimulating the local economy. The hon. Member for Twickenham referred to sustainable development. Such results assist sustainable development in many ways.

Mr. Hancock: The Minister is missing the point. We were talking about planning appeals, and applications that had already been turned down at local level. In general, 80 per cent. of planning applications are permitted and are not subject to appeal, a development

that is welcomed by local people. However, the problem is that the appeal process is weighted heavily in favour of the developer.

Ms Hughes: With due respect to the hon. Member for Twickenham, the debate has slid some way from the subject of planning appeals. I am sure that the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South will acknowledge that he talked specifically about the ability, willingness and capacity of local authorities, in the first instance, to turn down some applications because of perceived pressure from subsequent appeals. He talked about initial decisions.

Several hon. Members have claimed that the planning system is biased in favour of developers. We should acknowledge that we have a plan-led system, which requires the deposit of draft development plans and requires some decisions about the uses to which parcels of land will be put in principle to be made at local level. Applications will be sought in line with those policy decisions.

As we have a plan-led system, the charge of bias in favour of one set of interests does not hold water and must be qualified. The system is not based on a general presumption in favour of any party or interest. We are committed to a plan-led system that is given statutory force by legislation. In the context of development control, the system requires that, unless material considerations—I remind hon. Members that material considerations include the relevant considerations of third parties—indicate otherwise, local planning authorities must determine planning applications in accordance with the development plan.

The framework is not a free-for-all, or a system in which the rights of developers supersede those of everyone else. It represents a systematic approach to making decisions in principle about land use in the development plan and making development control decisions in accordance with that previously determined set of policies. In that way, an attempt is made through the system to strike a right and fair balance between the community's needs and individuals' rights.

People who apply for planning permission have a statutory right to appeal to the Secretary of State if the local planning authority refuses permission. An appeal can also be made if the authority fails to determine the application within eight weeks or if conditions are thought to be unwarranted. That statutory right has been a fundamental part of our planning system for more than half a century.

There has been a supposition in the debate—there may even have been an explicit statement—that most appeals are decided in favour of the developer. For the last year for which statistics are available, 1999-2000, almost 13,000 planning appeals were decided, but only 36 per cent. were allowed on appeal: two in one were not allowed. Decisions are not going in favour of developers. That rather challenges hon. Members' views. The appeals related to a wide variety of developments, with particular emphasis on household development, small-scale residential properties and change of use, the same issues that hon. Members have raised this morning.

Hon. Members will know that planning appeals are decided in one of three ways: following an exchange of written representations, an inquiry or a hearing. The appellant and the local planning authority have the right to have the appeal heard by a person appointed by the Secretary of State.

We have introduced new rules and procedures for planning appeals received after 1 August 2000. Most respondents have welcomed those proposals, which we expect to ensure greater transparency and clarity in the system. Concern has been expressed about the time scales in the new procedures. I do not accept that they will affect the quality of decisions. Clear time scales that parties, whether developers or others, cannot drag out by not submitting evidence on time are in local people's interests. As a result of the new procedures, more evidence has been submitted on time.

The hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned a couple of devices that he thinks developers sometimes use to circumvent the spirit of the appeal and planning processes. He mentioned the practice of twin-tracking, whereby two identical applications are submitted to the local authority at the same time. The applicant takes one to appeal as soon as the eight-week period has expired and continues to negotiate with the authority on the other. That is a safety-net approach. We have tried to make it a less attractive option. Twin-tracking used to enjoy a concession for the duplicate application. We have withdrawn that benefit. Both applications must now be accompanied by the full fee, reflecting our view that the submission of two applications involves a lot of work and deliberation.

Other hon. Members raised the practice of repetitive applications with respect to a particular site. The current legislation gives local planning authorities the power to turn away planning applications within two years of a similar, or substantially similar, application being rejected by the Secretary of State on appeal or following call-in, if there has been no significant change in the material circumstances.

The hon. Member for Twickenham made several suggestions. He talked about the ability of local people to put their point of view independently. Our present planning system and the system of development control are predicated on the assumption that the local authority is the best forum for such decisions.

I support the principle that elected members should both oversee the process by which planning decisions are made and be involved in individual development control decisions. Some hon. Members have had experience of those matters at local authority level, as I have. However, they have underestimated both the ability of council members to take difficult decisions and the jealousy with which such people guard their authority to make quasi-judicial decisions.

The suggestion that council members either have been browbeaten by officers or are afraid of going against the recommendations in officers' reports to planning committees does not square with my experience. Elected members take their role seriously. They realise that there are difficult decisions—that sometimes it is difficult to marry competing interests. In many instances, local people are being invited to planning committee meetings. It happens less in Conservative-controlled authorities, but it certainly happens in Labour and

[Ms Hughes]

Liberal Democrat-controlled ones. They are given the opportunity to express their views. It is interesting that, in Tory authorities, the councillors have more difficulty with that concept, which contradicts the policy that the hon. Member for Eastbourne said his party stood for, at least at national level.

Mr. Waterson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hughes: Certainly. The hon. Gentleman has risen to the bait.

Mr. Waterson: The Minister has only herself to blame. Is she now going to come to cross-appeals? It is no good inviting people to attend local planning committee meetings to let off steam if, at the end of the process, they feel that they have no control over whether a decision is made, or whether it can be overturned on appeal by them, rather than by the unsuccessful developer.

Ms Hughes: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman did not respond to the point that I was making, but went on to the next issue that I was about to raise. I know that, in some quarters, there is pressure for the introduction of some form of third-party right of appeal. Some people believe that that is an inevitable consequence of the Human Rights Act 1998. I agree that people affected by, or with an interest in, the development of an area should have an opportunity to make their views known before decisions are taken. The planning system should operate fairly and should be seen to do so. It should give people the chance to comment, as it does on development plans and on individual planning applications. It is also right that there should be an opportunity to challenge the granting of planning permission by a local authority through the judicial review process.

The hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned one of the difficulties that could arise from a universal third-party right of appeal: the impact that it could have on the decision-making process and the fact that it might be used as a device to delay or to veto applications that would otherwise be perfectly acceptable and bring jobs and regeneration to local communities. It is a difficult issue. I am not persuaded that a universal third-party right of appeal is either desirable in principle or an inevitable consequence of the Human Rights Act, but I am aware that there is pressure for it and I am sure that that pressure will continue.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned retrospective appeals, whereby a developer does not apply for permission, but simply does something and then goes back to the local authority. That is reprehensible; it is always so. The hon. Gentleman said that occasionally there are reasons for it—perhaps reasons not of intent, but of omission. Local authorities should take a strong line when that occurs. Indeed, they have the power to do so. They must use their power not only to make individual decisions, but to send the right message to developers that they will not tolerate people who ride roughshod over the planning process.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that a predisposition to sustainable development, rather than what he regarded as a predisposition to development, was important. I do not accept that distinction. In my earlier remarks, I tried to convey that development is an important issue, which need not necessarily be a negative one.

The issue of human rights was raised by the hon. Member for Eastbourne and others. It is correct that, in four test cases, the divisional court found that various planning processes might not be compatible with article 6 of the European convention on human rights. The court also found that the Secretary of State was not acting unlawfully, which is important. The judgment was directed to the House of Lords on appeal, which heard the case at the end of February. We are awaiting judgment and expect it to be announced in May or early June. I can comment no further for that reason.

On telecommunications, I remind the hon. Member for Eastbourne that this Government established the Stewart inquiry and that we are continuing to support substantial research on health and other issues. An announcement was made last Friday, which the Minister for Housing and Planning communicated to all hon. Members with constituencies in England, as well as to all council leaders and chief planning officers, so everyone is fully informed.

The series of important changes to the planning system for telecommunications masts significantly strengthen the current arrangements. We shall strengthen public consultation requirements on proposals for masts of 15 m and under, so that they are exactly the same as applications for planning permission. We shall increase the time for authorities to deal with prior approval applications from 42 to 56 days, which is the same period as that for a full planning application. We have underlined that school governors must be consulted on all proposals for new masts on or near a school or college. We have increased the fees to enable authorities to carry out full public consultation.

We shall introduce those changes and revised planning policy guidance at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Minister clarify what she means by "on or near"? Apparently, there is no effect outside a certain distance.

Ms Hughes: There will be further information about that. From the Stewart report, "on" means "on the premises" and "near" would normally relate to the beam of greatest intensity falling on some part of the school premises. Stewart raised those issues and those are the parameters.

Hon. Members' views have been less than rounded on the importance of development. Although I acknowledge that there may be individual issues, they should take a wider view. They have been unnecessarily critical of the planning system, which involves difficult issues. We inherited a seriously flawed system and have spent a lot of time modernising it. Many of the changes have been introduced to ensure that all those involved, especially local people, get a fair say. The process needs to be transparent and one with which people can engage more easily. I believe that the planning system pays heed as far as possible to all points of view in relation to development control decisions.

Lorayne Buckley

12.30 pm

Mr. Alan Meale (Mansfield): I want to talk about the case of the late Lorayne Buckley, a former constituent of mine, who I believe died because of inappropriate treatment and wrong assessment of her medical condition while an NHS patient. Although lengthy, the case is fairly straightforward.

Lorayne Buckley was born on 21 December 1956, and she was a normal, healthy baby. Aged approximately three months, she was injected with a vaccine against whooping cough by her local doctor—an action that was widely advised by the Government of the day—to ensure her better health in later years. In the following months, her parents noticed that she did not respond to sound and noise, and they duly notified their doctor, who referred Lorayne for various tests. After the tests were completed she was diagnosed, at the age of 14 months, as profoundly deaf.

Lorayne's parents were loving and caring, and they did their best in very difficult circumstances. However, at the age of eight or nine she developed epilepsy, and her family were subsequently informed that that was a result of the injection. According to NHS statistics, the chances of that happening were three in a million. From that age onwards, Lorayne was reliant on anti-convulsant drugs, which were used on many occasions over the years. Nevertheless, she had fits every day of her life.

Some of the drugs caused serious side effects such as swollen joints and hyperactivity, which are common among youngsters who suffer from epilepsy. By the mid-1990s, Lorayne was being prescribed Epilim, Rivotril and Frisium, which limited her fits to about three or four a day. As her parents pointed out, thanks to the excellent attention of NHS staff she had some semblance of life, even though she needed attendance 24 hours a day. Of course, she could not go out alone or do anything unattended. She had to be taken to the toilet, washed and given her medication, and was unable to do any kind of work. For example, she could not go anywhere near a kitchen in case she had an epileptic spasm near a hot kettle or oven.

I have outlined the background to give some idea of Lorayne's condition and the reasons why she needed, and received, constant attention. Like most caring parents with a sick child, Lorayne's mother and father were open to advice from professionals. At an early stage, they took the advice of NHS professionals and bought a book entitled "A Consumer's Guide to Prescription Medicines". They followed its advice meticulously, and it enabled them to be aware of any side effects of any drug prescribed for Lorayne. It proved invaluable, in that on many occasions it enabled them to inform Lorayne's doctor of such side effects. Indeed, all the consultants to whom I have spoken continue openly and actively to encourage parents to obtain the book.

However, having a child with many day-to-day health and other problems carries a cost. As we all know, in many cases respite care is needed not just for patients but for their carers. In February 1997, while Mr. and Mrs. Buckley were on holiday taking a break, Lorayne attended the respite care centre in Lyndsey close in my constituency. Lorayne had an epileptic spasm during her short stay, which caused her to suffer an accidental fall. She was taken to King's Mill hospital in Mansfield where she received stitches to a head wound. Unfortunately, while she was in hospital, staff did not examine her notes properly. She was given inappropriate drugs, which resulted in her medication going haywire, and she became dramatically over-drugged. King's Mill hospital later admitted that there had been a communication breakdown and duly apologised. The family accepted that the situation was the result of a genuine mistake.

Lorayne was introduced to three new sedatives during her stay at the hospital in 1997. However, she was already taking three anti-convulsant drugs, all of which came with strict warnings that caution would be needed if they were taken with other sedatives; the sedatives came with warnings that caution would be needed if they were taken with anti-convulsant drugs. Lorayne was taking three anti-convulsant drugs and three sedatives—a dangerous scenario. The situation alerted her parents to the problems that would occur if she were prescribed the same or similar combinations of drugs. It took months to wean Lorayne from those drugs, during which time she became severely destabilised.

Dr. Mukherjee was in charge of Lorayne's care during that period. As her condition worsened, Dr. Mukherjee continued the combination of drugs, despite several weeks of protest from her parents. When hospital staff informed Dr. Mukherjee that Lorayne's condition deteriorated when she took her medicine, Dr. Mukherjee said that that was "not clinically proven". When Lorayne's parents asked Dr. Mukherjee to explain that terminology, she said proof that the treatment caused the effects was unavailable. They found that exasperating. The extra drugs were taken away from Lorayne when she transferred back to the respite care centre in Lyndsey close, which caused her condition to improve dramatically.

Obviously, Lorayne's family did not want Dr. Mukherjee involved with her care, because it had taken months to wean her from the wrong drugs. That the drugs were wrong was proved on 21 July 1999 when, following consultation between Dr. Sands and Dr. Houghton of the King's Mill centre—both of whom were previous consultants to Lorayne—and her parents, it was decided to return to the medication that Lorayne had been receiving before she was admitted to hospital. At a further meeting on 4 August 1999, Dr. Houghton and Lorayne's parents agreed to a 28-day trial period on new medication, on the understanding that if her condition worsened they were to contact him immediately.

Lorayne's condition had deteriorated rapidly by 23 August 1999. She was having up to 10 fits at a time and her parents had to administer a suppository of up to 10 mg of diazepam twice nightly. They therefore went, as advised, to see the nurse, who had access to the consultant. Unfortunately, Dr. Houghton was on holiday, and because of the family's previous experiences they refused to see Dr. Mukherjee, who they were informed was the duty doctor. They opted instead to see Dr. Narayana, who said that he would be available on 24 August.

[Mr. Alan Meale]

My inquiries have revealed that Dr. Mukherjee was not the doctor on call when Mr. and Mrs. Buckley went for help on 23 August. Dr. Narayana was on call, but unfortunately he had to attend a funeral that afternoon. Nevertheless, he agreed to make himself available on the following morning. However, because of the scale of the problems, Lorayne's parents, while agreeing to the consultation on the following day, suggested to the nurse on duty that Lorayne needed a small amount of the drug Frisium to calm her down, plus more Epilim to control her fits. Both those drugs were known to help her condition.

On the morning of 24 August 1999, the nurse on duty telephoned to say that although Dr. Narayana agreed with what Mr. and Mrs. Buckley had suggested, he refused to alter another doctor's medication prescription. Bewildered, confused and angry, Mr. and Mrs. Buckley told the nurse that they were going to give Lorayne more Frisium, as she was still below her 1996 levels. After consultation, the nurse informed them by telephone that Dr. Narayana agreed with that, but he again refused to authorise it. One has to ask oneself what kind of an answer that was to give to two extremely distressed parents. He asked them instead to await Dr. Houghton's return seven days later. Amazingly, although Lorayne's fits had increased, he did not consider the situation to be an emergency.

What makes Dr. Narayana's decision especially strange is the fact that he was personally familiar with Lorayne's condition, having been one of her consultants over the years. Her case was well known to him. Indeed, such was Mr. and Mrs. Buckley's status that he agreed that, whenever Lorayne's condition worsened, they should immediately telephone his nurse or secretary for advice on any new medication or actions to aid her. In view of Lorayne's condition, it was standard practice for her parents to bypass their own GP and contact Dr. Narayana's nurse directly—which they had done on many previous occasions.

Sadly, by 5 am on Sunday 29 August 1999, Lorayne was having so many spasms that her parents rushed her to the King's Mill centre, where she was given an injection by a doctor on duty to stop her fits. Her dosage of Epilim was increased to 500 mg a day, which was later confirmed by the hospital as exactly what should have been done in the circumstances. On this occasion, the admitting doctor on duty at the King's Mill centre said that the extra Epilim would take five days to build up in her system and, as she was stabilising, he discharged her on Sunday 29 August.

Unfortunately, on the morning of Tuesday 31 August, Lorayne started to have more fits, and she was readmitted to the King's Mill centre. On Wednesday 1 September, her spasms had built up to one every two minutes, and the doctor on duty at the King's Mill centre said that he did not know what on earth to do. He sought advice from the Queen's medical centre in Nottingham, which is the largest teaching hospital in the county, and was told to administer a drug called Phenytoin—which was experimental in terms of dealing with epilepsy and was known to have major side effects—in three separate doses, at three to four hour intervals. That medication was administered at 3 pm and 9 pm on 1 September and at 3 am on 2 September by a junior doctor, as both the centre's senior doctors were still away on holiday.

What followed was devastating. Lorayne developed a red skin. At first, her parents were told that the symptom would disappear, and she was discharged on Friday 3 September. They were instructed to continue to administer 300 mg of Phenytoin per day to their daughter. By Saturday 4 September, Lorayne's skin was so red and irritated that the couple called out the emergency doctor. They were then told to reduce the phenytoin to 100 mg a day, which they did. On Sunday 5 September, they had to call the emergency doctor again, who immediately admitted Lorayne to the King's Mill centre. Her skin had started to blister, and she was given paracetamol as a painkiller.

It is amazing, given the circumstances, that it took two days for a dermatologist to come to examine Lorayne. On 7 September 1999, he transferred her to the intensive care burns unit at Nottingham city hospital. She was immediately given the maximum dose of morphine, which was continued until she died on Saturday 11 September 1999.

By the time of her death, all Lorayne Buckley's vital internal organs had collapsed. She had 11 machines attached to her body to keep her alive. One was to keep her heart beating and another to keep her lungs working. One machine kept up her blood pressure and another replaced her immune system. Worse still—if that were possible—the Phenytoin therapy had caused her skin to blister and fall off her body. She had 100 per cent. infected burns.

Lorayne's parents and the junior doctor involved had been advised only that Phenytoin might cause some adverse reactions. The truth is somewhat different, and can be found in medical records. I have established that Phenytoin can decrease co-ordination. It can cause mental confusion, transient nervousness, motor twitchings, headaches, nausea, vomiting and liver damage. All such effects are worrying factors where epilepsy is concerned. It can also cause dermatological manifestations, including fatal rashes such as bullous exfoliative, or purpuric dermatitis, erythematosus, Stevens-Johnson syndrome and toxic epidermal necrolysis.

Hemopoietic complications, some fatal, have also been reported as associated with the use of Phenytoin. Explicit warnings have been attached to the use of the drug for particular patients, such as those who are on other medications. Those include diazepam, which, as her records clearly stated, Lorayne had been prescribed for many years. A specific warning is also given to substitute alternative therapy in the event of an allergic reaction. That did not happen in Lorayne's case. Phenytoin continued to be administered until its effects were irreversible. Her skin moved from a state of blushing to a state of intensive burns.

Lorayne Buckley died without any skin on her body—it had either fallen off, or had had to be cut off in strips by hospital staff. She could not be given antibiotics, only morphine to ease her horrendous pain. Lorayne knew no language to describe that pain because she was profoundly deaf. She could only be comforted by her loving parents, who held her hand through the

torturous time until, at 11 am on 22 September, the decision was taken to stop the machines that had been keeping her alive, and she died.

At the inquest, the questions raised by the coroner included what treatment Lorayne should have received in the latter period of her life. The answers given only raise further questions about her sad demise.

I want to ask the Minister a number of questions about this very serious case. Why did Dr. Mukherjee insist that Lorayne's drug regime be changed in the first place? Why did Dr. Houghton ask for a further 28-day trial period? Why did Dr. Narayana refuse to alter Lorayne's medical treatment when he was aware of the problems and the analysis of her drug needs? Why did the consultant at Queen's medical centre prescribe Phenytoin, and did he or she fully explain its dangers to the junior doctor on duty at King's Mill centre that day? Why did the treatment not cease when the first rash appeared on Lorayne's skin while she was in hospital? Why was she discharged while under the therapy and with a rash on her body? Why was Phenytoin continued after her discharge and why did a dermatologist not examine her for two days, by which time her burns were so severe that she had to be rushed to an intensive care burns unit? Why has a public or independent inquiry into the case not been granted, particularly following the coroner's report? Last, but not least, why are drugs such as Phenytoin still being prescribed for epileptics by consultants employed by the national health service?

Amazingly, Lorayne's parents hold no anger against the national health service, which they believe helped her throughout her difficult and tormented life. They still talk proudly of the hospital staff who regularly cared for their daughter for many years, particularly those in the national health service King's Mill centre. However, the crux of the matter is that when they applied for an independent review of what happened to their daughter, they were refused. When I raised the matter with the local health authority and the ombudsman, I received a polite refusal. They even refused to listen to the coroner's tapes of the inquest. I have raised the case with the local hospital, which has been helpful, but still there has been no investigation.

My constituents—Lorayne's parents—are elderly and not interested in vengeance or financial compensation. They have told me that either of those, particularly financial compensation, would be an insult to their daughter's memory. They simply want justice, openness and honesty. They want to know how and why the mistakes were made, and to warn others about the dangers connected with drugs, particularly Phenytoin. That is the least we should give them, and I beg the Minister, in the spirit of openness that the Government are so proud to espouse, to use her office to achieve that, by ordering an inquiry as soon as possible.

12.52

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on obtaining a debate on this important matter. I know that he has taken a personal interest in Lorayne Buckley's case and is anxious that lessons should be learned from her tragic death, which he described so poignantly.

Lorayne Buckley had experienced physical and mental health problems, including epilepsy, throughout her childhood. Neurological conditions such as epilepsy are life-long and their impact often extends far beyond the individual concerned to family members. I know that Lorayne's parents devoted their lives to caring for her and their devotion enabled Lorayne to live at home, apart from short spells of respite care. I know that the Chamber recognises her parents' commitment and the selfless way in which they strived to meet her complex needs.

My hon. Friend raised a series of points about Lorayne's care at different stages of her life, and I shall respond to some of those in turn. First, concerning the treatment and care that Lorayne was given during the months before 31 August 1999, I know that Mr. Buckley has made a formal complaint to the trust, and that it followed the NHS complaints procedures. I want to examine how many of the points made by my hon. Friend were considered under the complaints procedure, and I will write to him with a detailed response on the points that were not considered.

I know that some of those issues were referred to the health service ombudsman. As he will know, the ombudsman is independent of the NHS and of Ministers. It is his job to decide whether and when to investigate particular cases. I understand that he has considered the particular issues that were raised by Mr. Buckley, taken independent clinical advice and decided that no further action is needed. Clearly, that is a matter for the ombudsman, but I will look into precisely which issues were taken up with him, and into those to which further response is needed.

Other issues were raised concerning the immediate and urgent medical intervention that took place once Lorayne's condition deteriorated. As I understand it, those issues were not considered by the NHS ombudsman or through the NHS complaints procedure, and it is true that some questions need to be answered. On 31 August 1999, Lorayne was admitted to the King's Mill centre in Sutton in Ashfield so that her condition could be stabilised, and she was given Phenytoin. Phenytoin is a commonly prescribed anti-convulsant that has been used since the early 1960s to treat most types of seizure disorders, and it is widely used in the treatment of grand mal epilepsy and partial seizures. Lorayne was discharged on 3 September, but was readmitted two days later with a rash and oedema to her whole body. Her condition deteriorated, and as my hon. Friend said, she was transferred to the burns unit.

Mr. Meale: I am grateful to the Minister, particularly for her willingness to re-examine all the matters that I raised in my speech. However, I am worried by what I have found out about this drug through the internet. Many senior medical consultants still do not know its effects. A new drug was given to someone who was clearly listed as in receipt of a range of other drugs, even though all medical evidence, including that on the internet, makes it clear that those drugs should not be mixed. One possible immediate effect is a rash, which can easily be fatal. Although I am grateful to the Minister for what she has done, I am worried that the same might happen to other patients, and I ask her to examine the matter urgently.

Yvette Cooper: Phenytoin is not a new drug—it has been in common use for about 40 years. My hon. Friend

[Yvette Cooper]

will know that on issues such as this we take the advice of the Medicines Control Agency, which informed me that serious skin reactions to Phenytoin result in hospitalisation in less than one in 100,000 cases. Phenytoin is used to treat epilepsy, which itself can be a life-threatening condition. Other treatments for epilepsy also have rare but serious side effects.

I understand my hon. Friend's point about whether Phenytoin should have been used in this particular case, and I accept that questions arise in that regard. The advice that was given to the parents on what reactions to look out for, and the point at which serious reactions should have been spotted and addressed are matters that need to be dealt with. They go beyond the broader question of the use of Phenytoin, which has been in use for many years. However, I accept that the matter should be investigated by the King's Mill centre.

The normal NHS complaints procedure is time-limited, and this complaint would normally be out of time. However, if Mr. Buckley and his family wish, I shall ask the trust to investigate the use of that drug in that case, and the treatment and care that Lorayne was given at Kings Mill during those critical hours. It is important that those issues are addressed and resolved, for the families concerned.

Mr. Meale: I thank the Minister for her response.

Yvette Cooper: And I thank my hon. Friend. I hope that that the investigation will go some way to resolving the understandable concerns of families who have lost a child in such devastating circumstances.

Fish Stocks

1 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): May I preface my remarks by placing on the record my sincere thanks to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for his unfailing courtesy during all of our debates during this Parliament? He and I have never agreed on fisheries policy, but nevertheless, I appreciate the manner in which he has responded to my frequent speeches on the subject. This will be probably my last opportunity to say that, because I am standing down at the next election.

I am sad to have to point out the error of Ministers' ways once again. I am sure that they are wrong not out of ignorance but out of an adherence to a profoundly mistaken and dangerous ideology. Fishing policy is determined by the political imperative of European integration; of that I have no doubt. The objective is to create an EU fishing fleet catching EU fish in EU waters under an EU permit system controlled by Brussels. That is the price that the British fishing industry must pay as its contribution towards the realisation of European political union, and nothing, not even the conservation of fish stocks, must be allowed to stand in the way of achieving the nirvana—nirvana being defined as the state of perfect bliss attained by the extinction of individuality. In the context of the fishing industry, we are talking about the extinction not of individuality but of fish stocks.

In previous fisheries debates, I have covered many other aspects of the iniquitous common fisheries policy, but today I want to concentrate exclusively on the question of feedstocks: the sand eel—which for the benefit of the Minister in another place I should point out lives on the bottom of the sea, not on the surface—the pout and the sprat. I trust that the Parliamentary Secretary will follow me if I refer to those species as being at the base of the pyramid of life. At the top of the pyramid are the bigger fish species, such as cod and haddock, which are sought after for human consumption. The bigger fish are dependent on smaller fish for their food. It follows, therefore, that if the stocks of smaller fish are drastically reduced by the continuation of industrial fishing, cod, haddock and the like will starve. That is a self-evident fact, but what does the European Community do?

As I pointed out in a debate this time last year:

"the sand eel total allowable catch was increased from 1 million tonnes to 1,020,000 tonnes."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall,* 9 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 80WH.]

During this year's round of quota setting, far from reducing the sand eel total allowable catch, the Council of Ministers agreed to set it at the same level. When there is real concern about the future viability of cod stocks, it is more than a little ironic that the hoovering up of feedstocks continues apace. It is a further irony that whole sea areas have been closed to cod fishing, but not to fishing for industrial purposes—in other words, fishing for feedstock continues, as if Ministers and their advisers were totally ignorant of the dependence of the larger species on the smaller ones that are regularly removed from the sea for land-based purposes, including feeding pigs and poultry. If quotas for sand eels and pout had been reduced to match matched

reductions in the total allowable catches for cod, for example, they would now be at about 250,000 tonnes for sand eels instead of 1 million tonnes, and 30,000 tonnes for pout instead of 200,000 tonnes.

Ministers know those facts as well as I do, but what action do they take? They ignore the facts of life—the dependency of cod and other species on the availability of adequate feedstocks—and blame the shortage of mature fish on the idea that too many vessels are chasing too few fish. What a travesty of the truth. It is a sad reflection on Ministers of the Crown that they are prepared to be party to that monstrous and wicked deception. That is especially true of this Fisheries Minister, who professes such a commitment to animal welfare. When he answers on the day of judgment, as will we all in time, the saving of the lives of a few foxes or a handful of badgers will look small beer compared to the mass destruction of the marine resource over which he has presided.

For the past four years, the Minister has been responsible for implementing policies whose result has been that as many fish are thrown back dead into the sea as are landed. His policies are systematically destroying the basis of the marine pyramid of life. The same Minister has acquiesced in the abandonment of the minimum landing size for no fewer than 11 species. They are now legally caught before they have had the chance to spawn even once. He has at long last agreed technical measures but, perversely, they have been implemented in such a cack-handed way as to defeat the object of the exercise.

The pyramid of life has been turned upside down. However charitable one might want to be to the Minister, there is no denying that this totally unacceptable and irresponsible state of affairs has been brought about by the conscious and deliberate action of Ministers, aided and abetted by others who should also know better. For example, I find it extraordinary that Professor Tony Hawkins, senior administrator of Fisheries Research Services at Aberdeen, should have stated last December that growth rates always tend to slow down when a big year class is recruited. If the current abundance of young haddock are not growing, that is not because of a big recruitment, but because the feedstock are being plundered. That plunder is the result of a deliberate political decision.

An increase in fish population requires an increase in food sources. The exemption of industrial fishing for sand eels and the like ensures that the opposite occurs. I must keep stressing the point to the Minister: it occurs because of a deliberate political decision taken in the Council of Ministers.

Two weeks ago, Dr. Paul Brady, the head of the Scottish fisheries group, stated that in the opinion of some of his scientists a cull of young haddock would not necessarily be a bad thing. That point of view is clearly not shared by the fishermen, who, in an unprecedented display of solidarity, kept their vessels in harbour in protest rather than go to sea to catch tonnes of immature haddock only to have to throw them back dead into the sea. The Minister will have seen that recent editions of *Fishing News* demonstrate the strength of feeling among fishermen on that issue.

Fishermen are often accused of irresponsibility towards the fish stocks on which their livelihoods depend. However, the events of the past fortnight demonstrate, without a shadow of a doubt, that they are very responsible, and are conscious of the effects of treating the fish stocks in an unsatisfactory way. That is why they are keeping their vessels in harbour rather than going into the fishing grounds that they are being driven into by the closure of certain areas of cod fishing.

Last week, when I asked the Minister in a question for written answer:

"what assessment he has made of the impact upon haddock stocks resulting from the closure of North Sea cod areas",

he replied:

"Given the prevalence of juvenile haddock in the northern North Sea urgent consideration is being given to improve technical conservation measures."—[*Official Report*, 12 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 483W.]

The answer to practically every fisheries problem is to talk about conservation, yet almost invariably, the action taken is to the detriment of conservation. The Minister repeated the mantra of sound conservation in his article in *The Western Morning News* of 12 March.

Conservation is simply the smokecreen behind which ruthless and ever more desperate measures are taken to ensure that by 1 January 2003, the real common fisheries policy—of equal access to the common resource—can be fully implemented. In pursuit of that political objective, not only are the fishermen expendable—that has been known for 30 years or more—but now the very fish themselves must be sacrificed on the high altar of European integration.

However, despite all the obstacles that have been put in their way, such has been the resilience of British fishermen that in the eyes of the EC there are still too many of them. Fanciful as this may seem, the decimation of their stock in trade is now the official policy by which the British fishermen are to be brought to heel.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Gill: The Minister shakes his head, but that is what the debate is all about, and that is the point that I have consistently put to him throughout this Parliament. On occasions, of course, he has said that I have been consistently wrong. I take the other view. I think that I have been consistently right, and that events have proved me so.

However, I understand that the Minister is bound by the collective responsibility of his Government—to deliver European integration. They will not let a few thousand fishermen stand in the way of that. The fishermen have, in effect, to be driven off the waters to make way for other fishermen from other EU countries as from the end of next year, when the real CFP begins.

One Scottish fisherman recently remarked:

"If only you'd listened to Tom Hay 10 years ago, we wouldn't be in this situation today."

However, we are in this situation, and in response to the Minister's challenge, published on 12 March in *The Western Morning News*, I will again tell the House what the alternative is. It is for the control of fisheries policy to be repatriated. There is no alternative to that, because it is a fact of life, human nature being what it is, that

[Mr. Gill]

something that belongs to everybody belongs to nobody. If nobody has the sense of ownership of a thing, it is not treated in the responsible way in which our fish stocks need to be treated. Unfortunately, that does not suit the political aspirations of a Labour Government, least of all one so wholeheartedly in favour of European integration, as evidenced by their recent surrender of 39 out of 45 vetoes at the Nice summit.

My friends in the fishing industry and my right hon. and hon. Friends in the House surely recognise that the collectivisation of the British fishing industry is inimical both to their commercial interests and to their political instincts. Telling the fisherman what he may catch, where he may catch it and in what quantities, where he may land—and, with smaller ports, when he may land—is as close to communism as one can get. That the ultimate collectivisation of the fishing industry should lead to the destruction of the fish stocks is wicked beyond belief. If the Minister had a grain of conscience, he would resign rather than be party to a regime that professes conservation yet permits mesh sizes of less than 16 mm. To speak of too many vessels chasing too few fish, to speak of the need to conserve fish stocks, to say that fish know no boundaries, yet at the same time to protect the seal and allow industrial fishermen to hoover up the fish on which our stocks depend, is indefensible. All that is for the sake of a political ideology that is bound to fail in western Europe as surely as it failed in the former USSR.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) on obtaining this debate. I am pleased that he did so, because it gives me the opportunity to deal with some aspects of industrial fishing, particularly those raised in a recent newspaper article by Mr. Christopher Booker, which was full of half truths and did not address the real problem.

The hon. Gentleman said some kind words about me—before starting the assassination job—and I shall miss him when he goes. Although he does not represent a fishing constituency, no one can doubt his sincere interest in fishing matters. Although some of his hon. Friends initially showed an interest in fishing, they soon disappeared from the scene, but the hon. Gentleman has been consistent in his attendance at fishery debates and his involvement in the arguments. I respect him for that even, though, as he stated, I do not agree with him.

The common fisheries policy is not without its faults. No one pretends otherwise. The Commission's Green Paper gives us a good opportunity to address some of those weaknesses and to try to improve matters. The CFP is not a great conspiracy designed to allow an integrated Europe in through the back door. The fishing policy is a European Union measure, but it allows a great element of national discretion. Its overwhelming priority is conservation. We can, of course, argue about how it should be applied, but the hon. Gentleman fails to recognise some basic facts.

The argument that the CFP is all about sweeping the seas clear of British fishermen to make way for other European fleets is nonsense. We have our national quota, which is now fixed on the principle of relative stability. I do not say, as the hon. Gentleman tries to claim I do, that this is a question of too many boats catching too few fish. He and others in the fishing industry point to convenient scapegoats such as industrial fishing, or seals, and say that they are responsible for the decline in fish stocks, but that is not supported by scientific evidence. During the past 10 years, the UK fleet has been reduced by about 30 per cent., but at the same time, landings have increased as a result of greater effort, improved technology and better design. That is what is affecting fish stocks. The reason for the dramatic decline in fish stocks is pure and simple. It is over-fishing.

Mr. Gill: I remind the Parliamentary Secretary of the answer that he gave me a month ago in response to a written question. He pointed out that the total amount of cod and haddock landed had drastically fallen during our 30-year membership of the European Union. Catches of haddock of 176,000 tonnes in 1971 had been reduced to approximately 75,000 tonnes last year. That is a dramatic reduction in landings and a sad commentary on the efficacy of the common fisheries policy.

Mr. Morley: It is certainly true that there has been such a decline in cod and haddock stocks. Of course, fishermen have switched to catching other species and other fisheries have developed. That is all part of the new challenge for fisheries management. However, it is wrong to suggest that that is all the fault of the common fisheries policy. The hon. Gentleman could argue that the common fisheries policy had dealt inadequately with management issues, and I believe that such an argument can be made. However, on the subject of discards, I have thrown down the challenge many times by inquiring about the alternatives. I am keen to pursue alternatives because there is a problem with discards. It is not a new problem; it has been around for a long time. The bulk of discards—undersized and unmarketable fish—are a by-product of normal fishing. We should not lose sight of that fact.

No one has defined national control, except as withdrawing completely from the CFP, tearing up the treaty of Rome and withdrawing from the European Union. Some people argue, as is their democratic right, that we should do that—but they should argue from that viewpoint rather than trying to pretend that we can make fundamental changes to the treaty without those consequences. Even if we had complete national control, there would still be a need to control effort on fish stocks and to set a biological limit on what fishermen may catch and land. It would still be necessary to decide how to divide fish stocks within the industry.

Every other fishing state, including those outside the CFP, has a quota management regime. Every fishing state has the problem of discards. Some approach the problem in a different way, such as requiring vessels to land all discards. Indeed, I do not rule out that approach, although it has its problems. First, such a requirement is difficult to enforce. Secondly, landing all discards does not solve the problem, because we should be reducing the amount of fish discarded. Those are serious issues, which we intend to address.

On minimum landing sizes—something that we have argued about before—there is a logic in what the Commission is saying. If fishermen are not prepared to increase mesh sizes, a great many fish will be killed. In that respect, there is a brutal logic in lowering the minimum landing size, although that is not the approach that we support in the United Kingdom, or the approach that I supported in the Council of Ministers, because it sends the wrong signals to the fishing industry. The hon. Gentleman may be aware that I argued successfully for increasing the minimum landing size of plaice—a change that was supported by other member states, and which has now been established.

The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that I have never supported industrial fishing. In fact, I have consistently argued against it. I have argued that human consumption of fish should always take precedence over industrial fisheries for non-human use. This is the first Government to have made progress in tackling the issue of industrial fishing. For example, I secured agreement at the Council of Ministers to a three-year total closure of the sand eel fisheries off the north-east coast of Britain, in the light of scientific advice that sand eel fishing was damaging the rate at which small seabirds, such as kittiwakes, were able to reproduce. In the case of kittiwakes, we can measure breeding success. In relation to that three-year closure, we are applying scientific principles and discussing with the Danes the impact on the ecosystem of catching sand eels for industrial fishing. That is a great step forward, and was achieved with the co-operation of the Danes, which I very much appreciate.

Mr. Gill: Surely the Minister recognises that if we were to repatriate control over our own fisheries, we would be able to determine the ground rules—for example, those relating to industrial fishing. At the moment, as he knows, he must go back to Brussels to consult the Council of Ministers, and it is always jam tomorrow. It is not possible to continue on that basis, because there is great danger of losing the feedstocks. If that happens, the mature fish will be lost. We do not need a scientific inquiry. We just need to talk to the trawler deck hands who gut the fish and find in their stomachs ever fewer of the sand eels on which the mature fish depend.

Mr. Morley: I shall come to those points in a moment, but that argument is flawed. The hon. Gentleman is right. If we had absolute national control we could, theoretically, ban industrial fishing in our waters—although I should point out that we have a small industrial fishery of our own. However, if industrial fishing is producing the dire consequences that the hon. Gentleman describes, and given that we could control only half the North sea—at the approach to the English Channel that amounts to a very small proportion of the sea—and as the industrial fishing would presumably continue unabated, or perhaps even more intensively, just over the boundary line, it is nonsense to pretend that there would be no effect on our stocks or our fishery.

An advantage of an EU-wide fisheries policy is that the United Kingdom is making progress with arguments for restrictions on industrial fishing across all EU waters and the entire EU fleet. At the previous Council, I reached agreement with the Danes on beginning official talks to establish whether the total allowable catch that the hon. Gentleman mentioned for sand eels was too high—as I think it is—and to consider what would be a more appropriate level. Those talks are getting under way. It is also agreed that UK scientists and discard experts should, at the invitation of the Danish Government, sail on Danish industrial vessels to see at first hand the landing and by-catch sampling arrangements. Those visits have been agreed and will happen between now and June. No one else has managed to obtain such an agreement. Our scientists will be on board Danish vessels, working with Danish scientists, to study the issue of by-catch, to see what the fishery is taking and to consider its impact.

Our scientific advice on the sand eel fishery is that the by-catch is less than 2 per cent. of cod. We can examine that advice. There are disputes about it. I have spoken to our own skippers who say that a clean sand eel fishery is possible. Things are not the same with respect to the Norwegian pout fishery, which has a much higher level of by-catch. It is for that reason that it is not allowed in the closed areas. The hon. Gentleman may also be interested to know that, according to our scientists, sand eels make up only a small part of the cod's diet—about 4 per cent. A scientific paper on that is due to be published shortly.

Mr. Gill: The Minister spoke about further talks and inquiries. What happened to the inquiry that was set up in 1996? Where is its result? We do not want to have to repeat inquiries endlessly. We want results.

Mr. Morley: I am not familiar with the 1996 inquiry, because I was not a Minister at the time and we were not in government. However, I do not think that any attempt has previously been made to deal with the matter in the depth that we are going into, or with the co-operation of the Danes. To be fair to them, if it is possible to demonstrate scientifically that there is a problem with the fishery in question, we shall take that seriously and approach the matter accordingly. We are working with the Danes to identify the relevant issues. We did not receive much support from other member states in doing that. It is the UK and the Danes who are proceeding with joint studies, because we take the issue seriously.

As for the haddock fishery in Scotland, there are ways of reducing haddock juvenile by-catch. We have already had quite a long debate about that in Westminster Hall. The Scottish Executive are introducing a range of amended technical measures, on matters such as reducing net extensions, the positioning of square mesh panels and the banning of lifting bags. The industry is also considering other matters, such as twine thickness.

I pay tribute to the industry's efforts to engage seriously with the issue. We are working with the industry, which has been involved to an unprecedented degree in decision making. However, I should comment on that part of the industry that was recently sitting in ports, involved in a campaign for tie-up grants that amounted to telling us, to put it crudely, "Give us the money, or the haddock get it." We need a more sophisticated approach to fisheries management. A common EU approach is the way forward. The UK has

[Mr. Morley]

influence on this issue, and people listen to us. We are pursuing the matter for the future, in a way that will benefit fisheries conservation.

Mr. Gill: The Minister knows that the industry has suggested all sorts of technical improvements in the past, yet the situation remains as he described.

Mr. Morley: A long process must be delivered, and that is what we intend to do.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order. We must now move on to the next debate.

Trooper Christopher Young

1.30 pm

Mr. Denis Murphy (Wansbeck): I thank the House for allowing me this debate on the issues raised by the inquiry into the death of Trooper Christopher Young.

On 24 February 1999, on behalf of Christopher's parents, his mother, Heather, and stepfather, Terry, I asked several questions in an Adjournment debate in the House. As background, I shall give a brief outline of the facts that led up to Christopher's tragic death.

From joining the Army, Christopher was recognised as a first-class solider, and he was well thought of by both his superiors and his peers. He matured into a confident and decent young man of whom his parents were justifiably proud.

Christopher changed dramatically after his return from a tour of duty in Bosnia in 1993. On his way home for leave at Christmas, at the end of what was for him a terrible tour of duty, his wallet containing his identification was stolen, and he was involved in a fight with another soldier. He was arrested and received 28 days' detention and loss of leave and pay as punishment.

During his detention, at Hohne, in Germany, Christopher asked to see a Women's Royal Voluntary Service volunteer attached to the Light Dragoons. I am informed that she subsequently told Christopher's parents that it was obvious that Christopher had a recognisable fear of returning to Bosnia. She was so worried about Christopher's psychological condition that she made strenuous representations to his commanding officer, asking that Christopher be granted a period of unscheduled leave as a respite. She felt that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Christopher was granted home leave at the conclusion of his punishment. On seeing him, his parents were shocked at the change in him. He wanted to leave the Army, and he told his parents that if he were successful in requesting a discharge, it would be complete by August 1994.

Christopher returned home to his parents in July 1994. Nothing then or in the following months suggested to his parents that there was anything irregular about the way in which he had left the Army. He was in fact absent without leave. Having left his regiment without authority, he failed to report to Bovington camp for final clearance and documentation.

Christopher made no attempt to hide the fact that he was living in the family home. He registered with the Department of Social Security and the Inland Revenue, giving his parents' address as his own. His driving licence, car registration and medical records were registered to that address. It came as a complete surprise to Christopher's stepfather, who was then and still is a serving police officer with the Northumbria force, to discover that Ashington police had received a fax from the Royal Military Police in Chichester on Monday 19 June 1995. The fax listed Christopher as absent without leave from the Army since 2 August 1994—nearly 11 months.

Christopher was made aware of the police inquiry and the warrant for his arrest on the evening of 19 June. He confessed to his mother that he was absent without leave and owed money. He gave no other details, but was

worried that he would, in his words, do "serious Army time". He was adamant that he would not return to his unit in Germany, as he feared that he would be sent back to Bosnia. He told his mother that he would rather be dead than return to the Army.

Christopher left the house saying that he wanted time to himself to think things through. That was, sadly, the last time that anyone saw him alive. His body was found on the east coast main line near the village of Acklington. He had committed suicide. He was 23 years of age.

In replying to the many questions that I asked in the Adjournment debate, the then Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), gave an undertaking to hold an inquiry into the events surrounding Christopher's death. His response concluded:

"The Army has a clear responsibility to retrieve documents, to settle possible outstanding wages and to ensure that proper procedures had been followed in any discharge...we have a duty to explain all the circumstances to the family of Christopher Young. I recognise that it is important in that explanation to make the most direct contact possible and I undertake to do that". — [*Official Report*, 24 February 1999; Vol. 326, c. 354.]

That inquiry was conducted, and on 16 December 1999 I received a letter from the then Minister for the Armed Forces containing the inquiry's conclusions. I met Christopher's parents, who were disappointed that the inquiry had not addressed the issues that they had raised. We subsequently requested a full copy of the investigating officer's report, which was sent. However, there were several omissions, primarily of witness statements. I wrote back to the then Minister for the Armed Forces on 19 July requesting copies of those statements. In his reply on 4 August 2000, he informed me that his officials would write to the people concerned asking permission for the release of their statements. He said that, understandably, that would take some time, and asked for patience while the matter was being addressed. We have been patient for more than eight months.

Several issues are still outstanding from the inquiry's conclusions, of which we have only a summary dated 16 December 1999. On page 1 of the letter, the then Minister for the Armed Forces concedes that the first entry made by the central criminal records and information office of the Royal Military Police was on 26 January 1995, six months after Christopher was officially listed as absent without leave. He states that CCRIO archives have been searched and that there is no trace of any signals having been received that would normally be issued in connection with an Army absentee. That is the first admission that, despite all the assurances in previous letters that such action would have been taken, it was not taken. Normal procedures were not carried out.

On page 2 of the letter, the responsibility is passed to the garrison administration staff, who, we are assured, made inquiries into Christopher's whereabouts after he failed to report there for discharge on 1 August 1994. I presume that their first inquiry would have been to his unit in Germany, which would have informed them that he left there on 11 July 1994, two weeks before his orders allowed him to do so. At that moment, there should have been confirmation of an army absentee and a missing person. Astonishingly, however, that information does not appear to have been serious enough to instigate normal army operating procedures, as, on its admission, no signal was sent to CCRIO.

The last recorded address on Christopher's unit personal address record, dated 22 June 1994, which is shown under the heading of family details and next of kin, is:

"46 Acklington village, Acklington, Morpeth"

which was then the home of his parents. It beggars belief that an inquiry into the whereabouts of a missing person would not start at this address, which would have immediately located Christopher. The letter then refers to an officer from the Army Personnel Centre in Glasgow, who allegedly remembers speaking to three different police stations in the Ashington area, at which I presume that he made similar inquiries, although he cannot identify the police stations by name. I find that incredible because it is not possible to ring individual police stations. All calls are routed through Northumbria police control centre at Ponteland. Any official organisation seeking to locate a missing person would be put through to the police station covering the address concerned. For the record, there is only one police station in Ashington.

The Minister's letter refers to the issuing of a locate and trace order by CCRIO as a result of information received from the DSS on 19 June 1995 giving a new contact address. It is important that the Army explain why it took so long to access the DSS information. As I have already stated, Christopher registered at his parents' address in September 1994, so the information would have been available to CCRIO from that date.

The inference of the letter dated 16 December 1998 contradicts the letter dated 10 March 1998. The latter stated

"When a soldier has been absent for a period of six months the case is automatically reviewed by CCRIO, RMP. It is standard practice during this review to seek assistance from the DSS to see if they can provide a current address ie. if the individual is claiming financial support.

It was through this action that it was established that Christopher had been living with his mother and had been doing so since October 1994. On the 19th June as a result of this new information a signal was sent to the civil Police in Ashington who would have been expected to visit the address and if Christopher was present arrest him."

That raises the following question. If, by its own admission, the Army's review of Christopher's case was held on 30 January 1995, why did it take another five months before a positive attempt was made to locate him? The Minister's letter focuses on the records on Christopher on the police national computer. There are no records remaining on the police national computer because any file relating to a deceased person is automatically erased 12 months after death.

However, in this instance, historic intelligence on Christopher exists on Northumbria police's criminal intelligence system. It includes details of stop checks made by traffic officers on two separate occasions, which resulted in the production of driving documents at police stations and the placing of those details—including a full postal address—on the CIS. It shows no record of any locate trace marker for Christopher having been created before 19 June 1995. The responsibility for that omission rests solely with CCRIO.

[Mr. Denis Murphy]

The role that the WRVS volunteer played in the affair is important. If she had not called Christopher's parents, they would not have embarked on their quest for the truth. His parents told me that she was the catalyst that provoked their questions and fuelled doubts about whether Christopher had received the care to which he was entitled from the Army. Although the family were clearly distressed and upset at Christopher's death, they did not look to apportion blame or responsibility to any individual or organisation, but the conversation that the volunteer initiated with them set alarm bells ringing.

Terry Haley, Christopher's stepfather, is a police officer with more than 20 years' experience. He is trained to collect, evaluate, record and disseminate information. He has a distinguished and commended career and is a holder of the Queen's medal for long and exemplary police service—it is unlikely that he would misinterpret his conversation with the WRVS volunteer. We were therefore astonished to read that the volunteer had informed the Royal Military Police investigator and made a statement retracting everything that she told Mr. Haley during their telephone conversations. I have been informed that at no time during those conversations did she mention domestic problems between Christopher and his girlfriend, even though Christopher's problems must have been grave to warrant such leave being granted. I have also been told that that information and the reasons for granting leave would, no doubt, be recorded on file.

Mr. Haley is sceptical about that explanation. First, the WRVS volunteer was a complete stranger to him and until he spoke to her over the telephone, he did not know that she existed. He is clear about the detail of their conversation, and says that it was she who mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder. It was she who first raised concerns about Christopher's psychological state, resulting from his tour of duty in Bosnia, and she who was so concerned about him that she persuaded the commanding officer to allow him compassionate leave.

Christopher's parents are rightly concerned that the first mention of alleged domestic problems was made almost six years after his death. At the time, Christopher was engaged to be married. Letters that were written by Christopher at that time are in his parents' possession. They contain no hints of domestic grief. Indeed, the opposite is the case; he writes fondly and enthusiastically of his and his fiancee's plans for their future. Their relationship began to deteriorate after he returned from Germany, and the engagement was broken off six months later.

It is significant that, only weeks after Christopher's death, Mr. Haley wrote a letter to Christopher's commanding officer in which he recounted details of his conversation with the WRVS volunteer. The commanding officer could have spoken to her, as she was still attached to the regiment in Germany at that time and had refuted the allegations.

The commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Webb-Bowen, made no mention of domestic problems, nor did he attempt to refute Mr. Haley's accusation that Christopher was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He merely rubbished the WRVS volunteer as unqualified. That has been a consistent theme in response to subsequent letters on the matter written by Christopher's parents and me. Mr. Haley was so concerned about the commanding officer's reply that he attempted to telephone the lady in Germany. He was told that she was unavailable. Unsatisfied with that response, he contacted the WRVS headquarters in London and spoke with a retired Army officer who said that he knew the lady concerned, and promised to contact her on his behalf. The retired Army officer rang back and said that she could not speak to Mr. Haley because she was the subject of some form of judicial army inquiry or review. That was confirmed to Mr. Haley when he contacted a member of RMP at Catterick who was involved in the initial investigation into Christopher's death and implied that an inquiry was on-going.

A letter dated 16 December states that a senior member of the Army medical directorate had examined Christopher's medical records and had found no evidence of psychiatric or psychological problems. All the entries related to minor physical problems associated with the rigours of soldiering and, regrettably, a "fit for detention" certificate was not found. The lack of a certificate suggests that Christopher was not examined at that crucial time and that it is improper of the Army to suggest that all was well when it cannot confirm that he was fit to be detained.

The lack of supporting documentation from the Army—an organisation that prides itself on and is famed throughout the world for its efficiency—is a prominent feature of the Ministry of Defence's case. Most of the evidence is circumstantial, based on procedures that were presumed to have been carried out, and does not bear close scrutiny. The Army admits that it failed in its duty of care to Christopher by not locating him immediately after he went absent without leave. There is no evidence that the Army followed its procedures, although there is considerable evidence that it did not.

In the years since Christopher's death, his parents have searched for the simple truth. They feel that the Army betrayed them by failing in its duty of care to Christopher. There are too many contradictions and unacceptable omissions in the inquiry document. Nobody admits to making mistakes, although it is clear that many were made. How can Christopher's parents have confidence in a system that has let them down so badly?

I met Christopher's parents on Saturday. They are still seeking the truth. They have not received any assurances that the systems have been improved or that new safeguards have been introduced to prevent another tragedy. Therefore, I ask that my hon. Friend the Minister hand the inquiry over to an independent body. A third party should examine the evidence, interview witnesses and, crucially, make recommendations, if necessary, to improve the system.

I represent an area that supplies more young men and women to the armed forces than any other. We have a duty to those young people to ensure that systems are in place to protect them. The inquiry has not satisfied me that protective systems are in place, and I urge my hon. Friend to carry out a speedy, independent inquiry.

1.49 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy) for the opportunity to discuss further the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of Trooper Christopher Young, following the response given in the House by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), on 24 February 1999.

First, and most importantly, I wish to take this opportunity to offer my sincere condolences to Christopher's family for their very sad loss. Mr. and Mrs. Haley are clearly concerned about the circumstances surrounding his death, and their desire to obtain a detailed explanation is both natural and understandable. I have carefully noted the points made in my hon. Friend's speech. I am worried about the details of the case and the questions that it raises about some of the general procedures. Accordingly, I am arranging a meeting between my hon. Friend and the Army authorities to consider both aspects and to prepare a report for Ministers.

Mr. Murphy: Would it be possible for the Minister to invite either one or both of Christopher's parents to that meeting?

Mr. Spellar: I undertake to give serious consideration to that request and to write to my hon. Friend about it.

I wish to place on record the information that we have on the case, and I shall begin by giving an insight into the young man's career in the Army. Christopher Young joined the Army on 11 January 1991. He served with his regiment, the Light Dragoons, in the United Kingdom, Germany, Cyprus and Bosnia. Throughout that time, as my hon. Friend said, he was highly regarded by his superiors and well liked by his peers. He was a hard-working, efficient and capable young man who had been singled out for possible promotion to junior non-commissioned officer. Christopher was a fit and active member of the troop, who boxed for the squadron. A promising career seemed to lie ahead for him.

However, after three years of service he decided to leave the Army, and applied to be discharged. That was to become effective on 2 August 1994. Later in 1993, Christopher's unit began a tour of duty in Bosnia. In December 1993, during a period of rest and recuperation and, while in transit to his home, Christopher was involved in an incident with another soldier. As a result, he was awarded a period of 28 days' detention, which he served in the Hohne guardroom. While in detention, he asked to speak to the Women's Royal Voluntary Service representative who regularly visited the guardroom to talk to all detainees. It was during their confidential discussion that Christopher said that he did not want to return to Bosnia after his release. It was, and continues to be, usual practice for soldiers given periods of detention to return to their parent unit on completion of their sentence. Were it otherwise, it would be possible for some to use it as an excuse to avoid operational service. There is nothing to suggest that Christopher saw his incarceration as a method of avoiding service in Bosnia.

It was also usual practice, in accordance with the Imprisonment and Detention (Army) Rules 1979, for all soldiers undergoing detention to be medically examined. During their examination, soldiers have every opportunity to express any worries that they may have. As may be expected, the WRVS representative expressed her views about Christopher to the commanding officer—as she did about all the other soldiers who were held in detention. Not being medically qualified, she did not offer any comment or opinion on Christopher's psychological well-being. However, she remembered that he was upset at having to spend the festive season in the guardroom and was worried that that would prevent him from returning home to discuss relationship problems with his girlfriend.

Christopher was also given a further opportunity to make known any personal worries that he may have had. His commanding officer, through the WRVS representative, advised all the soldiers held in the guardroom at Hohne at that time that if they were upset or believed that they were suffering from stress, they should make their concerns known by reporting sick and discussing their situation with a medical officer. Christopher did not report sick, and chose not to say anything about how he was feeling.

When speaking further to the commanding officer about the detainees, the WRVS representative mentioned specifically that Christopher had some worries about his leave. I understand that he was worried that, because he was detained for an offence committed while on leave, he would lose what leave entitlement he had left. As a result of that conversation, the regiment decided that it was appropriate to grant Christopher an additional period of unscheduled leave at the end of his detention before his return to Bosnia.

I should emphasise that at no time did Trooper Young give his chain of command any cause to be concerned about his behaviour. In fact, he conducted himself well and displayed no signs of severe stress, or, as my hon. Friend suggested, post-traumatic stress disorder. If Christopher was psychologically disturbed, it was not apparent to the regiment or the Army medical authorities.

Christopher spoke to the WRVS representative on a number of occasions, and he could have asked to see the medical officer or the community psychiatric nurse, but seems to have chosen not to do so. Either could have arranged for him to be properly assessed and treated if necessary. I assure my hon. Friend that if there had been any doubt about his mental state, he would have been referred immediately to the medical officer. As Christopher did not choose to ask for medical advice, and showed no signs of stress or obvious psychological problems, he returned to Bosnia, after a short period of leave, to complete his tour with his unit. That was completed without further incident. He was, of course, offered counselling before, and on his return from, his tour, as are all service personnel.

On 24 June 1994, Christopher underwent a full pre-release medical, in which he was assessed to be fully fit. He was due to attend a final, more informal release medical on the last day of his service, and that was scheduled for 1 August 1994. On 11 July 1994, having completed the documentation required at that time, Christopher returned to his parents' home and told them that he had been discharged from the Army. It

[Mr. Spellar]

seems that he did not explain that he had to report to Bovington camp on 1 August 1994 to complete the release process and undertake his final release medical.

I am advised that when Christopher failed to return to Bovington on 1 August 1994, the garrison administration office tried to contact him at his home address, which was listed on his documentation and shown on his discharge instruction. Unfortunately, when it telephoned to speak to Christopher it was told, for some unaccountable reason, that Christopher had not been heard of at that address, so he was posted absent without leave. I am advised that the civilian police were informed. After failing to reach Christopher at the address shown on his records, the garrison administrative office at Bovington camp contacted the manning and records office for help. It provided a further address from his vetting forms—that of his natural father—but Christopher had not been heard of at that address for the previous two years.

On 15 December 1994, the manning and records office contacted his regiment, the Light Dragoons, asking for further assistance. Although not normal practice, on 7 January 1995 the regiment contacted a close friend of Christopher who had been discharged the previous year, asking him to pass on a message to report to Bovington camp, with an assurance that he would not be in any trouble on his return. His friend confirmed to the regiment that he had seen Christopher, who had acknowledged the request. Unfortunately, he did not report to Bovington.

The House may know that when a solider has been unlawfully absent, a board of inquiry is normally convened to investigate the matter. A board of inquiry into Christopher's absence was convened in Hohne on 30 January 1995. It concluded that Christopher may not have known that he had been required to report to Bovington camp for final discharge procedures, or that he had simply forgotten during the three weeks that had elapsed between his return home and the reporting date.

Mr. Murphy: Does my hon. Friend not consider it unusual that, if the board of inquiry concluded in January that Christopher was absent without leave, it took a further five months to contact him?

Mr. Spellar: I understand that that may have been due to a move within the police system, which was transferring from one location to another, so communication between the two authorities was difficult. However, that is one of the matters that I hope will be discussed at the meeting between my hon. Friend and the Army authorities.

The board of inquiry recommended that in the circumstances, Christopher should not have any disciplinary action taken against him for his failure to report, and that all possible efforts should be made to allow him to report to collect his last salary payment.

It is not current practice, after the initial contact to the individual's last known address, for the civilian or military police to be proactive in locating absentees unless they are in receipt of new information about their possible whereabouts. Attempts were made by personnel in the manning and records office to locate Christopher during his period of absence, but to no avail.

When a soldier has been absent for six months, the case is automatically reviewed by the central criminal records and information office of the Royal Military Police. It was through that action that the Army became aware that Christopher was living with his mother—

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 March 2001

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Illegal Drugs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, which I know is in many ways a cross-party one. I know that there will be much consensus about what I am about to say. Many hon. Members have approached me in the past few days, since I won this spot in Westminster Hall, to say that they would be interested in contributing to the debate; several others who unfortunately cannot be here today have also shown an interest in it.

It is widely accepted that illegal drugs are the scourge of modern society. They ruin lives and leave behind not just death, in many instances, but family break-up, and they are one of the major causes of crime not just in this country but throughout the world. Drug-related crime is conservatively estimated to cost the country £2.5 billion—I have heard much higher estimates. Almost two thirds of criminals test positive for one or more drugs.

Drug use among our youngsters is also worrying, although I stress at the outset that the vast majority of young people do not take illegal drugs. There is a perception that it is the norm for anyone under 25 to do so, but it is not. That should be stressed time and time again. However, a recent study by the Alcohol and Health Research Centre confirmed that teenagers from Britain are more likely than are most of their European counterparts to have taken drugs. The report's author, Dr. Martin Plant, said:

"One of the problems we have is that drug taking has now become so commonplace that it is widely regarded as socially acceptable."

The report found cannabis use—that is, the percentage of those who had used it at least once—in Britain to be 35 per cent., in France 35 per cent, in Ireland 32 per cent., in Sweden 8 per cent., and in Greece 8 per cent. So we can see that we have a real problem compared with our European neighbours. The percentages of respondents aged between 16 and 59 in England and Wales reporting the use of cannabis, cocaine and heroin in the British crime surveys of 1994, 1996 and 1998 show an upward trend. Again, we have a real problem: the number of those admitting to taking illegal drugs has increased.

Deaths from hard drugs, such as heroin, cocaine and Ecstasy, have risen dramatically during the past six years. Since 1995, cocaine-related deaths have risen fourfold in England and Wales, while Ecstasy has featured in two and a half times more fatalities. Heroin or morphine-related deaths have risen by 110 per cent. from 357 in 1995 to 754 in 1999. It must be noted that that Office for National Statistics study did not include deaths registered as having been caused by drug overdoses.

Drugs are now commonplace in all parts of our society. More and more companies are testing their employees for drug use. British Airways recently announced that its crews were to face spot tests for drink and drugs—I think that we would all welcome that.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. Does he agree that the taking of hard drugs appears to be getting disproportionately worse in rural areas? The figure for hard drug addicts in Gloucestershire has risen from 28 in 1997 to 112 today. Does he agree that one of the best methods for combating that menace to our society is to have a proper preventive education programme? Only four police officers are dedicated to that task in Gloucestershire. Should not the Government wage war in that respect? Although they have announced a small amount of extra money for the drugs and alcohol action teams, should not they fund more dedicated police officers for a preventive education programme?

Mr. Evans: Like my hon. Friend, I represent a rural constituency. There is a perception that the drugs problem exists only in big cities and large towns. The Minister will know that that is not the case. There is a drugs problem in rural areas, and because the areas that we represent are so rural and so large, it is difficult to police them. We need to redouble our efforts on prevention, and education is the key. That is how we can get the message across to young people, especially in small rural schools, and we have to do it as early as possible. It is never too early to start.

I welcome the announcement that British Airways is introducing drug testing in the workplace. Doctors and nurses, too, will face random testing for drink and drugs under proposals that are being drawn up by the NHS trusts. The General Medical Council and the majority of medical students back the proposals, although the Royal College of Nursing would prefer the scheme to be voluntary. If we are to be treated by doctors and nurses, we want to know that they are not suffering from the effects of drugs.

Yesterday, we heard that the British Army is reputed to be relaxing its rules against drug use, in order to ease the shortage of recruits. More than 2,300 soldiers have been discharged since drug testing was introduced in 1995. In 1999, 485 soldiers tested positive for illegal drug use. In the last 10 months of last year, 580 tested positive, so the problem is getting worse.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): I am most interested in what the hon. Gentleman says. Will he extend his enthusiasm for drug testing to tests for legal and illegal drugs on parliamentarians and civil servants?

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman's views on this issue are widely known and sincerely held. I disagree with him on many points, but I agree that we should consider the possibility of extending drug testing into key areas—for instance to pilots. I should not like to be on an aircraft where I thought that the pilot was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The same would apply if I were going into hospital. Drug tests are being used increasingly in many areas of work, particularly where machinery is

[Mr. Evans]

used. [*Interruption.*] No, the issue must be addressed on a case-by-case basis. I am not going to rule it out, and I am not going to rule it in.

Mr. Flynn: Surely it is a matter of the greatest seriousness if people are inebriated—and their judgement is therefore affected—when they are in charge of a country, in charge of a legislature, or in charge of a foot and mouth outbreak.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful case. His suggestion should be looked at, but on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps the Minister will consider it.

The message for new recruits, according to a headline in the *Evening Standard*, is that the Army seems to be going soft. I am sure that the last thing that the Government would like is to be seen as a soft touch on drugs. I hope that the Minister will refer to this new policy so that we can find out where the Government stand. A record number of British people are being held in jails abroad, which demonstrates that the problem is still with us, and that it is on the increase. We must be vigilant in all areas, including rural areas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) has said.

My hon. Friend mentioned education, which is how we can make the greatest inroads. The classroom is an important tool in getting the message across to our youngsters as much as possible. The simple fact that we declare substances illegal does not mean that people will immediately be influenced not to use them. We know that the reverse is often true. The chief rabbi wrote a piece in *The Daily Telegraph* today along those lines.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way to me again, especially as I am afraid that I cannot stay for the whole debate, as I am due elsewhere. Does he acknowledge that the Cotswold objective group on the role of drugs and alcohol in crime and disorder recently introduced a good initiative in the form of a needle exchange? Not only did many users come forward, but it was discovered that the youngest user in the first week was as young as 12. Does that suggest that the problem is becoming more serious in rural areas and affecting our youngsters at a younger age? We must pay attention to that.

Mr. Evans: There is no doubt that people are getting older at a younger age—if that makes any sense; I hope that it is the most illogical statement that I make during the debate. We would all be depressed by the knowledge that people as young as 12 were injecting themselves with illegal drugs. I hope that the support that they receive, in a voluntary or a professional capacity, will be sufficient to wean them off drugs. It is appalling and chilling to think that lives are blighted and wasted before they have even been lived. I shall say a little more about treatment shortly, and I hope that the Minister can respond positively. That 12-year-old should be in the classroom, but I suspect that he rarely visits any classroom, which is absurd. I hope that teachers will receive full support to help and assist that child.

All children and young people have role models. Everyone seems to be dazzled by the glitterati and the soap stars these days. The photograph of Daniella Westbrooke, a former "EastEnders" star, that showed that her nose had been eaten away by cocaine addiction, was one of the most horrifying pictures that I have seen in a national newspaper. I could barely look at it. As most youngsters look towards soap stars as examples that they would like to follow, I suggest that we use that photograph in any advertising campaign. If it cannot put people off snorting cocaine, I do not know what can. I read that she is trying to free herself from her addiction, but, sadly, is regularly relapsing. Few of us understand the pressures of addiction to cocaine and how people free themselves from it. She is certainly no role model for those who look up to people on television, although there are some good role models.

Another celebrity who is no role model is Eminem, about whom there was much publicity when he came here from the United States. There was an investigation following his performance in Manchester, as he was reported to have not only taken drugs on stage in front of 15,000 fans, but encouraged many of them to take Ecstasy and other illegal drugs. I suspect that there were many youngsters, perhaps people as young as 12, in that audience.

I do not know what stage the police investigation has reached. I hope that if it is proven that Eminem, from the stage, encouraged 15,000 fans—some of them may have been children—to take Ecstasy, the Minister will consider the incident seriously and ensure that the information is passed to the Home Secretary and that Eminem is forbidden to come to this country to play here again. It is appalling for someone like that to encourage our young people, who look up to him as a role model, to take drugs. The United States of America has a strong policy on admitting people to the country if they are known to have taken drugs. I hope that we will take an equally hard line and prevent a United States citizen who has so much influence to spread such a message from coming here.

Many others act as role models; I think of Ellen McArthur, Tracey Edwards, Colin Montgomery, Steven Redgrave and David Beckham, who walked out of the Eminem concert with his wife—good on him! He was disgusted by what he saw—Denise Lewis, Tim Henman, Lennox Lewis and Michael Owen also show that young people have many role models.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend has been generous in giving way. Does he agree that the courts have a role to play in deterring those dealing in drugs with intent? A teenager in my constituency on his way to a night club recently was found to have 12 Ecstasy pills. That was far too many for his personal consumption, and he was convicted for dealing with intent. He was sentenced to 20 hours, community service. Does that not send totally the wrong message?

Mr. Evans: Absolutely. It is a joke. Whenever they can, the police put a lot of effort into cracking down on drugs, but for courts to impose such sentences must be morale-sapping for them. I suspect that no hon. Member would want that.

Mr. Flynn: Given that a thousand times as many people are affected by tobacco, and have their lives wrecked and their health destroyed by it, than are affected by cocaine, and that even more are affected by

the abuse of alcohol, will the hon. Gentleman set an example by ending the sale of tobacco and cigarettes in his shop in Swansea?

Mr. Evans: I would be more than happy. I also sell alcohol, so the hon. Gentleman could get me on that as well. However, he knows that we operate within the law on the sale of cigarettes and alcohol, and I would back a Government advertising campaign that spread information about the dangers of drugs. I happen to own a convenience store—

Mr. Flynn: The hon. Gentleman is a drug pusher.

Mr. Evans: I own a convenience store, and tobacco is one of the many products that we sell. I agree that we need to educate people away from cigarettes and restrict their use of alcohol to a moderate intake. If the Government ever decided to make cigarettes illegal, I would stop selling them immediately. The emphasis is on the Government taking action.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Following that train of thought, we know that alcohol and tobacco are widely used, including by many hon. Members. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when parents have a cigarette or a glass of whisky to help them unwind at the end of the day, they may give their children the message that it is okay to take drugs to relax or unwind, but that the youngsters may then decide to take another drug that is not as dangerous as alcohol or tobacco?

Mr. Evans: Yes, that may be the perception, but I do not agree with it. Those who have a gin and tonic to unwind at the end of the evening do not do so to get stoned, but people who take cannabis do. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is falling into the trap of thinking that cannabis is not so bad, that it is a drug for younger people to use instead of gin and tonic, and that such drinks are only for the grey set. I totally disagree with her. In a moment, I shall cite what Professor Henry says on the subject, and I hope that she will keep an open mind.

I congratulate our teachers. I have spoken to a number of teachers in Ribble Valley over the past couple of days to find out what work they are doing, not only for children but for parents. I understand that it is now the policy for schools to educate parents in how to recognise whether their children are taking drugs. It cannot be an easy job—they are not skilled in it—and teachers would welcome whatever support can be offered. Teachers certainly appreciate life education. I am a Rotarian, and we do a lot to support life education vehicles throughout the country, which spread the message to young people about all substance abuse—not only drugs, but all substances, including glue, over-consumption of alcohol and cigarette smoking. I congratulate the people involved on what they do. I believe that they now have more than 50 mobile classrooms.

There were mixed messages from the Runciman report. I congratulate the Government and the Home Secretary on standing up against its recommendations on reclassification of some drugs. My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold has talked about sending the wrong messages. What message would have been conveyed by reclassification of those drugs in a way that made them appear more acceptable?

I congratulated the Government on establishing the post of drugs tsar, which was a good idea. I hope that the drugs tsar will keep his messages straight and clear. There should be as few mixed messages as possible. When he talks about cracking down on hard drugs he must emphasise that it cannot be inferred that he will therefore be relaxed about soft drug consumption.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has presented a seven-point plan on drug taking. There is not time to list those points now, but it is vital to give head teachers the freedom to implement anti-drugs policies in schools and allow them to exclude pupils when they judge it necessary. There should be an emphasis on education. An emphasis in schools on the illegality of drugs will not have the desired impact. They should emphasise drugs' effect on people.

Professor Henry, a toxicologist who sees accident victims in the course of his work in the accident and emergency unit of St. Mary's hospital, wants more research to be done into the long-term effects of taking so-called soft drugs such as cannabis. I urge the Government to re-examine the need for that work. There is a perception that soft drugs, are not as bad as alcohol. Much research has been done in the United States of America, and we should follow suit, as well as sharing information as much as possible.

I welcomed drug testing and treatment orders when they were introduced, but they have not been as successful as they could have been. I believe that the drop-out rate is 50 per cent., which is far too high. I ask that they be re-evaluated, to ascertain how they can be made more effective.

I have received a letter from the Rev. John Garfoot, a Methodist minister in Norfolk, about treatment of addicts. He wants more Government action, and I agree with him. He writes:

"The basic mistake...is that drug misuse is treated as a crime problem not as a health issue. Seizures are commendably up but still massive quantities of illicit drugs are getting through to the streets. Arrest referral schemes are good but the damage is already done. What is needed is to attract into treatment drug misusers before they reach this stage. As it is, the only way many can get treatment is to commit an offence and be arrested. So treatment, treatment, treatment should be the watchword."

I agree.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the doctor whom he mentioned just now has not only been under investigation by the Home Office in the past, but is currently under investigation by the General Medical Council for prescribing high doses of drugs to the most chaotic addicts? If he is banned from practising, hundreds of the most chaotic drug users in London will be released onto the streets. No other doctors will take them up. Does the hon. Gentleman regard that as serious?

Mr. Evans: I am not aware of the case that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, and I hope that he will have an opportunity to make his own contribution to the debate. We must ensure that people with a problem receive treatment as early as possible. Banging up some of those drug users in prison without treatment is

[Mr. Evans]

useless. Forcing them to commit crimes to get treatment is the wrong approach. I hope that the Minister will give close attention to what the hon. Gentleman has said. He is chairman of the all-party group on drugs misuse and takes the issue very seriously.

A legal loophole exists with respect to crack cocaine. Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, it is illegal for the owner or occupier of a property to allow cannabis or opium to be smoked on the premises, but the law does not cover crack cocaine, which had not really been heard of when that Act was introduced. I understand that when raids are made, people need only to throw away the drug and they cannot be touched. Please will the Government look again at that?

I turn finally to drug driving, which is a real problem and is on the increase. As the Minister will be aware, I raised the issue on 5 February during Home Office questions, and I urge the Government to consider a four-point plan. This would include, first, a national campaign to highlight the dangers of driving while under the influence of drugs. That should take the form of a high-profile television and poster campaign. Secondly, the highway code should be redrafted to contain more information on the dangers of drug driving. Learner drivers must be expected to know about the dangers. I have a copy of the section of the highway code that deals with alcohol and drugs, and it is so small as to be almost useless.

Thirdly, it should be compulsory to be asked about the issues surrounding drug driving in the driving theory test, and drivers should not be allowed to progress to their driving test unless they have answered the questions correctly. Fourthly, information should be given out when anyone applies for a driving licence, or with other correspondence sent out by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, telling people about the ill effects of alcohol and drugs.

The four-point plan is straightforward. I know that the RAC wants more to be done about drug driving. Indeed, a letter from the RAC states:

"An estimated eighty-five per cent. of 22-25 year olds believe that their peer group regularly drive after taking drugs. Drug driving could be more prevalent than drink driving within this age range."

The letter continues:

"Unlike alcohol, most respondents attached little social stigma to driving after having taken ecstasy. One respondent described: 'No, it's not shunned as such. There isn't anybody I know who'd get into a car with somebody that is drunk, but there is an awful lot of people I know who would get into a car with someone who is on E.'"

We must do a lot more. I know that the Home Office recently announced the introduction of roadside tests to find out whether people have taken drugs. I welcome that, as far as it goes, but it seems to go no further than did our attempts to deal with alcohol consumption 20 or 30 years ago. More research is required into effective ways of testing for drugs. Please will the Minister consider the idea of an advertising campaign, and of rewriting the highway code to ensure that it contains much more information about the effects of drug and alcohol consumption on drivers? Will he make certain that the theory test will include questions about alcohol and drug taking, and that anyone who answers those questions incorrectly will fail the test? The problem cannot be over-emphasised.

Someone in my office spoke to the question bank manager at the Driving Standards Agency. He wants the highway code to include more information about drugs, because that would make it possible to question people in more detail about the problems of driving under the influence of drugs or drink. Any action taken by the Government that helps to educate youngsters about the problems of taking drugs will receive full support from the Opposition. We have a common battle to fight, and I want the Government, of whatever political colour, to get on with the job.

9.58 am

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): There have been two reports on drugs in the past 12 months. There is the "United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator's Annual Report 1999/2000", which is vacuous piffle, unscientific, self-admiring and useless. Perhaps that is too generous—I tend to be mealy-mouthed whenever I talk about the drug tsar's report. Then there is another report—"Drugs and the Law: Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971"—which is scientific, authoritative, independent and practical. It was written over two years by a group of policemen and scientists, and it comes up with solutions. The sad thing is that the first report represents the policy both of the Opposition and the Government, and the second does not.

I have listened to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) with some interest. All drugs are damaging, and one should always make one's own position clear. I am a user of drugs—I am devoted to wine and beer, in modest quantities. They add a great deal of pleasure to my life and help me to relax.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Those are both legal.

Mr. Flynn: All drugs are potentially damaging, but they are all part of nature, and gifts from God, to be used in either a detrimental or a beneficial way. On the subject of medicinal drugs, I must repeat that I have never taken an illegal drug in my life—and although I have had arthritis since I was a child, I have not taken any medicinal drugs for the last 25 years, and I do not intend to start doing so.

In considering the drugs problem, it is completely distorted to talk about the harm caused by a small group of illegal drugs and ignore the enormous damage to lives and health caused by legal drugs. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley, as I mentioned earlier, is a purveyor of tobacco and cigarettes, and of alcohol. He might also be a purveyor of medicinal drugs. The number of deaths caused by Ecstasy has been mentioned. Over recent years, the average number of such deaths, which were all terrible tragedies in themselves, and devastating for the families concerned, has been seven. The number of people killed by anti-depressants during every one of the past 10 years is between 400 and 500. More than 1,000 people are killed by analgesics every year, 120,000 by tobacco and 40,000 by alcohol. The costs that follow from all the other problems caused by those drugs are also high.

The hon. Gentleman has outlined the conventional, timid politician's approach, which is inexcusable. We should blame politicians. The hon. Gentleman told a story of failure. The turning point in British drug law was on 27 May 1971. The Misuse of Drugs Act is nearly 30 years old. All the parties agreed about it. The Act started out as Labour legislation and was subsequently taken up by a Tory Government. The result of that legislation—the result of policies the same as those presented by both the Government and the Opposition this morning—has been a 2,000 per cent. increase in drug harm in Britain. We are the worst drug users in Europe. We have more deaths, and they are increasing at a steeper rate, than in any other country in Europe.

For the past 18 months, I have been writing a report for the Council of Europe, as rapporteur for the Committee on social, Health and Family Affairs, which has looked at drug use in 43 countries. There has been a mountainous increase in all drug use in England and Wales—the part of the UK for which there are figures. How dare we, with this record of continuous failure by all Governments, dare to preach at other countries? How dare we reject this independent inquiry, which suggests reforms? Instead of reforming, we fall back on the comfortable, self-admiring report produced in Whitehall, which simply says that we should carry on, appear to do something and throw money at problems. We set up organisations and we create new bureaucracies so as to give an appearance of activity.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley mentioned drug education. That is a fascinating subject. There are incontrovertible reports of drug education leading to increased drug use. However, I know of no case, and I would challenge anyone to produce one, in which anti-drug education has led to a reduction in drug use. We used to talk about Operation Charlie.

Mrs. Winterton: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's point. Does he agree that more sex education has led to more sexual activity among the young, especially the under-age?

Mr. Flynn *indicated dissent.*

Jackie Ballard *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Winterton: That is true, although hon. Members are shaking their heads. That is the effect of the way in which such education is given. If it is merely a damage limitation exercise, which is so often the case with sex education, and, in some cases with drugs education, one will get the result that the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) described. However, a genuine drug prevention programme, sustained over a period of time, gives different results, as has been shown in America and elsewhere.

Mr. Flynn: I ask the hon. Lady, as I have asked Governments of both political colours over the years, to give me an example of a scientifically examined anti-drug programme that led to a decline in drug use. Sex education certainly does not have much effect. Most young people in this country have been at it for a long time before sex education arrives in their schools. If we want an example of excellent sex education, we should look to the Netherlands and its remarkably low rate of unwanted pregnancy and abortion. That is the model to follow.

I do not want to take too long, but the hon. Lady should consider what America did in the 1950s, when anti-drugs groups were sent out to tell young people not to do drugs. They told young people that drugs were wicked—which is exactly what young people wanted to hear—and that their parents would not like them to do drugs, which presented them with another challenge. All young people want to do things differently from their parents. The groups also said that drugs were dangerous, but all young people are risk takers and believe that they are immortal. The anti-drugs groups sent out a message that was irresistible to young people, so drug use followed that drugs education programme as surely as night followed day.

There was once something called Operation Charlie, which other hon. Members may want to mention. Again, a tiny piece of drug education that involved 40-odd children for a brief period proved absolutely nothing, but we used it as a basis for our beliefs about what the way out should be. The Government refused to consider the practical policies that have reduced drug harm in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Italy. We should consider fairly what is happening in those countries, which are all moving away from the idea of prohibition, and what is happening in Sweden. Its policy of strict prohibition is similar to Britain's, and drug use there is rising rapidly. Of the 43 countries in the Council of Europe, the two countries with increasing drug problems—although Sweden starts from a low base—are the two most prohibitionist countries. Countries with policies based on intelligence and pragmatism have fewer and reducing problems.

The speech by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley was the traditional one that we have heard many times. He referred to the Rev. John Garfoot. I had a case in my constituency of a young man who had reached the point in his life—as many addicts do after a bereavement, the loss of a relationship or another major event—at which he wanted to kick his drug addiction. That feeling does not always last long. Within a fortnight, he might have changed his mind, but when he came to me, he wanted to get off drugs. Could I, as his MP, or anyone else get him on to a course? I could not. I had to tell him that the only practical way of getting on to a course of treatment for his drug addiction was to commit a crime that was serious enough to put him in prison, and he would receive treatment straight away. That is exactly what happened with the son of a woman who bravely went on Radio 2 and said that she wanted her son to live. That is the current position in this land.

We are going down that road because of political cowardice and our failure to face up to the practical ways of helping people. We, as politicians, must take some of the blame. We cannot blame drugs, because they are inert substances, with which mankind can do as it wishes. By refusing to take hard decisions, we in the House are responsible for drug deaths. If present trends continue, there will be at least 1,000 avoidable drug deaths in Britain during the 10 years of the policy in the document, and we will be to blame. We can try to blame drug pushers, but why do they exist?

[Mr. Flynn]

There is an illegal drug trade, and drugs empires, because we have prohibition. We are following exactly the same policies of prohibition that were followed in America in the 1920s with alcohol, and we are therefore having the same experience. The only way to start to get control of the drug problem and reduce it, instead of increasing it every year, is to collapse the illegal, criminal and irresponsible black market and replace it with a market than can be licensed, controlled, policed and regulated. At present, there is not a child in this country, of almost any age, who cannot get hold of a soft drug. If we had a licensed market on which soft drugs were available, people who sold drugs to children would lose their licences and go out of business.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman must be aware of the enormous amount of smuggling in cigarettes and alcohol from the continent to this country that is taking place now. Does he not realise that, if we have the licensed system that he suggests, white van man will come into this country with truckloads of illegal, or licensed, substances, and children would have access to them, too?

Mr. Flynn: Where does the hon. Gentleman think white van man is now? How does he think uncontrollable amounts of drugs are getting into Britain now? The price of heroin has hardly changed in 40 years; there is no problem with the supply of drugs coming into Britain, as there is an open door for drugs. In a legal market there could be some control over the sale of drugs, but there is no control over an illegal market. There are other advantages, too: if people use the drugs legally they can take them without having to mix the soft drug cannabis with the terrible, addictive, killer drug tobacco, which the hon. Member for Ribble Valley sells in great quantities. People could take soft drugs by other means—by eating, by drinking, or through inhalers, for example—which are far safer than smoking. They could also take milder forms of drugs in a market where they were not prohibited.

In the United States under prohibition, the alcohol that was sold was distilled spirit, which was concentrated and easy to transport, but the alcoholic content was difficult to control. In this country now we have drugs and their lethal and addictive products in their most concentrated form. If there was a legal market for cannabis, the situation would be the same as it is in Holland, where people do not set out to get stoned; the hon. Member for Ribble Valley is entirely wrong about that. They have a choice of perhaps a dozen different forms of cannabis that they can smoke, or take in drinks or in a cake. In a legal market, the great majority take the mildest forms of drugs, as most of us drink wine or beer rather than spirits.

The responsibility is on us, as parliamentarians, to look fairly, intelligently and rationally at the drugs problem. The main difficulty is our own political prejudices and our fear of being pilloried as drug pushers by the popular press. It is the job of politicians not to follow what the tabloids tell us, but to give a lead; that is the only way for us to reduce drug harm.

Mr. Eric Illsley (in the Chair): I shall call the party spokespersons no later than 10.30 am. I should be grateful if the remaining two Back Benchers could divide the time left until then between them.

10.12 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing a debate on this important topic. In 1999, when Keith Hellawell published his first annual report, we had a major debate on the subject that took an entire Friday afternoon. I had hoped that that exercise would be repeated last year, and I asked the Leader of the House to secure such a debate, but one was not forthcoming. I hope that the Minister will take note of that, because drug misuse is Britain's number one social problem and all hon. Members should be given the chance to debate the anti-drugs co-ordinator's annual report when it is published.

When the Government took office, we were spending about £1.75 billion annually on tackling the misuse of drugs. Since then, the figure has increased several times, most recently in the March Budget. Will the Minister give us an up-to-date figure on what all the Departments are spending on tackling the issue?

When the Government began their work in 1997, most of that money was spent on enforcement, but little treatment was available for addicts or those who were affected by drugs. Since then, I have pressed the Government to move more closely to the treatment end of the spectrum. I believe that drugs misuse is a health issue with criminal consequences, rather than a criminal issue with health consequences. However, until recently, the increased sums devoted to tackling drugs issues have been spent at the enforcement end of the spectrum, and we have left it rather late to increase treatment provision.

I am worried that people who enter treatment via the Government's enforcement measures will gain preferential treatment over those who have not. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) illustrated that problem with an example. Surely it should be the other way round: those addicted to drugs or who have a drug problem should be able to secure preferential treatment without entering the criminal justice system.

I stress from the outset that I strongly deplore the misuse of all substances, including alcohol and tobacco. Ultimately, however, prohibition will not work. It is a complex issue, and I am pleased that we are able to debate it today. As it is difficult to collect data on such illegal activities, we do not know the scale of the problem. However, I congratulate the Government on devoting more money, which is long overdue, to researching drugs misuse. We must understand what drives people to the brink and how to stop them taking that path. Health and treatment must be available at the time of need.

Last year, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs published a report, "Reducing Drug-Related Deaths", which I recommend to right hon. and hon.

Members. It states that alcohol is responsible for 28,000 to 32,000 deaths per annum, and that smoking kills about 120,000 people per annum. We also know precisely how many deaths—580, in 1998—are caused by paracetamol. Unfortunately, we do not know precisely how many deaths are caused by illegal drugs—or even by legal ones such as methadone, an opiate substitute.

The report provides two figures for deaths by drugs overdose. On page xii, the 1998 figure is quoted at between 1,076 and 2,997, but, on another page in the main body of the report, the figure of 2,300 is given. That illustrates how we do not know the precise number of deaths attributable to drugs. Thousands of deaths are also caused by infection following the injection of drugs as a result of HIV and the hepatitis B and C viruses.

The report refers to the failure of coroners' offices to challenge death certificates signed by doctors before they forward the data to the Office for National Statistics, in London. Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us what action the Government are taking to implement the recommendations of that excellent report?

Page xx of the report states:

"We conclude that the current system for collecting and reporting of drug related deaths in the UK stands in need of considerable amendment and strengthening".

I urge the Government to take note of that advice.

It is not only illegal drugs that cause deaths. The benzodiazepines are responsible for an ever-increasing number of deaths, especially when taken with other drugs such as alcohol. According to the dance magazine *Mixmag*, which takes a responsible attitude to drugs misuse, GHB—or gamma-hydroxybutyrate—is becoming an increasingly used so-called "recreational drug". If the chemistry is understood, it can be manufactured in the kitchen sink. We do not need to import drugs from abroad on to the dance scene. Irresponsible people—some of whom have had no training in synthetic chemistry—can make them in the garage or at home. We must get across to young people the dangers of using this veterinary anaesthetic, especially at the same time as alcohol consumption, when it can be fatal.

The drug pushers recognise that fashions and drugs change to suit the mood of the day, especially on the dance scene. Unfortunately, "brown and white" has now entered that scene; drug pushers are dangerously mixing brown heroin with white cocaine and pushing it to young people as a new substance without telling them the main constituents. There is therefore a new danger of poly-drug use, which has become a mega-problem in Britain.

Hon. Members might be surprised to learn that, according to coroners' reports, the hotspots for deaths from drug use are Blackpool and the Fylde, Brighton and Hove, inner London north, Lincoln, Peterborough, Norwich, Pembrokeshire and Reading. Some of those towns and cities would not be uppermost in our minds as hotspots of drug misuse and death.

Loss of tolerance to opiates is the principal cause of death, especially for prisoners who have served relatively short sentences. During that time, they may have largely abstained, thus developing a reduced tolerance to the opiates that they were taking before entering prison. Therefore, proper aftercare for prisoners is essential if we are to avoid their deaths through overdose on release. So far, however, aftercare has been fairly pathetic.

We must also consider the impurity of street drugs. When one young person died from one ecstasy tablet, the world lit up with headlines about it. Sadly, last year, when almost 50 people, mainly in the Glasgow, Merseyside and Greater Manchester regions, died from injecting biologically contaminated heroin into muscle tissue, those events were, by comparison, hardly mentioned in the national press. It was a great tragedy that went unnoticed.

I cannot understand why we do not return to the system of positively encouraging heroin addicts to register at clinics and prescribing them clinically pure heroin until we can wean them off it. That happened before 1971, and I urge the Government to re-examine the idea. It would take heroin addicts off the streets and away from the dangerous street heroin, and treat them as people whose health is at risk.

The debate will continue, and I hope that it does so in greater depth than we have time for today, because it is important to talk about social problem number one. The illicit drugs trade is one of the largest industries in the world—larger than steel or automobiles—and represents 8 per cent. of world trade. It is a pyramid selling racket that not only damages our health, but severely damages the economy. No tax is paid to the Government, and most profits leak out of the country to end up offshore.

10. 22 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing such an important debate. The contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) and for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) demonstrate the complexity of the issues that are involved. The extent of the problems that we have discussed so far perhaps shows that we should have had the debate on the Floor of the House. Certainly, enough is said about how important and difficult the issue is and how it is one of the greatest challenges that faces our society, but we do not seem to debate it much.

At the risk of encouraging my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West to suggest that I am just reinforcing failure, I will speak about the extent of drug trafficking and dealing in our communities. I recently spoke to the deputy divisional commander in my constituency, who told me that the police estimate that 80 per cent. of crimes of dishonesty—excluding car crimes—in my constituency are committed to fund a drug habit. An article in *The Guardian* on 10 July 1998 stated that the Office for National Statistics estimated that total consumer spending on drugs in Britain is somewhere between £4.3 billion and £9.9 billion.

Undoubtedly, illegal drugs and their abuse destroy families, lives and communities. One of the greatest obscenities, particularly in some communities in western Scotland, is that criminal dealers flaunt their wealth and power in the communities that they destroy. Throughout the land, individuals with no visible means of support enjoy life styles that belie their legitimate status. Not only does their trade destroy those with

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

whom they live, but they rub people's noses in their manifest wealth—their life style often includes large cars and houses, foreign holidays and ostentatious spending.

There has been a manifest failure to reinforce the message that crime does not pay. The 1998-99 report of Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary in Scotland states:

"An important dimension of impacting on drug traffickers... is the money they derive from it. Confiscating their assets is increasingly seen as a vital part of the law enforcement effort. Despite legislative advances and focus by police and the Crown the end results remain disappointing. About £630,000 is the total of orders made and the monies actually collected can be less. This is significantly disproportionate to the money made from crime."

For about 12 years, a substantial body of law, designed to help confiscate the assets of crime, has been in place. It has the stated objectives of punishment: denial of access to funds to resume criminal activities, deterring others and taking criminal money out of circulation—but they are just not working. In Scotland in 1999-2000, confiscation orders amounted to £822,270. To put that into perspective, the report from which I gleaned that information estimates that the current cost of the financial investigation in Scotland by police forces was, in terms of staff alone, £900,000. We are still only reaching the tip of the iceberg, yet we are spending more money than we can ever hope to recover. In 1995, research for the Home Office concluded that as much as £100 million from drug trafficking was likely to be available for confiscation—so why are we so poor at it?

Apart from the underlying philosophy about legislation of illegal drugs, it is clear that the legislation fails because it is possible to confiscate only where there has been a conviction. Even then, the courts are not obliged to confiscate the proceeds of crime; they only "may" do so. That contrasts with the effective use of legislation for civil confiscation and forfeiture in the Republic of Ireland—I had intended to speak in detail about that, but I shall pass over it quickly. The police themselves conclude that in Scotland there is a disparity between forces and their approach to asset confiscation. Senior officers lack commitment to that; it is seen as ancillary to core police work and there is a preconception that criminals have no assets worth recovering.

It is interesting, in the light of the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East, that agencies—this includes government agencies—do not always work effectively together in sharing information. They are hidebound by legal and procedural constraints that allow the sharing of information and intelligence only in circumstances that prevent, or help to detect, crime, that help to apprehend offenders, or that allow the assessment or collection of duty or tax.

Another report mentioned a case study that is relevant in that regard:

"The police were investigating and ultimately arrested an individual whom they suspected of trafficking in drugs. During the course of the investigation, documents in possession of the Inland Revenue were turned over to the police. These documents revealed that for the past 10 years, the defendant had reported to the Inland Revenue that his earnings rose from his activities as a drug trafficker. Since he always paid a substantial tax Bill, the Inland Revenue did not complain."

There is a lack of general awareness among the community at large of the importance of whistleblowing and suspicious transactions. The evidence suggests that money-laundering legislation works well in the financial service industries. Indeed, there are regularly about 14,000 disclosures per year to the National Criminal Intelligence Service economic crime unit. A straw poll in my constituency of businesses who must trade with people who deal in drugs revealed a total lack of awareness of obligations in that regard. The Government are working on that, and have announced a major initiative in the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill, which will introduce civil confiscation, tighten up on money laundering and implement the second European Union money laundering directive.

In Scotland the report of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary has helped significantly to improve the work of the police in this area, as has the setting up of the Scottish Drugs Enforcement Agency. There have been additional resources. We must increase awareness both among the public and the business community of their responsibilities. Again at the risk of bringing my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West to his feet, I shall mention the fact that as a consequence of the deaths in the west of Scotland that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East spoke about, our tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Record*, has run a persistent campaign to empower communities against drug dealers. I unequivocally support that campaign, because communities are being destroyed not just by the presence, but by the activities of those people.

Mr. Flynn: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Browne: I will not on this occasion, as I am concerned about the time.

Finally, there is no reason why we cannot empower our communities to deal with this, but parliamentarians and the Government have an obligation to put in place the framework for a confiscation programme that shows people that crime does not pay.

Mr. Eric Illsley (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard), may I ask the three party spokespersons to respect the convention of speaking for only 10 minutes each?

10.31 am

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): At the beginning of the 20th century a professor of physic at Cambridge university wrote in a standard medical text book:

"The sufferer is tremulous and loses his self command, he is subject to fits of agitation and depression. He has a haggard appearance, a renewed dose of the poison gives temporary relief but at the cost of future misery."

The professor was talking about coffee. As the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) said, no drug, either legal or illegal, is totally harmless. Alcohol and tobacco are responsible for many deaths and the related illnesses put high demands on the NHS. So does tranquilliser addiction. The hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) gave us some figures for that.

Ideally, none of us would use any kind of drugs except for medicinal purposes, but it is not an ideal world. For reasons of low self-esteem, stress, boredom and

unhappiness, many people take drugs to help them to relax, unwind or escape from life's pressures. We have all, I expect, met someone whose life has been blighted by drugs. My father died of cirrhosis of the liver, so I know from close hand the impact that alcohol can have on an individual and on the family. I recently met a 17-year-old who had been involved in crime since the age of six. He started burgling people's houses when he was six because he was small, and the older boys with whom he hung out gave him crack cocaine as a reward. His life has followed a fairly disastrous path ever since. He had written himself off at the age of 17, as having no hope of redemption.

A young man from my constituency was convicted of dealing in Ecstasy at the age of 18. He was a university student and his case may have been similar to that described by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). It was his turn to get the Ecstasy for the others in his flat, and he therefore had more in his possession when the flat was raided than one person would be expected to need or use. He was convicted of dealing and ended up spending two years in Strangeways prison. That obviously has had a major impact on his life. He has not only experienced imprisonment, but acquired a criminal record. A criminal record for drug dealing will affect his ability to travel to other countries for the rest of his life.

There is no argument between us about the fact that drugs of whatever kind are harmful and can damage individuals and society. The big question is what can we do about it. In 1994, the chief constable for West Yorkshire said:

"The current policies are not working. We seize more drugs, we arrest more people, but when you look at the availability of drugs, the use of drugs, the crime committed because of and through people who use drugs, the violence associated with drugs it's on the increase. It can't be working."

That chief constable was Keith Hellawell.

One member of the Conservative party has advocated the legalisation of all drugs as a liberalisation issue, arguing that it should be of personal choice. Many former chief constables support the legalisation of all drugs on the grounds that it would cut off a large income supply from organised crime. Some people say that legalisation of cannabis alone, for example, would send a more credible prevention and education message about the more harmful hard drugs. It would also allow for regulation of the quality of drugs, thus reducing health risks. That is an argument for legalising all drugs. I am surprised by the number of young people who are, say, vegetarians or vegans, and check the labels on every product that they buy in the supermarket, yet will buy tablets in a nightclub. They have no idea of the content or purity of those tablets.

Prohibitionists argue that cannabis is a gateway drug to harder drugs, which are more damaging to society because of the cost of addiction and the associated crime. When I recently visited a drug treatment centre at a prison in Devon, I was shown statistics on gateway drugs. Without exception, all the hard drug users who had gone through the treatment centre had started by smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol when they were very young. Desperation and diminishing returns had encouraged them to move on to harder drugs. Some of them had not even tried cannabis, and only a tiny fraction of the 6 million people in this country who have used cannabis move on to harder drugs. Many drug addicts are also alcohol-dependent; their problem is one of dependency. Because cannabis is illegal, users have to resort to dealers to buy supplies, and of course, it is in the dealer's interest to try to introduce them to harder, more lucrative and addictive drugs. Some people argue that legalisation of cannabis would break that link and, rather than leading to increased hard drug use, would reduce it.

Some people say that cannabis could, in effect, be decriminalised simply by non-enforcement of the law. That already happens in many police force areas. The percentage of people dealt with by cautioning in 1988 was 25 per cent; in 1998, 39 per cent. This is another example of a postcode lottery: in some areas, people are given a caution; in others, they go to court and receive a fine or even risk imprisonment. The Police Foundation report, which was mentioned earlier, recommended that drugs classifications and penalties should be adjusted to reflect current scientific understanding of the relative risks that different drugs pose. I will not go through the report's recommendations; I am sure that hon. Members who are interested in the subject will have examined them. However, Dame Ruth Runciman said:

"We have concluded that the most dangerous message of all is that all drugs are equally dangerous."

Not all drugs are equally dangerous, but all drugs are dangerous to some extent.

Much more needs to be done to provide treatment for people who have an addiction. Other hon. Members mentioned the difficulty of getting treatment. I recently received a letter from a parent in my constituency whose son, a heroin addict, has been committing burglaries to support his habit. The father desperately wanted treatment for his son but was told that the burglary offences were not serious enough for automatic treatment referral. The suggestion was that the son needed to commit some more serious offence.

The lack of residential treatment facilities is a huge problem. People who have been through drug treatment units in prison often need follow-on residential facilities when they leave prison, but those are not there for them.

In my view, prohibition has not kept the number of users down. It uses valuable resources and criminalises large sections of the population. It is time for us, as politicians, to catch up with the debate—we are not leading it; many national newspapers and members of the public are ahead of us—and to stop being politically timid. We must develop an effective drugs policy with the objective of reducing the harm caused to society and individuals by drug misuse of all kinds, whether legal or illegal.

10.39 am

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on introducing this interesting debate. The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) has been as consistent as ever—we expect nothing less—but I must point out, in response to his scathing remarks about education and prevention, that drink-driving education has actually worked. The hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) made the point that we should have a full day's debate on drugs. I second that, and also his comments about immediate treatment programmes

[Mrs. Ann Winterton]

for all those who need them. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) made a thoughtful contribution, predominantly about drug-related crime.

It is obvious to everyone—this was remarked on earlier—that the Opposition support the Government in their overall policy towards illegal drugs. From time to time, we have made constructive suggestions. For example, we believe that there should be greater emphasis on tackling the supply side. The work of customs officials, National Criminal Intelligence Service personnel and others involved in the struggle to prevent drugs from reaching the United Kingdom should be highly valued, not least because those people are becoming ever more successful in preventing huge shipments from reaching our shores. However, we all know that the amount of drugs that enter the country illicitly continues to cause concern. How can we best ensure that people, especially the young, are aware of the nature of those substances? What can we as a society do to protect the vulnerable from succumbing to peer pressure, and possibly ruining their lives by taking drugs?

In February, the drugs tsar, Keith Hellawell, said that:

"we need to discriminate between different drugs and the relative harm caused."

That is right to an extent, and explains why the Government have concentrated on heroin and other class A substances. However, it would be a fundamental error to ignore class B substances, especially cannabis, for several valid reasons. We all know the cannabis problems that face us at the moment. So many members of the public, especially the young, do not know that the drug has psychological and physical side effects, some of them serious.

The main psychoactive ingredient, THC, has certain psychological effects, which is why there is widespread, so-called recreational use to experience highs, altered states of consciousness characterised by emotional changes such as relaxation, altered perception and heightened sensory experiences. Not many people are told of the possible unpleasant psychological reactions to cannabis intoxication. Evidence supports the occurrence of more serious, although rarer, psychological problems. Dr. Andrew Wilski recently wrote:

"Today in my work as a consultant psychiatrist, I would estimate that 75 per cent. of the young people I see suffering psychotic illness have a history of cannabis abuse".

That is a telling figure.

Cannabis also has a more subtle, universal effect on concentration, memory and co-ordination, which I would have thought was not frightfully good for students. Another concern is the effect of cannabis on psychomotor functions, which has implications for driving, when perceptual accuracy and attention are vital. There are comparisons with intoxicated drivers who cause accidents. That serious problem was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley.

There can also be physical side effects, including increased heart rate, lower blood pressure, damage to the respiratory system and development of lung cancer. There is a 20 to 30-year latency period between the initiation of regular smoking and the development of cancer. Decriminalisation of cannabis will hugely increase the numbers of people who smoke on a regular basis. Thirty years down the track, we will see further lung cancers. THC promotes tumour growth. Well-documented research points out that cannabis can affect fertility, and when used in pregnancy can impair foetal development.

There are also worries that cannabis is a gateway to other drugs. Hon. Members have talked about the serious consequences of the use of hard drugs. Many cannabis users do not go on to use harder drugs—but studies have found links between cannabis and heroin, and I do not think that any user of heroin, cocaine, Ecstasy or other drugs has not begun by using cannabis. One reason advanced for that is that using cannabis puts young people in contact with users and sellers of the drugs, increasing the risk that they will be exposed to, and urged to try, more drugs.

Last February, the drugs tsar and the Minister for the Cabinet Office agreed that the Government should turn a blind eye to soft drugs. Now, however, Keith Hellawell appears to have changed his mind. Research in New Zealand found that young people who had smoked a joint once a week were 60 times more likely to take hard drugs in future. As a result of that finding, he stated:

"The pro-legalisers who have said that cannabis isn't a gateway drug will have to look at this hard and long."

Mr. Flynn: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Winterton: Forgive me, but because our time is so restricted, I must proceed. Keith Hellawell continued:

"I can say now cannabis is a gateway drug. I have not found any evidence anywhere that cannabis is not harmful, is not carcinogenic or that its usage will not lead to harder drugs."

More than half of all young people have not taken drugs. Of those who do, many resist moving on to other more harmful drugs. We must support those young people, but it is vital that Ministers send out the right message. To support young people, it is important that we have a national campaign. The drug action teams, which were set up to deliver drug treatment and prevention programmes locally, obviously cannot introduce a national campaign, which must be introduced by the Government, the drugs tsar, or a combination of the two. The same constructive message must be reinforced by schools, Churches, parents, people in sport, people in the music and entertainment industry, and any individual or organisation with influence over the young. We need such a sustained campaign, not to preach at our young people but to explain why, in their own best interest, they should stay off drugs, including cannabis.

I for one could never go down the path taken by the Liberal Democrats, or by others in the Chamber who have said that they believe that decriminalisation would solve the problem. I deplore some press statements, and some articles in what I would usually call responsible newspapers. I think it almost impossible that if we decriminalised, we could ever reduce the number of drug

users. That point of view is seconded by the deputy administrator of the Drugs Enforcement Agency in the United States, who said:

"Whether all drugs are eventually legalised or not, the practical outcome of legalising even one, like cannabis, is to increase the amount of usage among all drugs. It's been said that you can't put the genie back in the bottle."

Mr. Flynn: I invited the hon. Lady to come to the Netherlands. She would find there that decriminalising cannabis, by separating the two markets, has meant that young people can use soft drugs in safer ways and less harmful forms, and not be exposed to the hard drugs market. The result of 20 years of decriminalisation of soft drugs in the Netherlands has been that use has reduced to a fraction of what it is here. Why does the hon. Lady persist in the nonsense of saying that decriminalisation would increase use? It does not.

Mrs. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman always makes that point. Of course, more factors than decriminalisation are involved, as he knows. I mentioned, for example, the difference in the number of abortions and single mothers in Holland, and the difference in the number of young people who do not take drugs of any description. That is partly because the family situation in the Netherlands is much more supportive than it is here—in fact, our traditional family has broken down. Other factors are involved, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Netherlands is the drugs centre of Europe. There is manufacturing and growing there; we import Ecstasy and other things from the Netherlands.

Indeed, if the hon. Gentleman lived in the outskirts of Amsterdam, he would not like to see the pimping and other activities that feed on the drug taking there. I am sorry, but far more factors bear on the problem in the Netherlands than those that the hon. Gentleman—disingenuously, as always—picked out from his bucket of reasons. I disagree with him. He may be able to live with the consequences of decriminalisation, if it ever happens—but I could never bear to take that risk, and would not want it on my conscience. I believe that many other people in this country feel the same way.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing this debate and thank him for his bipartisan approach to such an important and serious issue, which affects all our communities. As can be seen from the piles of paper under which I am almost buried, it will be impossible for me to answer all the points raised in the debate, but I will write to hon. Members whose questions I do not have time to deal with.

The emphasis in the debate has varied between the view that this is a health problem with criminal consequences, and the view that it is a criminal problem with health consequences. It is actually both, which is why the Government's policy on drugs has four prongs. First, we intend to provide education to help prevent young people, in particular, from becoming drug users. The second prong is treatment. The third is to cut off the supply of drugs, and the fourth is to protect communities, which are often badly damaged by drugs. I thank hon. Members who have given their support to that approach today.

All communities are affected by drugs. One of the earlier contributions to the debate emphasised that drug abuse is a problem that is increasing more in the countryside than in urban areas. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) for providing some extremely interesting statistics about the areas where unlawful drug taking has the worst consequences. However, the problem is not just rural or just urban; it affects all our communities.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley talked about the Eminem concert. Clearly, I cannot comment on that because the police are investigating the matter. However, it is worth saying—although it is an obvious thing to say—that the law should be applied to everyone equally, whether they are pop stars, footballers or anything else, and whether they are encouraging people to take unlawful drugs or inciting violence against certain groups.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley made the case for his four-point plan to deal with drug driving. He mentioned that he had raised the matter at Home Office questions. I am aware that he has also been in correspondence with Lord Whitty on the matter, and I want to quote briefly from Lord Whitty's letter to the hon. Gentleman, because it deals precisely with the sort of education campaign that he suggested. Lord Whitty wrote:

"The Department is working on the question of an appropriate publicity campaign. One of the key questions for an effective campaign is the precise nature and extent of the problem because all the professional advice we have tells us we would need to target the campaign accordingly (as demonstrated by the success of the drink-driving campaigns). We would need to give positive advice informed by research and for enforcement to be backed up by reliable detection methods. We do not believe that a generalised campaign (or generalised information such as you have suggested) would necessarily reach the right people."

Lord Whitty recognises that there is a problem, but we need to think more about direct use of resources to target the problem. A specific approach, rather than a more generalised campaign, is needed.

The point that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley raised about the law not covering crack smoking on premises is partially true. The police can take the same action against the owners of crack houses as they would against the owners of pubs and clubs where dealing was encountered. We are considering whether the relevant provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 need to be updated, but in considering whether to extend the scope of the existing offences we are mindful of the concerns of voluntary organisations that work with drug misusers. They are extremely concerned about their own liability to prosecution.

It is possible to become extraordinarily depressed when some hon. Members say that the problem is always growing worse. We have a 10-year strategy, and the targets that we published in the second annual report are being met. In response to the question that the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) asked about young people taking drugs, I must point out—although I do not want to over-emphasise this—that according to research by John Balding, the number of 14 to 15-year-olds who experimented at least once with

[Mr. Graham Stringer]

illegal substances fell to about 26 per cent. in 1998, from 32 per cent. in 1996. That is a glimmer of hope, and although it does not mean that the problem is solved, it is an important statistic.

If there was a common theme or question between those with a belief in liberalising the drugs regime and those who support the bipartisan approach of the two Front Benches, it was that there should be no criminal gateway to treatment for drugs problems. We all agree about that. The Government strategy is aimed at providing treatment for all who need it. The investment in treatment is almost doubling, from £234 million in 2001-02 to £400 million by 2003-04. That was announced as part of the spending review settlement. We are setting up a new National Treatment Agency to bring about a step change in treatment services, based on that major new investment.

I do not want hon. Members to think that we are complacent. The situation is not satisfactory.

Mrs. Winterton: Is there any Government research into the effectiveness of different forms of treatment? Are the programmes good value for money, and do they produce the results that the Government want?

Mr. Stringer: I can take this opportunity to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East and the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) that programmes are assessed for effectiveness, and that we need to improve our empirical and evidence base on what motivates or drives people to take drugs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), who talked about recovering the proceeds of crime, made his points extremely well. The answer to his question is similar to the one that I gave to the hon. Member for Congleton. Several proposals in the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill would undermine criminal markets. We have increased the amount of assets being seized, but it is not sufficient at present. Making the law more effective will satisfy the objectives of one of those four prongs, which is to destroy supply lines and stop people making a profit from the drug market. I do not have time to say more. I thank the hon. Member for Ribble Valley for initiating the debate.

Families (Scotland)

11 am

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): I welcome the opportunity to consider the impact of the Government's policy on families in Scotland. I am surprised that no members of the Scottish National party are here, because the debate is important to the people of Scotland. Opposition Members have condemned measures implemented by the Government because they involve additional regulation, because they do not do enough or because the Government appear to show no ambition. However, the manifestos of the major Opposition parties in the 1997 general election said little about pledging resources to tackle the problems of the poor in Scotland.

The Government have tackled the issue of poverty not only within Scotland and the United Kingdom, but internationally. The concept of the family and the traditional stereotype image of the past have changed dramatically. Whether or not we approve, young men and women are engaging in relationships at an earlier age, and are consciously entering long-term relationships outside the previously conventional marriage model. Although society believes that marriage traditionally creates the best environment in which to raise children, we must recognise unfortunately that it is not always possible. When relationships or marriages break down, policies should be in place to provide parents with a choice of financial and structural support, such as the provision of nursery care and after-school clubs, side by side with the working families tax credit and the children's tax credit. Work should be a real option for parents. It is vital to ensure that children have the best start in life.

A modern Scotland must be designed to meet the needs of children. Scotland should be a place where men and women have opportunity and real choice—the chance to use their talents and realise their potential to the full. I believe that the Government are breaking down the old barriers that for too long have held families back. They are eliminating the stigmatisation of lone parents caused by the language and vocabulary of the previous Government. Indeed, many individuals have suffered deep despair, poverty and lack of opportunity because of the inaction and lack of compassion of successive Tory Governments.

Government policies are benefiting families in Scotland in three ways. First, they are making work pay. Secondly, they offer a renewed, replenished and reformed system of benefits. Thirdly, through increased child care provisions, they offer better opportunities for parents to balance the responsibilities of work and parenthood.

In a memorandum to the Scottish Affairs Committee, the Low Pay Unit argued that the goal of making work pay is as yet unmet by the advanced industrial economies. A key part of the Government's strategy in tackling family poverty must therefore be to make work pay. Nothing crystallises the difference between this Government and the last Tory Government more than the fact that one of the few proclaimed triumphs of the Major Government was the winning of an opt-out from the European social charter. Nothing highlighted more clearly their vindictiveness towards working people than

the damage and waste of that Government's final years. Is it not a disgrace that it was considered a triumph that, after 18 years of Tory rule, we had the lowest paid workers working the longest hours in Europe? The Tories denied working people basic employment standards and rights. I would therefore welcome Government measures that would overcome the poverty trap, and ensure that people are rewarded fairly for their endeavours. The Scottish Low Pay Unit welcomes the minimum wage, tax credits and the future tax reforms—potentially radical and progressive steps that demonstrate the Government's intention to put employment and economic policy at the heart of a national anti-poverty strategy.

The minimum wage is one of the Gov ment's greatest achievements. It underpins the .n of working tax credits and is tackling the scandal of low pay. It is building fairness and transparency into the work force. Until now Britain has never benefited from a national minimum wage. If we examine history, we can imagine what a future Conservative Government's attitude would be. In the 1970s, wages councils existed to set minimum wages for certain industries, yet the Conservatives abolished them in 1993. The Tories predicted that the national minimum wage would be a disaster. In 1997, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said:

"I think the minimum wage is a truly immoral policy."

It appears that he has now changed his mind. Its success and the increase of the national minimum wage to £4.10 this October tell a different story. The Scottish Local Government Forum against Poverty argues that it is a step along the way towards the goal of good wages for people in work, so that they can be taken out of poverty. The Low Pay Commission report states:

"Employment effects have been broadly neutral and employment among vulnerable groups has grown."

In all, 120,000 people across Scotland, or 6.1 per cent. of the work force, are benefiting from the national minimum wage. It should be noted that the national minimum wage has had the single most beneficial effect on women's incomes since the Equal Pay Act 1970. I also welcome the working families tax credit as a second part of the strategy. The Scottish Council foundation describes the credit as possessing the potential to make a significant impact on tackling in-work poverty. It allows families to keep more of what they earn. It is a crucial element of the strategy to tackle child poverty within a generation.

The old system of family credit had many faults, not the least of which was that, across the UK as a whole, more than half of family credit recipients also had to pay tax. Working families tax credit provides a fillip for moving low earners out of the poverty trap, and its payment through the wage packet makes clear the link between work and greater financial reward. Around twice as many single parent families are benefiting as did under the old family tax credit. Approximately 2,089 working families in my constituency are benefiting from the credit. From this April, they are guaranteed an income of £214 a week for full-time work. From June, the £5 increase will mean that they will effectively receive a minimum hourly rate of £6.40.

Reforms to the national insurance scheme have also helped families. For too long, national insurance acted as a barrier to people on welfare who wanted to get into work. The Government have eased the burden by abolishing the entry fee and raising the thresholds.

Targeted cuts in direct taxation for hard-working families are also welcome. It is vital that we build a tax system that is fair for low-paid families; one that allows them to keep more of what they earn. Around 7,740 people who work in my constituency of Hamilton, South are benefiting from the 1p cut in the basic rate of income tax, which has brought the tax to its lowest for more than 70 years.

The introduction of the 10p rate is a further valuable measure towards making work pay. I welcome the £300 above-inflation extension in this month's Budget. That means that the first £1,880 is now taxed at 10p rather than at 22p in the pound. In total, by this April families will have seen a significant fall in the direct tax burden. The burden on a single-earner family on average earnings with two children will be at its lowest since 1972—down from 21.5 per cent. in 1996-97 to 18.6 per cent. this year. By October this year, Scottish households will be, on average, £580 a year better off as a result of all the measures that come into effect this year. Scottish households with children will be £970 a year better off as a result of measures introduced by Parliament as a whole. A single-earner family with two children on average earnings of £25,400 will be £520 a year better off in real terms. The same family, on half average earnings, will be £3,000 a year better off in real terms. Families with someone in full-time work will have a guaranteed minimum income of £225 a week or £11,700 a year.

I turn to child support. Child poverty is a disgrace. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said, it is a scar on the nation's soul. Every child should have the best possible start in life, and no child should be condemned to poverty. For 20 years, the living standards of families with children fell behind those of families without children, and the rest of the population. Around four years ago, the average income of households with children was about 30 per cent. lower than those without children. Such a situation was totally unacceptable.

I therefore welcome the Government's reforms to child support. A more generous, integrated network of child financial support is being created. Child support for a family on average earnings with two children fell by 5 per cent. in real terms between 1979 and 1997. It will rise by about 50 per cent. during this Parliament. Labour introduced child benefit in 1977. It failed to rise in real terms during the 1980s and for most of the 1990s, and cruelly it was frozen by the Tories from 1987 to 1990.

The Government have shown that they are committed to the principle of universal child benefit by raising it to its highest ever level in real terms. Child benefit for the eldest child has risen to £15.50 from this April. In 1997, it was only £11.40. Child benefit helps around 8,900 families in my constituency of Hamilton, South. Child benefit for each subsequent child has risen to £10.35. That amounts to an increase in real terms of 26 per cent.

The increase in support for all children of all families has been striking. Combined with the increases in the working families tax credit, financial support for the first

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child of a family will range from £15.50 to £50 a week. In 1997 the range was between £11.05 and £27.70. Nothing else more clearly highlights the Government's commitment to the eradication of poverty.

The married couples' allowance was a badly targeted measure. It was the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea who began phasing it out, describing it as having "the least on-going justification". Under the Tories, the allowance was cut from 40 per cent. to 15 per cent. Martin Barnes, the director of Child Poverty Action Group, last month supported its abolition. He argued that it was

"outdated, discredited and failed to put children first. The best way to recognise marriage through the tax system is to support children."

The Government have been right in reforming the allowance through the introduction of the children's tax credit. The specific aim of that credit is to support children. Again, that is vital in meeting the targets for the eradication of child poverty. The credit will be worth £520 a year for low and middle-income families. Significantly, it is worth more than twice the value—£197 when it was abolished—of the married couples' allowance. Up to 400,000 Scottish families will benefit. The only potential difficulty involves take-up. That is why I welcome the Government's £4.7 million national advertising campaign in anticipation of that.

The baby credit of £20 a week—£1,040 a year—for families in the first year after the birth of a child, is particularly to be welcomed. Families often need additional support at such a time. Martin Barnes argues that the new credit is

"a boost to parents and carers for children."

On child care, I welcome the fact that the Government have recognised that the best start in life for children cannot be achieved by financial measures alone. Practical, day-to-day support for parents and children is required. It is vital that the Government's child poverty strategy provides parents with the opportunity for parents to work. I welcome the alliance of parents, communities, professionals and voluntary organisations that is being built to achieve that aim.

Last December, J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, spoke to the National Council for One-Parent Families of her struggle in trying to raise a child in poverty. As a single parent, she has spoken of the enormous barriers that she had to overcome in attempting to find part-time work. The same is true of all mothers who wish to work.

One of the biggest obstacles in that area, of course, is child care. Last year, the Scottish Affairs Committee spoke to representatives of the Govan initiative. They stated that problems with child care caused some people not to bother applying for work. In the 18 years when the Tories were in power, fewer than 74,000 child care places were created. I therefore welcome the Government's measures to help people to combine work and parenting, especially the national child care strategy, which aims to ensure that there is good-quality, affordable child care for children throughout Scotland. To target the greatest need, family centres with £42 million extra resources have been developed to support families with children aged three and under.

I welcome the local information services, the national website and the information line that has been set up to give parents accurate information and to help them make informed choices.

The new deal for lone parents has played a valuable part in giving lone parents the opportunity to work. The scheme offers individual help and support; lone parents are helped to overcome the barriers that prevent them from taking a job. Joining is simple; participants can telephone an adviser or visit a job centre. In total, a national network of about 800 personal advisers offers comprehensive help and advice on job search, training, child care, benefits and financial support.

I welcome, too, the enhancement of choices announced in the Budget. The reality is that all parents hold down two jobs—the one that pays the wage and the most important one, raising a healthy, contented, happy and well-adjusted child. This month's Budget has built on these measures; the flat rate of maternity pay rose by almost £15 to £75 in April 2002 and will be £100 the following year. The pay period for maternity pay has been extended from 18 weeks to 26 weeks from 2003; the right to two weeks' paid paternity leave for working fathers from 2003 is paid at the same rate as the statutory maternity rate. The £200 increase and the sure start maternity grant will be paid from April next year.

The changes provide support for all families who need it most when they need it most. They provide an increased choice for women to stay at home and look after children in the crucial first months of life. That is possible only because of the sound economic foundations that the Government have laid. The Chancellor's tough choice in introducing a new economic framework will ensure economic stability for Scottish families in the long term. Those achievements are of great benefit to Scottish families; we have the lowest inflation rate for 30 years and the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years; mortgages average £1,200 a year less than they did under the previous Government. More people are in work than ever before; there is the lowest unemployment since 1975. National debt is down so that much more money can go into public services and to deserving, hard-working families. Living standards are up by 10p in real terms.

The Government are delivering for the people of Scotland; changes in taxation, together with the introduction of targeted credits are rewarding work. New measures to balance the responsibilities of working parenthood are offering new opportunities for employment, boosting the income of families and bringing us closer to the goal of full employment. A new, integrated and seamless system of child support has been built in pursuit of the eradication of child poverty.

The Tories' record is of 18 years of neglect, the two worst recessions since the war, record unemployment, interest rates at 15 per cent., record repossessions, one in five families with no one in work, one in three children growing up in poverty and few rights for hard-working families. If we gave the Tories a chance, that would happen again.

I ask the Minister to recognise three points, and, first, the role of parenting. The nurturing of a child by its own parents is of enormous value and, as the Scottish Poverty Information Unit pointed out to the Scottish Affairs Committee, child care is work. With that in

mind, I hope that the Government will examine further steps to ensure that where both parents work, sufficient time is made available for them to spend with their offspring in the vital stages of their development.

Secondly, there should be more recognition of the great diversity of families in Scotland today; the European Commission's 1996 "Guide to Good Practice, Work and Childcare: Implementing the Council Recommendation on Childcare" made the case for arrangements taking account of special circumstances. For example, children with disabilities may need parents to take more time off, perhaps for hospital appointments. As the Scottish Parenting Forum argues, in rural areas of Scotland, men in particular are self-employed in the fishing and farming industries. The Government might like to examine further ways of providing enhanced provision for such groups.

Adoption is another important issue. I welcome recognition of the need for adoptive parents to spend time at home. The adoption system is vital to the future of many children and it is important that every possible provision is made. The Government might consider placing greater emphasis on the importance of attachment for adoptive parents. Adopted children are often the most disorientated and in the greatest need of support. The Government should consider giving adoptive parents equal rights to parental leave.

The Government have the vision and the policies to deliver real, tangible improvements to the lives of Scottish families. This Parliament has made a substantial start and, given another term, we would achieve further progress. It is important to recognise the value of the family to society.

11.20 am

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) on introducing this excellent debate. It is important and timely to examine the impact of UK national policies on Scotland. Some people north of the border—particularly the Scottish National party—are the real enemy of the Scottish people when they pretend that everything that matters now takes place at the Scottish Parliament and that nothing important to Scotland ever happens here in Westminster. They pretend that, until there is an independent Parliament in Scotland, this Parliament can make no difference to the lives of the Scottish people. The reality is that our Parliament has made a significant difference, particularly to families in Scotland.

My hon. Friend referred to statistics, and I have been reading a briefing by the Economic and Social Research Council on the impact of Government policy. The statistical basis runs from 1991 to 1997, which helps us to understand where we came in. Increased deprivation in the family unit was clear during that period. The research showed that single-parent females, as opposed to females in general, were less likely to be in work. In 1997, 3.6 million children were living in poverty. Job-poor people were shown to be income-poor people. The final interesting statistic was that poverty was not continuous, but a fulcrum. People went from absolute poverty into low-income status and teetered on the edge. If they were lucky, they stayed at low-income level, but most of the time they fell back into absolute poverty, usually because of a break-up of the family unit or one or both parents losing their jobs.

I have not been able to obtain statistics, but public housing was significantly correlated with poverty. People living in public housing saw poverty as the consequence of being unable to struggle into private housing, particularly after a marriage break-up or the main breadwinner's unemployment. In those circumstances, people had to seek public housing. I hope that that problem will be addressed in the future. As a socialist, I regard it as a great indictment that people view public housing as something that they fall into rather than a life style choice.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South said, the Government have addressed these problems, and he referred specifically to child benefit. I shall not provide statistics about my constituency. We could all provide a litany of figures if we wanted to. I have been hammering away through the press, and I hope that my constituents know the facts. General policies are important, and the most significant is the working families tax credit. If job-poor means income-poor and that means deprivation, it is the transition from unemployment to work that matters—and it is now worth while to leave the poverty trap on benefits. The Government have made a significant difference through the working families tax credit, which has been a great success in my constituency.

I am in constant touch with the employment office, which tells me about the numbers of people who, when they work out the figures, realise that taking employment will make them significantly better off. The minimum wage has been a significant factor. They are no longer being offered £1.50 per hour as cleaners, but a minimum of £3.80 per hour and £4.10 per hour after the latest rise. The Scottish nationalists said that we were continuing with Conservative policies and we could not possibly introduce the minimum wage—but we brought it in. They then complained that it was too low and that it should be £4, not £3.80, and we made that increase too. The last item on my tick list for the minimum wage is the introduction of the adult wage from the age of 18. If people wish to be treated as adult workers, they should be paid an adult wage. I am sure that many hon. Members here today went into work before the age of 18 and expected to earn a man's wage by the time they reached 18. I hope that we will bring that in.

We are talking about getting people into work. Job-poor means income-poor and the Government have tackled that with the new deal. The figure in 1997 was burned into my mind: 513 young people under the age of 26 in my constituency had been unemployed for six months or more. In October 2000, the figure was 47. When 500 young people who are hanging around street corners go into work, it changes the atmosphere of a town. When I go around Grangemouth and Bo'ness people tell me about the difference that has made. Under the Tories, parents would tell me that they could not get their sons out of bed because they had no purpose. There were no jobs and they had given up. Those parents now tell me that their sons have an apprenticeship with BP, are working for Zeneca or Syngenta or have a job in some other part of the economy.

There is a change in the way that mothers and young people react. There is no more walking out of the house in anger because of feelings of frustration. Young people have returned to live in the family home because they

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have a job and can make a contribution. They have a bit of pride. The Government have found that generation who were lost by the Tories. They should be recognised as having done a great deal for them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South mentioned child benefit. The significant change in child benefit is important to many families in my constituency. It affects thousands of people. People receiving child benefit for a first child who also receive the working families tax credit can now have an income of over £50 per week more than when the Government came to office. That is very significant. I also commend the Government for introducing the baby tax credit. In those first years when incomes and family arrangements are usually dislocated, that extra money will not be just £10 a week, through the family tax credit, but £20 a week. However, not even spending £4 million on advertising will do enough to make everyone take up that benefit. People will still ask why they are not getting their £10 when they have forgotten to apply. Employers should ensure that all their employees put in their forms so that they receive the £10 from 1 April.

The final group that I want to mention is pensioners. In a sense I will do some recanting here, which I fully admit the Government deserve. I gave them stick over the rise last year. I and many others, including the Pensioners' Forum, demanded a link between the increase in earnings and the increase in the pension. With the £200, which is worth £4 a week, and the forthcoming increase of £5 and £8 for pensioners, the Government will have increased the level of the pensioner income by more than the increase in earnings between 1997 and 2001. I called the £200 a gimmick and I demanded on the Floor of the House that pensioners be given a real-terms increase. The Government have now responded to our demands. The fact that pensioners can receive the £200 as part of the new settlement has been welcomed by the pensioners that I meet in the Pensioners' Forum and others. They realise that the Government have delivered an increase in pensions higher than the increase in average earnings from 1997 to 2001.

The last element in the family is the grandparent, who may be a pensioner. When a young parent seeks assistance when the family group is composed of one earner and two children, or a young person seeks first employment, the older members of the family give so much. Our elderly parents helped to give us all a good start. They helped us to achieve a level of earnings and standard of living that was much better than they could had. At last, the Government are delivering for them and have listened to family groups.

Although we will debate the general economy next week, I want to point out that the stability created by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and the Government is the most important factor in giving the economy a chance to cope. The Tories predicted a crisis if the minimum wage was introduced, and that would have happened had we run the economy in the way that they did. Getting 1 million people back into work, as we have done, would have been a problem had we run the economy as the Conservatives did. The Government have listened to representatives of family groups and given us a stable base on which to deliver policies that have made a significant difference to the lives of families in my constituency and others throughout Scotland.

11.31 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I congratulate my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) on securing the debate.

The substantial turnout of my Labour colleagues and the representation of both the Liberal Democrats and Conservative parties demonstrate the importance of this issue to the people of Scotland and its representatives. It is a pity that we do not have time for them all to make a contribution to this debate. Hon. Members will have noticed the absence of the Scottish National party. That shows clearly that they have other priorities. I suspect that if we were discussing the timing of a ministerial announcement they would be here in numbers, making substantial points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South has comprehensively dealt with many of the direct policies that have been put in place as a result of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's five successful Budgets to support families. Today, I want to concentrate on what might be termed indirect help for families and how that has impacted on my constituents.

One of the key elements in ensuring that families can enjoy a secure and happy life style is that their family income is stable and assured, and at a level that allows them to make informed and confident decisions about the future. In an area such as Kilmarnock and Loudoun with its persistently high unemployment and the very painful transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, too many families were denied that ability for far too long because they could not find work or, indeed, work that paid more than benefits.

When we came to power in 1997, some 1,135 of my constituents were among those termed as long-term unemployed, and more than 3,000 had no jobs. That is why it was so important that the issue was addressed urgently. It was also important because under the previous Government it had been a matter of policy. In my constituency the response has been successful beyond everyone's wildest dreams. First, we introduced the new deal. I know that our opponents have consistently criticised the new deal, and the official Opposition have made it absolutely clear that they would remove it completely, but since its launch the new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds has helped 1,393 of my constituents, and 639 have been found jobs. I would like the official Opposition and the Scottish nationalists to tell those young people who have been able to find independence through the help given by the new deal that it has all been a waste of time, as they have consistently said. I suspect that the response from those young people would be termed in what we may call unparliamentary language.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): We are all anxious for young unemployed people to find jobs. If the hon. Gentleman analyses the numbers in his constituency and throughout Scotland, he will discover that the reason why young people are now finding jobs and were not before is not the introduction of the new

deal and all its glossy brochures and media spin, but the strength of the economy, which is based on the Conservative policies of the past 10 years.

Mr. Browne: I thank the hon. Lady for that observation as it gives me an opportunity to give the lie to that argument, as I have done previously. I shall find the statistics, and she can join me in examining them. The statistics for my constituency should be examined not only over the Government's term in office, to consider the effect of their choices in benefiting people, but over the longer term, by which I mean since 1979.

As the hon. Lady will know, there have been several periods of growth during that time, although, unfortunately, because of how her party managed the economy, they were followed by periods of deep recession. The significant factor in respect of long-term and youth unemployment in my constituency is that no one ever benefited from any of the previous periods of growth. In previous periods of growth, either unemployment remained the same or youth unemployment, in particular, increased. It is only because of the intervention of the new deal, in the context of continued growth, that we have been able to tackle that problem. Previously, economic growth managed by the Tories bypassed my constituency and many other constituencies in the west of Scotland—some of my hon. Friends are nodding in agreement. That was because the Government did not care about them. This Government care about the entire country, and deliver for areas such as mine.

It was recognised that the new deal was not enough. Pockets of persistently high unemployment exist in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Minister, and they had to be tackled through special means. That was why we lobbied and were happy that East Ayrshire was one of the pilots for the enormously successful action teams for jobs. In the short time of its existence, Jim Burns and his team at the Employment Service have built an excellent partnership with the local authority, local training providers and local businesses. They have already helped 397 local people in my constituency, and they have found work for 140.

The importance of such a targeted initiative is that it was backed up by real money, given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for people in such areas to be helped out of long-term unemployment and into work. The figures might not seem significant, but in both constituencies in the pilot areas, such targeted help has helped 20 per cent. of those who were long-term unemployed and registered for jobseeker's allowance—in six months, they are out of unemployment and into work. That is a sign of how successful such initiatives can be. That is why I was pleased that the Budget included a commitment to extend the action teams over the spending review period and to create more action teams. Whenever I speak to my hon. Friends about the matter, they ask how they can get action teams for their constituencies. I am sure that they will be able to get them soon, because the pilot has been so successful that the scheme is about to be rolled out over the country. I look forward to the benefits of the action team in East Ayrshire being extended to even more of my constituents and those of other hon. Members.

The importance of partnership has also been recognised in the proposal to create local strategic partnerships to create local employment plans. Such an approach has been widely welcomed by Kilmarnock and Loudoun. The East Ayrshire Employment Initiative, of which I am an unpaid director, brought together not only the local authority and representatives of the Westminster and Holyrood Parliaments, but representatives of local business and the wider community to provide advice, guidance and support to people who are looking for work. Only last week, I directed a constituent in his late 50s who had been unemployed for more than six years to George Fraser and his team. They will be able to identify for him the barriers to employment, give him the skills to overcome those barriers and, I hope, find him a job in the not-too-distant future.

It is vital that that service remains available to my constituents. The funding and new initiatives provided by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment have done much to ensure that families can look forward to the future with confidence.

Educating our children is as important as supporting them financially, as we have heard from my hon. Friends. Although the delivery of education is a devolved issue, education has benefited directly from the Chancellor's successful management of the economy. The targeted assistance announced in last year's Budget was passed directly to schools by the former Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs in the Scottish Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith). I am sure that hon. Members will forgive me if I digress to express my regret, and that of many other hon. Members, at his decision to retire. We all understand why he plans to retire. He has shown great courage and has made a significant contribution to Scottish public life, which was motivated by a desire to bring people out of poverty. We should congratulate him on that, and we wish him well in the future.

I asked a number of local head teachers what it means to them to receive the direct funds. Stewarton Academy, which is justly renowned for its successful music provision, has embraced new technology. That has included wide area networks with feeder primaries and even contact with National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the United States. The head teacher, Derek Mathieson, told me that some of the funding was used to set up links for a local area network within the school, which will do much to enhance his pupils' education. He was able to make local decisions on spending and to enhance his school's development plan because the local authority and its director, Mr. Mulgrew, embraced the philosophy of the Chancellor to devolve as many decisions as possible to schools. That allows teachers at the chalk face to address the particular educational needs of their pupils.

Similarly, Mrs. Starrs, a teacher at St. Sophia's primary school in Galston, was able to use the funding to improve her school's environment by converting a redundant cloakroom into a workspace that will enhance her pupils' education. Mrs. Maclean, the head teacher at Gargieston primary school, was able to use the funding to secure additional staff.

Such uses of funding are examples of decisions that are taken locally in response to local needs and to the needs of local families. Head teachers and staff work out local development plans and consult the families that

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they serve. None of that could have occurred without Government guidance from the Chancellor. He has repeated the spending exercise this year, and I hope that the new Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs in the Scottish Executive, Jack McConnell, will repeat the practice of his distinguished predecessor. I know that such an approach will be warmly welcomed in Ayrshire and by head teachers in my constituency.

I turn to assistance for the disabled. Families with disabled members face additional costs over and above those faced by other families. That is why I welcome the disability income guarantee, which comes into force from 1 April, substantial increases in the disabled child premium, and changes to the disability living allowance higher rate mobility component and incapacity benefit, which deliberately target help for the younger disabled. I also welcome proposals on assistance for carers.

I address a specific issue that puts a great strain on the finances of families with disabled members. On Monday, I had the honour of presenting a petition to Parliament bearing more than 2,000 names on behalf of the Kilmarnock forum for the disabled. The forum has been campaigning for more than a year for the winter fuel allowance that is paid to pensioners to be paid to disabled people on medium or high rates of disability living allowance. The campaign co-ordinator of the group, Mrs. Margaret Lees, told me that such disabled people are particularly susceptible to secondary infections brought on by the cold because of their mobility problems, and that some of their conditions are adversely affected by the cold. They have great difficulty getting out of the house during the winter and can run up very large bills in attempting to manage their disability. They require urgent help, and I ask the Minister to give a message to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security that giving the allowance to such people would be widely welcomed in Kilmarnock and Loudoun by able-bodied people and disabled people alike. Such a change would enhance the Government's reputation for caring for disabled people.

The Government have done much for families in Scotland, both directly and indirectly. However, there is much yet to do, and only the return of this Government will ensure that families in Kilmarnock and Loudoun can continue to benefit from the increasing prosperity of our country.

11.44 am

Mr. John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said about the Government, we have done much, but there is much still to do. That is a fair point. In Anniesland, we have more problems than most when it comes to poverty. The number of jobs has increased by almost 14 per cent. during the Government's time in office, but we remain one of the four worst areas in Scotland for unemployment problems. I ask the Minister to examine the situation, because there are not many employers in the constituency. We need work, particularly in regenerating the Drumchapel area and shopping centre. Young people hang out there, but it has no facilities.

Undoubtedly, there is a link between poverty and crime. Again, my constituency suffers more than most, but what better way is there to reduce resentment than to help those who are worse off to achieve a higher standard of living? We must do that, and I am glad that the Government have identified that need. The Budget recognised that families, and especially children, are important. My hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South said that he particularly liked the increases in the working families tax credit, child benefit and children's tax credit, and that they would go a long way to help families. I thoroughly agree. The jobseeker's allowance, which will increase in October, will also help.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has proved again that he is the family's champion by increasing maternity leave from 18 to 24 weeks. He also announced that we would pay fathers for paternity leave from 2003, which will also go a long way. As a father of three children, my family did not have a lot, particularly when my youngest was born. Any help that could have been given would have been gratefully received. As a parent who has tried to shoulder my share of the responsibility over the years, I know that the increase will go a long way, not only in helping the family in general, but perhaps in showing male members of the family that they have a job to do and must share the commitments.—[*Interruption.*] I am glad that hon. Members agree.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Not all of them do.

Mr. Robertson: As my hon. Friend says, not all of them do.

The Chancellor also helped small businesses, some of which were complaining that they could not afford the paternity leave. I am glad that small business relief has allowed businesses under the £20,000 threshold to claim back the full amount while, in effect, larger employers reclaim 92 per cent. In 2002, the threshold will double to allow 11,000 businesses per year to qualify, which will mean that 60 per cent. of businesses will pay a lot less than before. That dispels the myth that Labour does not help small businesses; Labour helps businesses and families.

The real challenge is to eradicate child poverty, which will not be done easily or quickly. The Government have at least pledged to try; I wish that the Conservatives had tried so hard when they were in government, instead of appeasing the paymasters. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said, abolishing child poverty is a complex problem that needs a multi-dimensional approach. We need to provide a decent income, extra help for those who cannot work, excellent public services, a good education that ensures equal opportunities for all, and voluntary and community sectors working in partnership to deliver best practice. That will not happen overnight, but it epitomises what needs to be done. We must work together in the private and public sectors to help each other. If we could pull people out of poverty, society would be better, and, if society were better, more money would be available. If more money is available, businesses do better, and the whole country does better. I think that the Government are doing their best, and that they can make that happen.

Billions of pounds have been invested in schools, which emphasises our continued policy of putting children first. Added investment in health makes clear our commitment there. The jobless total for Britain has fallen to below 1 million and has greatly improved in Scotland—although Anniesland is, unfortunately, a black spot, and I have asked the Minister to examine that.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) for mentioning disability, although he pre-empted the next part of my speech. His points are valid and apply not only to Kilmarnock and Loudoun, but to the whole of Scotland—and even to the whole of Great Britain. I am pleased that under the new deal for disabled people families with severely disabled children will benefit, from next month, by an extra £11.05 for each disabled child. I wish that it were more, and that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor would do more, but it is a start. I am sure that he will make improvements in years to come.

My colleagues' remarks have shown that the Government are a Government for families. They can go into the next election with pride in their record, and with the expectation of a second term. The alternative does not bear thinking about.

11.51 am

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Following on from the speeches of my hon. Friends, I take up the theme that there is much still to do. I thought that the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) took the biscuit—as he does, on occasion—by covering every area in which the Government have made improvements to date. Although we have done enough to be proud, and to justify re-election with larger majorities, we must recognise the need to tell people where we intend to go next. We cannot stand still. I want to focus on areas where there is still work to be done.

Unemployment in my constituency has dropped by more than 30 per cent. since the last election, but that drop is smaller than in many constituencies where absolute unemployment was lower to start with. Everybody is rising up, but the constituencies that were at the bottom remain there. If anything, the gap is widening. Glasgow has such concentrated difficulties and deprivation that it contains six of the 10 Scottish constituencies with the highest unemployment. There must be a greater area focus on Glasgow, perhaps with tax breaks, or additional funding, direct from No. 11. Additional cash must be spent on Glasgow if it is to share in the increasing prosperity that the Labour Government have brought to Scotland as a whole.

A major difficulty in my constituency—and, I am sure, in similar constituencies—is the scale of poverty of ambition. In a considerable number of families in my constituency, a tradition of unemployment and low wages has persisted for three, four, five or six generations. Such families believe that they are never likely to rise above the lowest income level. They do not look for improvement because they think that to strive is to be rejected. They must be given the opportunity to break out of the cycle that some of my colleagues mentioned: poverty, unemployment, low-paid jobs and then back to poverty. I can see no reason why the children of the poor in my constituency should not have the same access to the best jobs as those from wealthier backgrounds. I recognise that the hardest target—the poorest—will cost the most to lift to the standard of the rest. That is a price worth paying. As a Labour Government, we should make it clear that in our next term, and the term after that, we intend to make a concerted effort to deal with the problems of the most deprived in our society.

Some of my hon. Friends mentioned education, which offers a way out of poverty. Some of the schools in my constituency and in the city of Glasgow reflect the legacy of capital underspending over generations. When I was chair of education in Strathclyde, we received enough capital allocation from the Government to replace primary schools every 400 years. When schools and educational establishments are allowed to fall into decay, whereas pubs, bookies, bingo halls and other kinds of centres in the community are built to the highest standards, that inevitably sends to our youngsters a message that education is not valued by society.

More cash for staffing must be given to schools in the poorest areas. It has always been absurd that the head teachers and promoted posts who got the most money tended to be those in the most prosperous areas, because their schools were generally larger and salaries were paid on a per capita basis. That created a financial incentive for people to move out of poor areas into better-off areas, effectively moving away from the hardest tasks to easier tasks. The Government must try to find ways of reversing that process.

Although I recognise that many of these problems are now the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, we at Westminster have the same responsibility to Scots in poverty as to all those in poverty across the United Kingdom. There are ways in which we can take helpful action from the centre.

I turn to the plight of families living in poor housing in my constituency. Again, I recognise that much of that is now the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, and I regret that it is one of the areas in which it has not moved forwards as quickly as I should have hoped. However, we do have responsibility for housing benefit. For many people in my constituency, the operation of the housing benefit system acts as an enormous disincentive to taking work. They are caught in the trap of council tax benefit, housing benefit, low wages and part-time work, and are often unable to calculate what the benefits of work will be—notwithstanding the advantages of the working families tax credit and similar measures, which I applaud. We need to do more to ensure that the operation of the housing system no longer serves as a disincentive to self-advancement.

The thrust of the Government's policy, as dictated by Treasury rules, is to privatise council housing. That ideological obsession about removing housing from local authorities is a diversion from the main task of providing first-class housing to all. I am sure that, like me, the tenants in my constituency have no objection to genuine competition between alternative providers. However, they find it unfair when the scales are rigged and the balance is weighed so overwhelmingly in favour of privatisation, because that takes the choice out of their hands. A choice between a change of ownership and a continuation of dilapidation is no choice at all.

[Mr. Ian Davidson]

Pensioners are an important part of families, and under the previous Government pensioner poverty was a blight on our society. I applaud the Government for introducing the minimum income guarantee. I also applaud the five churches in my constituency that last week distributed to their entire congregations a leaflet that was drawn up by myself and the Benefits Agency to publicise the minimum income guarantee and to urge pensioners to take it up. Another seven churches distributed the leaflet to all their parishioners during the previous week, and three more will do so this weekend. Such partnership between church and state, acting in the interests of the poorest in our society, is greatly to be applauded. However, the issue of free television licences enables us to draw attention to the enormous difference in life expectations. It is anticipated that 50 per cent. of people in my constituency will live to the age of 75, and that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) more than 66 per cent. will reach that age. In some constituencies in England and Wales, the estimate exceeds 75 per cent. I see no reason why constituents of mine should not aspire to the life expectations of those in the most prosperous areas.

I believe that the measures that I have outlined are affordable. Millions—indeed, billions—of pounds will be flung at the current agricultural crisis, just as billions were flung at BSE. The crisis of poverty among many of my constituents and those of my colleagues is equally deserving of money, and we should pledge to spend money on them in the next term of this Labour Government.

12.1 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Perhaps it is appropriate to have a change of party at this juncture, although I have no complaint about the fact that five Labour Members have spoken so far. Nor do I blame them for taking this opportunity to claim credit—in some cases, deservedly so—for a number of Government initiatives. However, the hon. Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) was right to say that we need to look ahead and ask where the money is going. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Robertson) said, although much has been done, there is still more to do. I do not agree that all the Government's initiatives have been effective or conducted in the best possible way, but I none the less welcome the fact that there have been a number of them.

Although the problems associated with poverty are extremely important and have to be dealt with, we should remember that this debate is concerned with the impact of Government policies on families in Scotland. We must consider the entire perspective, because in dealing with poverty we must level up, rather than down. Some who are regarded as part of the better-off strata of Scottish society nevertheless feel vulnerable in the light of current events. They fear that their standard of living and quality of life will decline rather than improve.

Given that I have an 18-month-old child, I should declare an interest in knowing whether the Government recognise a commitment to families. The principle behind such a commitment is right, and it should be given priority. It is clear that supporting people who bring up children is an important investment in the future quality of our society—not just in economic terms, but in terms of citizenship, social justice and the entire fabric of society. Of course, such support boils down to practical measures. It is a fact of life that in the flexible labour force for which this Government and the previous Government have argued, parents will be working, even in households where there is only one parent. We must ensure that the income available to those who work is sufficient to provide a good home for their children. Child care is also vital, and the right type and quality must be made available.

The Secretary of State has been a working mother, and she will not mind my saying that during last week's Question Time we had an informal discussion in the wings on the impact on children of such work. It has been suggested that working mothers might not be helping their children and should stay at home instead, but my view is that that is a fruitless and unfair debate. The truth is that many children who were brought up by working mothers proved well-adjusted and happy individuals. Working mothers need to know not just that the child care that they need is available, but that it is of the right quality. As was said, we do not want a left-luggage office for children, and more needs to be done to ensure that the right care is available. A nursery is not a place to park children; it is a place that provides children with a stimulating environment before they go to school.

I am proud of my association with the expansion of nursery education in my area. The north-east of Scotland was one of the first parts of Scotland to achieve almost total nursery provision for four-year-olds, and we are well on the way to achieving the same goal for three-year-olds. The Conservative party opposed campaigners for the expansion of nursery provision because its members regarded nursery education as an inappropriate leftist issue. Indeed, when the regional council was founded it came into power with a Conservative majority. Several nursery units, which the previous independent council had built, were not opened for 10 years because the Conservative group did not believe that that kind of provision was desirable. The policy changed only after the Conservative group was heavily defeated in local elections.

I am glad that Liberal Democrats co-operated with the Labour party to implement the strategy that created universal nursery education. [*Interruption.*] I can hear the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) muttering from a sedentary position, but I shall go further. That strategy demonstrated that for whom one votes makes a difference, even in local council elections. People realised that a fundamental shift in policy can bring about a beneficial change.

Families contain not only children, but older people and pensioners. The commitments that have been made to pensioners go some way to assuaging their anger about the 75p increase to state pensions and have made them feel that they are beginning to be treated differently. I shall be bullish and say that the Liberal Democrat party has made a positive contribution by campaigning and petitioning on the back of the 75p increase. I welcome the fact that the Government are under pressure from not only Liberal Democrats, but their own people and pensioners' organisations.

Never mind the argument about the earnings link. Pensioners have a right to expect that pensions and associated benefits will keep pace with general improvements in the economy. It is no longer acceptable to relate pension increases only to the cost of living, and no Government should accept doing so. As everyone else's earnings rise in line with the economy, pensioner poverty is accentuated. Although this is neither the time nor the place to develop that argument, it is one reason why the Liberal Democrat party will make a commitment to improve the income of pensioners, and especially older pensioners, the centrepiece of our general election campaign—whenever that may be. Whether or not we have an opportunity to deliver that policy, we shall pressurise any future Government to adopt it.

We have secured a commitment to provide personal care for the elderly in Scotland. I hope that that issue will be taken up by the United Kingdom Government for two reasons. First, if it is right for Scotland, it is right for the remainder of the UK. Secondly, if the UK Government made such a commitment, it would take the pressure to find the money off the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive, which would ease the pressure on other resources.

Much has been made of the new deal. It is important to put it on record that those of us who criticised the new deal did not criticise and do not criticise the practical assistance and support that it has given to individuals. We appreciate that that kind of resource often delivers benefits to individuals. However, we are concerned by the high cost of the programme. A few people may have benefited substantially, but many did not benefit or the benefit was not connected to the new deal. Additionally, two questions arise. First, as a windfall tax for the duration of this Parliament has been the prime basis of funding for the new deal, how will the programme be funded in the next Parliament? Secondly, the Government have benefited from a growing economy, for which they claim the credit, but would that mechanism stand the test of being the best way of funding the programme if the economy went into a downturn?

I agree with the hon. Member for Pollok that to give people access to education, training and ambition and to raise standards we should encourage the private sector to play a more active part in poorer communities. More money must be spent, but it does not have to be state money; it could be private money from firms that employ people or open facilities that people can use, work in and gain benefit from.

Mr. Connarty: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that about 80 per cent. of those who have entered work through the new deal are now in unsubsidised employment? It is a mechanism for access, not to sustain them with public subsidy.

Mr. Bruce: I accept that entirely, but the hon. Gentleman will agree that the Government did not create the jobs. They provided the training and the economy created the jobs. There has been a happy match, but that may not continue in all economic circumstances.

The Government may have a commitment, but they are in danger of making life too complicated with too many different initiatives. If they really want to address the issues facing families, simplifying the tax system and easing the burden on the lower paid would be a far better way of doing so than too many, too complicated initiatives that not everyone understands.

12.11 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) on raising this important issue for discussion today. He and other Labour Members have made many valid points, and I agree that it is deplorable that, in such a debate, there is no representation from the Scottish National party. However, we are having a perfectly good debate without Scottish National party Members. I think that that shows that we do not need them as much as they need us, the Westminster Parliament.

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): I thought that the hon. Lady was referring to the Tories.

Mrs. Laing: They need the Tories as well.

Having criticised the Scottish National party for its total lack of presence this morning, I am aware that I stand here alone—but that is not unusual, and I am not daunted by the massed ranks of the Labour and Liberal Democrat alliance in Scotland. I am used to facing them alone, ever mindful of the fact that safety is not always in numbers and that Robert the Bruce was massively outnumbered by enemy forces when he won the battle of Bannockburn. All hon. Members in this Chamber will agree with me on that.

We all want to create the best environment in which young people can make a good start in life. In most cases, but not all, such an environment requires a stable and well-supported family. Conservative policies always take account of the fact that many people, for a huge variety of reasons, do not start their lives in a stable family environment. However, that does not mean that we should ignore the family's undoubted role as the basic building block of society.

Many hon. Members have quoted statistics today, and the hon. Member for Hamilton, South rightly detailed the effects of the Chancellor's recent and previous Budgets. However, what is spun from the Dispatch Box and in the media is not always what happens in practice, and we have had a chance to examine what the Chancellor of the Exchequer has done in the past few weeks. We found that his claim that he is attempting to support families and relieve poverty is a matter of interpretation of the figures. The figures used by the hon. Member for Hamilton, South have been achieved by excluding indirect taxes and non-standard tax relief, and they work only if one agrees that a typical family has no mortgage, no pension savings, no car and does not pay anything to a local council. I do not think that that is a typical family.

I have examined the figures on an average family in Scotland and discovered that recent Government policy has increased tax for such families by approximately £670 per year, which is significant. The following figures are from the House of Commons Library and Chantrey Vellacott—I have not made them up.

The changes in income tax rates give a gain of £431 to that average family. However, abolition of the married couples allowance loses them about £300; abolition of

[Mrs. Laing]

mortgage interest relief at source loses them £326; and abolition of dividend credits on the pension tax—I agree with the many hon. Members who have said that pensioners are an integral part of family life—loses them £400. The changes to national insurance contributions gain them £233, and the cut in VAT on fuel gains them £22. However, the increase above inflation of petrol tax and the freeze on vehicle excise duty lose them £185. Tobacco tax increases above inflation lose them £193. Although I might agree with that tax, that statistic should still be taken into consideration. Council tax increases above inflation lose them well in excess of £100. Although child benefit gains them about £170, if one adds up all the figures, the total loss is £670. That cannot be simply ignored.

Let us consider other ways in which the Government have implemented their policies. I ask the Minister—although this is really a matter for the Chancellor—why there was one year's delay between abolition of the married couples allowance and introduction of the children's tax credit. The Chancellor announced that he would replace the married couples allowance with the children's tax credit and said that, in his view, that was a reasonable change to fiscal policy. Why, however, was there a year's delay? Was it to allow the Chancellor to rake in more money to the Treasury's coffers, so that, a couple of weeks ago, he could give away what was taxpayers' money in the first place? He can say that he is giving money to families, children, pensioners, unemployed people and those who are in serious poverty only because he has been taking so much more in tax. It is not his money; it is money that he has taken from hard-working families in Scotland over the past four years. There is therefore a certain disingenuousness about the way in which his policies are presented and spun.

I want to leave enough time for the Minister to answer the few questions that have been asked. Hon. Members have, however, made some points that are worthy of comment. It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Robertson) accuse the previous Conservative Government of appeasing the paymasters. It is nice to hear good old-fashioned socialist rhetoric again; at least it gives Conservative Members something to get our teeth into. In fact, the Government whom I supported did not appease the paymasters; they encouraged the growth of the economy, which creates jobs.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Laing: With apologies to the Minister, I shall briefly give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman must be brief.

Mr. Marshall: It hurts me to be less than nice to the hon. Lady, but the Minister who is about to reply to the debate and I sat in the House through 18 years of Tory Governments and saw the misery that they inflicted on hundreds of thousands if not millions of families. There is nothing that the hon. Lady can say to defend the actions of 18 years of Tory government.

Mrs. Laing: Of course I will try. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but, as I have already said to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), jobs are created by a strong economy and not through spin and rhetoric. I was also interested to hear the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) speak. He was absolutely right about the effect of working mothers on their children. At least, I trust that he was right. However, as he says that the Secretary of State agrees with him, he must be right. Families are helped not by rhetoric and spin, but by real policies and proper management of the economy, which is what Conservative Governments have given this country.

12.21 pm

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): I join other hon. Members in justly congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) not only on securing the debate, but on a speech that was so good and comprehensive that I feel almost redundant. We have had a good debate, and most contributions have been excellent. I can tell those who have not participated that there is a debate on poverty tomorrow afternoon and one on the economy next week in Westminster Hall. There will also be a Scottish Grand Committee. All that shows the importance of this Parliament to the people of Scotland. The fact that the Scottish National party is not present, even on an away-day basis, is a disgrace and an insult not only to the House, but to the people of Scotland.

There are two strands to our support for families: financial security and help to balance work and family. Everyone knows that worries about money and making ends meet can create insecurity and tensions in families, so financial security is vital. When we took office in 1997, the economy was in total disrepair. Unemployment was at record levels, and youth unemployment was a disgrace. Inflation averaged more than 6 per cent. between 1979 and 1997. Interest rates peaked at 15 per cent. and remained in double figures for four years. Mortgage rates averaged 11 per cent. between 1979 and 1997.

Hon. Members should consider the difference since 1 May 1997. Economic growth has averaged 2.7 per cent. Employment has increased by more than 1 million in the United Kingdom generally and by over 100,000 in Scotland. That makes a difference to families. Youth unemployment has decreased by 78 per cent., which means that 31,500 more people are in work, thanks to the new deal. Long-term interest rates are at their lowest for 35 years. The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) mentioned mortgage rates; they are down to 6.75 per cent. or lower. The average mortgage paid is £1,200 less since 1997. All that has a profound impact on families. Jobs, low inflation and low mortgage repayments make families more secure and more likely to stay together. We shall have a full debate on poverty tomorrow.

On top of those measures, we have introduced the national minimum wage—which has helped many people, particularly women—and the working

families tax credit. Of course, there is more to do, but my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) knows that there is only one Government, of one party, who will do more in that direction. I hope that he remembers that and votes Labour. He and all my other colleagues will be pleased that the Government have made a pledge on full employment. We did not achieve it under previous Labour Governments, but this Government are totally committed to it.

The Green Paper recently launched by the Prime Minister, "Full Employment in a Modern Society", discusses the next steps towards full employment: dealing with drug addicts; advisory and outreach services for lone parents; further help for lone parents to move into self-employment; and greater training flexibility. Those are substantial steps forward in dealing with disadvantaged or hard to place people who are out of work.

Work-life balance is crucial, and we are helping people to cope with the competing demands of work and family life. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is here today to underline the importance of the debate. She copes with the demands of home and work, as do most parents.

The nature of work is changing. The new economy, based on skills and knowledge, brings new challenges. My hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South and the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) raised the issue of child care, which is vital to help women, in particular, to continue work. That is a devolved matter. However, in 1979-80, under the previous Government, fewer than 32,000 children were in local authority nurseries. By June 2000, more than 98,000 children were in publicly funded child care. That is a step-change that makes a difference for working families and that the Labour party can be proud of. The working families tax credit, another significant move towards helping working families, is worth an extra £20 million a year in Scotland.

In order to recognise the importance of work-life balance, the Government introduced the work-life balance challenge fund. I am delighted to announce that another Scottish company will benefit from that fund, which encourages businesses to help their staff achieve a sensible balance between work and home life. Cigna Healthcare, based in Greenock, has secured a share of the £10.5 million challenge fund, which will allow it to access expert help and advice about the development and introduction of diverse and flexible working patterns. Cigna joins previous Scottish winners of the challenge fund that are at the forefront in modernising working life in Scotland, such as Standard Life, Scottish Coal, Perth and Kinross council and Renfrewshire and Inverclyde Primary Care NHS trust. We have made a further £5 million available. I urge my colleagues to spread the word and to urge other Scottish organisations to bid for a share and explore ways of introducing flexible working patterns for the benefit of all.

On behalf of Her Majesty's Government, I wish to take this opportunity, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith), who has announced that he will leave Westminster at the next election. He is planning to leave Holyrood as well. On a day that we discuss social justice in Scotland, it is fitting that we recognise his commitment to social justice, which is well documented. He left a distinguished career in medicine and entered politics in 1987 because he wanted to ensure that others have the same opportunities that he enjoyed. He has made a lasting contribution through ministerial office in Westminster and in Holyrood. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in wishing him a long, happy and fulfilling retirement.

I wish to discuss the partnership between the Government and the Scottish Executive; if I had time, I could go into great detail about it. That partnership is essential to our work on social justice. As a result of our economic strength, more money has been provided to the Scottish Executive for health, education and social justice. However, I cannot go into greater detail because of contributions other hon. Members wish to make. Thankfully, there will be many other debates this week and next week in which I will have that opportunity.

In conclusion, the Government have made clear their total commitment to the family. We have restructured the tax and benefit system to provide more generous help to families. The new children's tax credit provides extra income for 400,000 families in Scotland, and the working families tax credit ensures that 108,000 families in Scotland are better off. There is support for new mothers and fathers. There is also help to make work pay for 120,000 Scots, and for families, through the introduction of the minimum wage. The new deal for lone parents in Scotland helps more than 7,000 people. The Labour Government are building a fairer, more inclusive society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: After that gallop by the Minister, we will move on to the next debate.

Aldridge Fire Station

12.30 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I shall try to emulate the Minister of State, Scotland Office in the previous debate by galloping through what I recognise is a very local problem. I am grateful to the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), for his presence. I understand that the brief was a late one; he had to take over from his hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Home Office. I am also grateful that Mr. David Winnick—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton) : Order. The hon. Gentleman must refer to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick).

Mr. Shepherd: Certainly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am also grateful that the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) is present and would like to contribute. I am sure that that is agreeable to the Minister.

As the Minister knows, the West Midlands fire service, with the approval of the West Midlands fire authority, is seeking approval for a proposal to close the single-engine fire stations at Bloxwich and Aldridge and to replace them, under a private finance initiative; with a two-engine community fire station, in a location that is more central to the combined areas of their responsibilities. The local authority advises me that the single-pump Aldridge fire station covers a population of 59,271 and the single-pump Bloxwich fire station a population of 49,814. As the population of Walsall is 259,488, that total of 109,488 represents 42 per cent. of the borough's population. As the new location means that more people will be further away from the new station than at present, the public has, understandably, widely expressed opposition to the proposal. At present, Bloxwich attends an annual average of 1,277 incidents in its station area and, as the fire service document "A Better Way?" states, is busier than most one-pump stations.

The station also undertakes community fire safety work aimed at the local community. The fire service document tells us that the average figure for Aldridge is 662 incidents and that the fire station also undertakes a small amount of community fire safety work. None of those figures has been put in context. It is not clear whether Bloxwich is the first, second or third busiest one-pump station in the west midlands, or whether Aldridge is at the bottom of the scale or very nearly so. It is also not clear whether fire stations in the region are more immediately in need of upgrading or replacing with a new community fire station.

Aldridge fire station opened in 1968 and comprised a four-bay appliance room with a covered wash-down area adjoining a two-storey block which formed the operational and administrative side of the station, with offices, lecture room, and stores on the ground floor and recreational, dining and sleeping facilities on the second floor. A training wing, including two lecture rooms and living and sleeping accommodation for 16 students, was attached to the station but was closed when the West Midlands brigade training centre in Smethwick opened. The station has served the separate communities that comprise Aldridge-Brownhills well throughout the intervening years.

On 23 May 2000 I received a letter from Mr. K. J. Knight, the chief fire officer of the West Midlands fire service, advising me that he was proposing to develop a community fire station for the Aldridge and Bloxwich areas. The two-pump community fire station would be built, financed and operated by a private sector partner, allowing the West Midlands fire service to deliver what he claimed would be an improved service to the community. Mr. Knight went on:

> "The project will result in the provision of a newly constructed community fire station which will enable the West Midlands Fire Service to deliver an improved service to the surrounding community from a strategically placed site. The facility will provide accommodation and training facilities for two pumping appliances and personnel with an integral, purpose-built safety education facility through which community safety education programmes can be delivered. The estimated capital cost of the project would be £3.5 million to £4 million."

Mr. Knight promised to keep me in touch with the public consultation process. The initial public response to the proposals was not favourable. When the West Midlands fire service published its proposal under the title "A Better Way?" the facts about the proposed north-east Walsall community fire station, with an accompanying glossy brochure sharing that title and containing a precis of the larger document, were studied with interest by many local residents.

The fire service set out various options for Aldridge fire station, which it described as a one-fire-engine station staffed 24 hours a day by four full-time watches whose annual number of incidents over the past three years was 662, in addition to which it undertakes a small amount of community fire safety work. The running costs, not including central overhead costs, are £755,251.

The three options were to do nothing, to refurbish or to rebuild on site. It is claimed that to rebuild a new fire station on the existing site to current standards would cost £2.2 million. At no point did the fire service mention that there had also been a training wing of two lecture rooms and living and sleeping accommodation for 16 students, nor was there an explanation of what the current standard is or whether it is a statutory requirement.

I sought an explanation when I wrote to the chief fire officer on 27 November, raising among other things my concerns about the admission on page 4 that a second fire engine consistently fails to reach fires in Aldridge within the time recommended by the Home Office. The response was a deafening silence. I did not receive a reply to my letter, and when I wrote again on 19 January, Mr. Knight responded only to my questions on response times. I still do not know what the current standard is, or whether it is a statutory requirement.

Similarly, despite writing on 6 March, I have failed to establish what is the projected response time from the fire service's "optimum location", which is widely believed to be in Pelsall, to Streetly, or whether any test runs have been carried out to confirm the reliability of the computer-generated times that the fire service quoted to me.

The refurbishment options costed have been estimated for comparative purposes. Many facilities that would be required to achieve a minimum acceptable standard of accommodation for future needs cannot be

achieved within the confines of existing buildings. The need to achieve satisfactory provision for women fire fighters, access for the disabled, satisfactory storage provision for personal protective equipment and so on are all essential enhancements within the short term. The station training facilities consist of a drill tower that requires upgrading. That is the burden of the arguments advanced, understandably, by the fire service.

Building condition surveys identify substantial repair and maintenance costs in the next four or five years. There are no community fire safety facilities on the site. In view of those factors, the Bloxwich station is considered a high priority for replacement. Refurbishment of the existing station would cost approximately £637,000. I shall not go through the options, as the documents are readily available to the Home Office.

Many of my constituents feel that the best-value criterion is impossible to assess without reference to the state of the stock across the region. They are also puzzled by Mr. Knight's comment that there is a potential for over-provision at Bloxwich, when that pump station is one of the busiest in the west midlands. The over-provision is presumably a reflection of the capacity of the two-pump Walsall fire station to meet some of the present responsibilities of Bloxwich. That is what prompted the fire service's response at the public consultation meeting at Bloxwich, where it was argued that it makes more sense to relocate Bloxwich further into its area. The widely leaked preferred location in Pelsall Villa football ground at Bush grove off Walsall road, Pelsall, would be outside Bloxwich's current area and close to Walsall fire station. It would create a greater bunching of fire stations towards the centre of Walsall.

Mr. Knight also told the meeting that

"it is true that if you live in Aldridge, then response times will be worse under this proposal."

That is cited from page 56 of the annexe that was given to the fire authority. The point made by Mr. Knight has been apparent to many people in Aldridge-Brownhills and it has fuelled our concern that response times might become longer for the majority of people in the present Aldridge fire station area.

As a local resident, the statutory consultation process was directed at me, and I carefully followed its progress. I and other residents noted that the consultation period co-incided with the Christmas period, and that it was deemed to have started on 21 November 2000, one day after the West Midlands fire authority had agreed to proceed with a consultation. The chairman, Councillor Peter Bilson, said:

"We took a positive decision in the light of material for the consultation being ready for commencement to bring forward the start date".

The press was notified of that, and Mr. Knight wrote to me on 20 November 2000, which was proper, as he had previously written to inform me that the consultation period would probably start early in December. On that point, I had misled many constituents who had written to me about rumours concerning the future of Aldridge fire station.

In any event, the public consultation leaflet was not distributed until the end of the month—and even then, I am told, only patchily. Some residents of Streetly, who receive the *Sutton Coldfield Observer* rather than the *Walsall Advertiser*, said that they were not sent the leaflet, even though they live in the Aldridge area. As the fire service has a statutory duty to consult, I and many of my constituents are greatly concerned about those matters.

In politics, it is generally thought that Christmas and August are the worst times to conduct an effective consultation. Mr. Dale Hall, the project design and report author of Opinion Research Services Ltd., which is based at the university of Wales in Swansea, agreed with me that the timing of the consultation process was "not ideal". However, Mr. Knight told me that he had been advised that it was one of the best times to consult, as people were on holiday and at home and therefore had more time to consider the proposals. That has not been my experience of what has now become, for increasing numbers of families, a major holiday period.

None the less, the process commenced. Four public meetings were held, and six people's panels were convened. As I had attended meetings—including one that had been arranged by the Fire Brigades Union prior to the public consultation—I made a point of attending the one that the fire service organised on Saturday 13 January. At that meeting, a petition against the proposals was presented to the chairman of the West Midlands fire and civil defence authority, Councillor Peter Bilson, by the leader of Walsall council, Mike Bird. It was claimed that it contained 22,000 names.

On 26 February, I received a report on the public consultation by Opinion Research Services Ltd., entitled "Community Fire Safety Strategy". It summarised the conclusions of the six people's panels, each of which comprised between eight and 10 members, and the four public meetings. The report revealed that membership of the people's panels was restricted to people aged between 21 and 55. That is of great concern, as Aldridge-Brownhills has the highest proportion of residents aged between 40 and pensionable age in the country. Despite the age restriction, four out of the six panels decided against the proposals, and two were in favour.

With regard to the panels' discussions, the report states that

"it would be wrong to treat the study as some kind of referendum or statistical estimate of the balance of opinion in the community".

However, it also states:

"We believe the findings are reliably indicative of public opinion in Walsall".

The report accepts that four of the public meetings "resoundingly and overwhelmingly" rejected the proposals. The accounts of the meetings contain several references to the presence of serving fire officers. My experience of the Streetly meeting was that, of the 50 people present, 19 were dressed in fire service uniforms, helping to promote the consultation process. The report implies that serving fire officers who were dressed in mufti, rather than those who were in uniform, were trying to protect their interests. That is unfair. Serving fire officers have been assured that their jobs are safe. Mr. Knight has stated:

"There are no proposals for job losses".

[Mr. Shepherd]

Councillor Bilson has said:

"There will be no job losses: that is recorded. There will also be no loss of fire engines. It is up to the chief how the fire fighters are deployed. All the laws and standards need to be met."

We all accept that. All the fire officers whom I have met have been principally concerned about their ability to meet the Home Office response times for the new fire station, wherever it is located. Clearly, without a specific location it is difficult to assess whether that is true.

The Fire Brigades Union's report for the fire authority meeting on 19 February simulates, by way of example, journey times from the prospective Pelsall site. The times given are for the time it takes to travel the distance and do not include times for mobilising, traffic, speed humps or restrictions. For example, on that basis, Pelsall to Freeth road, Brownhills—a travelling distance of 3.8 miles—would take 11 minutes. Clearly, travelling to the nursing home in Hednesford road, Brownhills would take some minutes longer. On the same basis the travel time to Anchor road, Aldridge is 10 minutes. Therefore, points further to the east and in Streetly, such as Foley road, Hardwick road and Blackwood road, would take longer.

The report was incorporated in a much larger one prepared for the West Midlands fire authority's consideration. I understand from a member of the authority that, unfortunately, it was not made available to members until a few hours before their meeting on 9 February 2001, at which they were asked to approve the proposals, which they did. The report contains several press cuttings indicating that 2,000 letters were presented to the fire service, yet annexe H of the report records only 1,612 letters having been received, although, according to page 172 of the report, 1,267 were discounted as being outside the time of the consultation. Annexe J relates to Walsall council and reports the views of council committees, including the policy and resources committee, the Walsall area planning committee, the highways and transportation committee and various other area planning committees.

While Aldridge, South area planning committee resolved to receive and note the proposals, Brownhills and Aldridge, North area planning committee recorded that it

"does not support the closure of the Fire Station at Aldridge. The cover provided by the Fire Station is effective and efficient and, in the interests of public safety, the Committee supports its retention".

Bloxwich area planning committee resolved that

"consideration should be given to the modernisation or rebuilding of Bloxwich Fire Station at a location within the Bloxwich area."

Darlaston area planning committee resolved that

"this Committee opposes any proposals to close existing fire stations on safety grounds as the extra time taken to reach a fire from a centralised location could lead to loss of life".

Willenhall area planning committee resolved that it

"notes the Report in respect of its own area and supports its colleagues in other areas which could be affected by this detrimental move".

As far as I can find out, the fire authority has organised no visit to the fire stations affected by the proposal.

The chief executive of Walsall council listed the points raised by councillors at a members' seminar. They raised the question of the required response time and whether a new station serving a larger area could achieve that. They also raised the issue of the replacement or enhancement of the two existing stations at Aldridge and Bloxwich as an alternative to the development of a new site. Another of the issues raised was whether the present proposals should be viewed in a wider context, for the division or the service as a whole, and with specific reference to neighbouring stations such as Sutton Coldfield and Fallings Park. Concerns were also expressed about the proposal in respect of local traffic patterns and the build-up of traffic on local roads year by year.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), I should inform hon. Members that, as is traditional with the half-hour Adjournment debate, he has notified me, the initiator of the debate and the Minister of his interest in participating.

12.48 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I shall take up very little time, to allow as much time as possible for the Minister. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) for allowing me a couple of minutes. As has been pointed out, the amalgamation affects Bloxwich fire station in my constituency. There is significant concern about that, and I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister of State, for whom I have a great deal of time and respect, that that should also be taken into consideration.

Bloxwich is a densely populated residential and business area of the borough, and, according to the West Midlands fire authority, Bloxwich fire station is one of the busiest of the one-pump stations. I first wrote to the Minister on 27 September 2000, stating that there was a good deal of understandable anxiety about the matter. Since then, I have been in correspondence with Ministers and the chair of the fire service ,as well as with the chief fire officer. On the whole, I am not happy with the response that I received. It may be that, regardless of today's debate and the consultations to which the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills referred, the issue is clear cut and will go ahead, but I must emphasise that there is a feeling that the amalgamation should not proceed.

Obviously, I cannot speak for Aldridge or Pelsall, but in Bloxwich worry continues and it is shared by a number of residents and elected local representatives. In those circumstances, I hope that today's debate means that the matter is looked at again. I do not expect the Minister to say that it is off, but I urge that the amalgamation of the fire stations in that part of the borough be reviewed. I hope that that will be possible.

12.50 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) on securing the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) for his intervention on behalf of his constituency. As the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State cannot be here today, unfortunately, owing to a late governmental commitment. I am happy to stand in for him and I shall pass the full text of the debate to him for his attention.

I understand the concern that has been expressed about the proposal by the West Midlands fire and civil defence authority to replace the two fire stations at Aldridge and Bloxwich with a new fire station serving both areas. Before dealing with specific points, I shall make a few background remarks. The fire service as a whole in this country consistently achieves high standards of performance, often in difficult and hazardous circumstances. Its high level of performance in responding to fire calls has been confirmed year after year by the Audit Commission. According to the latest figures for 1999-2000, the fire service nationally met attendance standards in responding to fire calls on 96 per cent. of occasions. In the west midlands, standards were met on 95.3 per cent. of occasions. Obviously, we shall strive to raise those levels, but that shows a good level of performance.

The fire service is also to be commended for the range of community-based initiatives that it undertakes throughout the country to promote fire safety in the home. We want such progress to be measured against the commitment to prevention as the first line of defence against fire, and we want to develop a more clear vision and strategy for the service. I welcome particularly the excellent programme of community fire safety work being implemented by the West Midlands fire and civil defence authority. Throughout that process, we have established the principle of best value and the West Midlands fire and civil defence authority, as the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, is defined as a best value authority under the Local Government Act 1999. Under that duty of best value, authorities are required to secure continual improvement in the exercise of their functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. It is their duty to do that, and the statutory responsibility for achieving it lies with the fire authority. It is for the West Midlands fire and civil defence authority to keep its fire cover provision under review and, in particular, to provide a service that meets the national standards of fire cover.

I turn now to the Aldridge and Bloxwich fire stations. In January last year, the authority submitted a bid for support under the private finance initiative to replace single-appliance fire stations at Aldridge and Bloxwich with a new two-appliance fire station within the Walsall metropolitan borough council area. In April, it was selected as one of the bids to go forward to the next stage. The authority is in the process of developing its outline business case, at which point we shall wish to consider, in consultation with professional advisers, the scope of the scheme, whether PFI requirements are met and, in particular, whether the scheme represents value for money.

The private finance initiative has been mentioned at various points in the debate, and I well understand the controversy that arises about that method of financing public sector investment. I have the largest PFI hospital in the country in my constituency and there has been much controversy about that. In fact, the building work is many months ahead of schedule and such a method has been efficient, but strong worries persist. The Department for Education and Employment has recently announced a £90 million PFI initiative for improving schools in eastern Norfolk. Head teachers have expressed concerns, and I understand the anxieties about that method of financing—it can give rise to doubts—but, ultimately, Government policy is right.

If the Government approve in principle the allocation of PFI credits and the scheme is endorsed by the interdepartmental project review group, it would be open to the authority to put the project out to competitive tender, select a preferred bidder and develop its final business case. At that stage, the project would be closely examined to ensure that PFI requirements continued to be met.

I now come to the nub of the debate, and I emphasise as strongly as possible that considerations relevant to a PFI project are different from those that come into play when the closure of fire stations is under consideration. A separate statutory process applies. Approval of any PFI scheme does not of itself imply that other consents will necessarily be forthcoming. I shall describe in a few moments the procedures relevant to closing fire stations.

Several points were made about public consultation, which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary must take into account when examining any application. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills has put on the record the weaknesses that he believes are inherent in the process. His views can be taken into account both by the relevant authorities and by my right hon. Friend when matters reach him.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills referred to correspondence with the chief fire officer. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, on a couple of occasions, he was invited to a meeting to discuss his concerns? I know that he was unable to attend the fire authority meeting to which he referred. I urge him to enter into correspondence and discuss directly with the chief fire officer the concerns that he raised. That form of communication is important for resolving the issues.

I understand that the authority expects to submit its outline business case to the Home Office next month. Section 19(4) of the Fire Services Act 1947 applies and it is separate from the PFI process. A fire authority cannot, under that statute, reduce the number of fire stations, fire appliances and fire-fighting posts without the express consent of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. The authority's proposed closure of Aldridge and Bloxwich fire stations when the new station is operational would require an application under section 19. To date, the Government have received no such application from the fire authority.

How will my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary deal with those applications when they arrive? His role is specific and he can grant approval only if he is satisfied that three conditions have been met. First, the proposals must have been sufficiently widely publicised in appropriate detail and with adequate time to enable interested parties to make representations. That is the nub of my response to the hon. Gentleman's many questions. My right hon. Friend will have to consider various matters at that stage. The age of panels, the timing over Christmas and so forth can be raised legitimately when my right hon. Friend is considering those questions. Secondly, my right hon. Friend must be satisfied that the representations have been properly considered by the authority and, thirdly, Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services must advise that national standards of fire cover will be maintained.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

My right hon. Friend must ensure that those three important conditions are met, and he can assess them only after an application under section 19 has been made. I repeat that no such application has yet been received, which makes it difficult for me to comment in detail, except to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North and the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills have raised important issues for the record. I can give the assurance that if an application is received, we shall also take other representations—for example, from whoever may be the Member of Parliament at the time—into account. I can give the further assurance that no proposal will be approved unless we are entirely satisfied that national fire cover standards are being maintained—a critical question for the Government and for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

To conclude, I repeat that I understand the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North and the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills. The authority will have to consult and will know about the issues raised in our debate. If an application is made under section 19, it will be considered by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. Consultation, national fire cover and the question whether the authority has considered the issue properly will be matters of concern to my right hon. Friend, and it will be entirely appropriate for any Member of Parliament to address those matters at that stage.

I have tried to respond to the points that were made, and I am glad that we have had the opportunity to have this debate.

Health and Safety Executive (Hull)

1 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): At full complement during the 1980s and early 1990s, the Health and Safety Executive office in Hull had eight inspectors, covering the full range of local industry with the exception of specific control of major accident hazards sites. In recent years, the office has been systematically run down to its present complement of three operational inspectors, with the intention of closing it later this year. That will reduce the number of inspections in the region by some 600 contacts per annum, and will result in inferior health and safety cover for many thousands of workers. It will probably lead to a great increase in accidents, and will prove less cost effective.

There are three main arguments for maintaining the HSE office in Hull: the industrial profile of the Humber region, the region's geographical isolation, and value for taxpayers' money. The Hull office is part of the Yorkshire and north-east region of the HSE, which also has offices in Newcastle, Leeds and Sheffield. Inspectors from Hull will be relocated, and future health and safety in the Humber region will be enforced from the Leeds and Sheffield offices, both of which are more than 60 miles from Hull, yet we are asked to believe that there will be no detrimental effect on the service in the region.

A similar proposal to close the HSE office in Poole—an area not renowned as a hive of industrial activity—has recently been reversed. The Hull office is low-cost and more cost-effective than its Sheffield and Leeds counterparts. Its closure will leave a city that is one of the largest in England, and which has particularly high-risk industries, more than 60 miles away from the nearest HSE office—an unprecedented situation. Moreover, in the opinion of trade unions and others involved in the Hull exercise, the procedures that led to the decision to close the office were underhand, misleading and inconsistent with the Government's declared policy on the HSE.

The Humber sub-region has a unique economic structure. Measured by tonnage, the Humberside ports account for more than 20 per cent. of all import and export trade in the United Kingdom. They are busy ports that are not only vital to our island economy, but extremely dangerous places in which to work. They need regular and expert attention, and ample accident statistics reveal what happens when the systems fail. Given that Sheffield is some 70 miles inland, there can be no logic or rationale in moving HSE inspectors who cover such coastal activity from Hull to Sheffield.

Agriculture, which is another dominant feature of the Humber region's economy, also accounts for a high percentage of fatal accidents year on year. Yet the enforcing authority for this rural activity will be based at the heart of the urban manufacturing and commercial institutions of Leeds—miles away from where it is needed, and in some of the most expensive office accommodation in the north. Humberside is also the international centre of caravan construction, which is another industry renowned for heavy work, fast production and accidents. Construction is a risky business. Work situations can change daily and require a quick response. With the closure of the Hull office, there will be no such quick response in Humberside.

Grimsby, which is on the south bank of the Humber, is the undisputed food capital of Europe. I should mention that in making this case I have the support of my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Brigg and Goole (Mr. Cawsey). The food industry employs many thousands of people, and has an accident rate that is higher than that of most other industries. Its workers are even further from the protective services of the HSE.

Twenty-six top-tier control of major accident hazards sites are located across Humberside, including oil refineries and petrochemical sites. They represent the most serious potential for disaster and are situated on the coast, for obvious reasons. It would make sense to locate the COMAH inspectorate in the same area, so that visits can be frequent and thorough. Instead, it is to be based in Sheffield, although there are only six COMAH sites in the whole of South Yorkshire. Let us not forget that the dark shadow of the Flixborough disaster in 1974 still hovers over Humberside—although the site of that disaster would now be regarded as minuscule compared with the big COMAH sites that are now in the region. We still live with the memories and lessons of that tragedy on Humberside.

The HSE policy for Yorkshire and the north-east appears deliberately to distance inspectors from the industries and sites for which they are responsible. A typical day's work for a docks inspector travelling from Sheffield will involve driving a round trip of 150 miles, which in today's traffic could take up to four hours—and that is a conservative estimate. That reduces the working day by half, is paid for at great expense to the taxpayer and results in the loss of a great deal of expertise. Under the new proposals, the estimated annual mileage per inspector will be an incredible 26,500 miles. Every hour spent driving is one hour less inspecting; every mile driven is a drain on the financial resources of the HSE and on the physical and emotional resources of the inspectors involved.

It makes no sense for HSE inspectors to spend half their working days as highly qualified taxi drivers. That is why the decision to close the HSE office in Poole was reversed. Over a full year, the aggregate driving time is up to 66 working days per inspector. If the full quota of eight inspectors work out of Leeds and Sheffield, a total of 528 inspection days per annum will be lost due to unnecessary travel. That will more than double the cost of travel and subsistence claims per inspector, and will lose them valuable inspection time. Moreover, it is unlikely that improvement and prohibition notices will be followed up as vigorously as they would be if they were issued locally. If those notices are not followed up, they will be ignored, as happened in Hull last year. A prohibition notice was ignored at a demolition site, leading to the deaths of three people, one of whom was a constituent of mine.

As the quantity and quality of cover declines, the service inevitably becomes reactive instead of proactive—investigating accidents instead of preventing them. That is already becoming apparent in Humberside. Accident statistics reveal that over the past two years, as the Hull office has been run down, there has been a significant increase in loss of life, with 19 fatal accidents and almost 1,500 major injuries in the region. All that suffering and heartbreak is being caused to save the princely sum of £2,428 a year.

It is not known exactly when the decision to close the Hull office was made, but it was taken without reference to the users of the service: employers, workers, trade union officials and local councils were consulted. The Government produced a document entitled "Revitalising Health and Safety", in which they promised to improve consultation and to extend promotional activities, working closely with local communities. Whoever wrote the document failed to draw it to the attention of the Health and Safety Executive officials in the Yorkshire region. No local group supported the decision to close the whole office. Indeed, the only good thing to arise from the exercise is that it has united all parties with a vested interest in health and safety in their opposition to the closure and the crass way in which that foolhardy decision was made.

The total absence of consultation is serious. When I asked a parliamentary question about the consultation process, I was told that a meeting had taken place between Mr. Bill Callaghan, chair of the Health and Safety Commission, Mr. Chris Willby, regional director of the HSE and local union officials. I want to set the record straight and stop the deceit—it is not clear exactly when the decision to close the HSE office in Hull was made, but it was certainly made before Christmas 1998. That meeting arose only because of representations made by local constituents and trade unions to the three local Members of Parliament and took place on 15 May 2000, more than 18 months after the decision to close the Hull office had been made and after the matter had been put in the local domain, drip by drip. There has been no consultation.

At that meeting, Chris Willby told trade union officers—Bill Callaghan was a witness to his statement—that the closure was necessary because the HSE was unable to recruit to the Hull office. Six weeks later, in reply to a series of written questions, I was informed that the HSE had not tried to recruit to Hull since 1997, so why was it stated that there was no possibility of obtaining candidates for important positions in Hull? I was told that the meeting on 15 May 2000 constituted the due consultation process prior to the decision being made, but no such meeting would have taken place, without the insistence of local Members of Parliament. The decision to close was made at some time during 1998.

Another of my questions concerned the environmental impact of the closure. It is a legal requirement for organisations to undertake environmental impact assessments of their activities. It seems that no such assessment was made, and there was certainly no reference to any environmental impact assessment in the replies that I received. Subsequently, I asked my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to place a copy of the Sykes report, with its appendices, in the Library, but a different document was put there. The title of the Sykes report that I wanted to see was "Accommodation Review—Future of the Hull Office" dated 22 March 1999. It shows the total savings from closing the Hull office as £2,428 per annum, albeit at a cost of 600 annual contacts. It states that the only reason for closing the office is a problem of remote management. I believe that 19 deaths and 1,500 major accidents show how remote the HSE management in Yorkshire and the north-east region is, and it will be even more remote at the end of the month.

[Mr. Kevin McNamara]

Moreover, the reply from my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment was carefully drafted. The Department did not provide the report that I wanted, but instead provided the report entitled, "Accommodation Review: Yorkshire and north-east region business needs". However, even that was revealing. It gives the criteria necessary to meet the HSE's policy. First on the list is the need to be able to reach 90 per cent. of all premises within a travel time of one and a half hours. With current traffic patterns, it is not usual to travel from Leeds or Sheffield to Hull or Grimsby in less than an hour and a half. At peak times, one would be lucky to complete the journey in two or two and a half hours. Anyone who thought that those criteria could apply in that area must either have driven when there was no traffic on the motorway or have significantly broken the speed limit. Journeys are longer still for the many people coming to Humberside who live south or west of Sheffield.

Close consideration of the review would support the closure of the Sheffield office and an increase in the Humberside contingent. At peak times, it takes an hour to travel between Sheffield and Leeds, which are within 30 miles of each other. Hull is between 60 and 70 miles from those cities. The Sheffield area, moreover, has a lower death rate—15 in the past two years—and has only six COMAH sites, less than a quarter of the 26 in Humberside.

The whole process is littered with failure. There has been failure to consult, and failure to comply with Government policy as stated in the document "Revitalising Health and Safety". There has been failure to comply with the HSE's policies of working with the community and of holding environmental assessments, and failure to meet HSE criteria on target compliance. There has been failure to provide adequate answers to a Member of Parliament, and failure to provide effective health and safety cover for the people of Humberside.

Mr. Sykes made an insulting offer to representatives of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union on 13 February. He said that, if we are very lucky, premises in Hull will be used for a monthly surgery, where people can go to have their cases examined. Presumably, somebody will put the Saltend oil refinery in his haversack, dump it on the surgery table and point out its problems. If there is excessive demand, the surgery might be opened even more than once a month. How very nice. How generous. How insulting.

Great questions remain. Why has deceit been used and misleading answers given? Why has there been no proper consultation process? Why was an environmental assessment not properly carried out? Why is the HSE office in Hull being closed, despite the substantial loss in efficiency that will result? Why have 19 people been killed and 1,500 seriously injured? Those people deserved the same protection as workers elsewhere in the country. Those figures are likely to rise, and all for a paltry saving of less than £2,500.

1.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on securing the debate. I have listened carefully to his points about the Health and Safety Executive's decision to close the Hull local office at the end of this year. I understand his concern, which he has every right to express in this Chamber, but I do not share his view that the standard of service in Humberside that the HSE provides will be adversely affected by the decision.

It is not fair to make the link, as my hon. Friend did, between the reduction of inspectors at Hull and what he claims as increases in deaths. I acknowledge that there have been a number of deaths. I concur with my hon. Friend's last point—as would my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and members of the HSE and the Health and Safety Commission—that people in Humberside deserve the same protection as in the rest of the country. The HSE's decision about deployment of resources does not diminish its commitment to the people of Humberside, which is equal to its commitment to people elsewhere.

The proposals are intended to improve overall service delivery as part of the restructuring of the HSE, over several years, to which my hon. Friend referred. There is a centralised telephone contact for information and, from 1 April, there will be centralised telephone, e-mail and internet reporting of incidents. Staff in Sheffield already handle telephone and postal complaints, and almost all meetings are held at the premises of duty holders.

Those changes date back to 1976, when the HSE reorganised its field force from one based on numerous small offices and small districts to a national structure based on fewer large offices. The introduction of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 increased its responsibilities. It had to become flexible and keep abreast of developments in industry, which required a different organisational base if it was to meet the increased demands and keep up with developments. Those and subsequent changes have allowed inspectors to develop a deeper expertise—which is a safer way for the organisation to operate—by concentrating on a smaller range of industries and delivering more focused plans of work.

Further changes took place in 1995, when the HSE reorganised its field operations directorate to a regionally based structure. That included the formation of the Yorkshire and north-east division with its main offices in Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle upon Tyne. Most small district offices had closed, but some were retained as outstations; the Hull office had only four inspectors at that time.

Although Hull was retained as an outstation, much of the inspection activity in the area was carried out from the Sheffield and Leeds offices. Following the formation of the area structure in 1976, the chemical industry and most construction work on Humberside were inspected from Sheffield because of the need to keep staff together to develop their expertise, knowledge and experience. In 1995, inspection of the engineering industry transferred to Sheffield, with agriculture and the services sector, including the docks, being inspected by inspectors based

in Leeds and Sheffield respectively. Those changes have not affected the coverage or standard of inspection. The people of Hull have not noticed the gradual switch from inspectors based in Humberside to inspectors based in the Sheffield and Leeds offices. The HSE inspects the same premises, investigates the same accidents and participates in the same events, as it would have done if the Hull office had not been reduced. However, the range of inspector resources and expertise available in the Yorkshire and north-east region cannot be delivered by only three or four inspectors.

It is not only the HSE that has recognised the need to deploy its resources differently, and to enable its staff to work together to develop the expertise and depth of experience that they need. Several trade unions have also closed their offices as they rationalise their structures to provide a more effective regional service, so the HSE is not out of step with other organisations.

I agree with my hon. Friend that the efficacy and efficiency of the service is more important than the location of individual small offices. The HSE must use its resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. It must therefore have staff resources that can be deployed in a planned manner to meet strategic demands. That is an important part of the Government's revitalising health and safety strategy.

Inspection and investigation policies are set by the HSE nationally on the basis of risks arising from work activities, irrespective of location. Decisions to investigate accidents, incidents and reported ill-health are determined by their nature and severity, not by location. The HSE puts considerable effort into ensuring that its approach and standard of service is the same across the country irrespective of distance from the office. That applies as much to Humberside as to any other part of the UK.

Resources need to be flexible so that inspectors can be redeployed, often at short notice, to respond to changing priorities. Having small numbers of inspectors in small offices does not aid flexible deployment. I understand why the closure of small offices, such as that in Hull, might cause concern, but I reassure hon. Members that the decision was not taken lightly. It followed a thorough UK-wide review that considered the needs in the region and those in Humberside. The restructuring changes are in line with changes in the service industry and in other agencies.

When coming to its decision to close the office, the HSE also considered the need for a local office to serve the people of Hull. However, the office receives few personal callers and, as I have said, telephone and postal complaints are already handled by Sheffield staff. There is also soon to be a centralised telephone contact for the reporting of incidents. I think that the conclusion that there was a limited need for an office physically located in Hull was rational. The main need is for liaison and joint participation with local organisations to continue as before.

The HSE will continue to service the needs of those areas. In general, the same staff will continue to participate in local meetings and liaise with trade unions, local authorities and employers organisations. Where possible, the HSE will maintain and increase contacts with local organisations, in line with revitalising the health and safety strategy. It will continue to develop partnerships as it does in other areas of Yorkshire and the north-east division. The HSE also proposes to acquire premises in Hull in which to host meetings with employers, local officials and the public. My hon. Friend derided the notion of surgeries, but they are a more responsive way of linking with local stakeholders and meeting their changing demands. I am sorry that he derided that offer, because I think that that approach is very important. It could be a way of developing services in the future.

Staff considerations have been an important factor in the decision. At present, there is only one inspector in the Hull office, who is due to retire in June, and an administrative officer. Two operational managers remain in Hull, but the staff that they manage are in Leeds and Sheffield.

Staff development has also been an important consideration. The HSE has a large number of trainee and relatively inexperienced inspectors. To develop their careers, inspectors must be able to move posts to gain experience—in a larger office that would be possible. The pooling of expertise and experience is an important ingredient in encouraging and enabling staff to develop. For that reason, inspectors are increasingly reluctant to join a small office and, as a responsible employer, the HSE is reluctant to move staff against their will.

My hon. Friend mentioned consultation and referred to the meeting with trade union representatives in May 2000. The amount of work already being carried out from Leeds and Sheffield came as a surprise to the representatives at the meeting. The reasons behind the decision were discussed and understood, if not accepted.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the Sykes report, about which there seems to have been some misunderstanding. The report referred to by my hon. Friend "Accommodation Review—Future of the Hull Office" was not the Sykes report. It is a different report, produced by the HSE estate management team about the financial implications. I will ensure that a copy of that report, if that is the one that he wants to examine, is placed in the Library.

In conclusion, the decision to close the Hull office should not be seen merely as a local decision. The centralisation of HSE offices resulted, in the first instance, from the increasingly complex demands placed on HSE, and a desire to maintain safe and equal standards across the country.

Rail Services (Berwick-upon-Tweed)

1.30 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): There are five stations in the constituency of Berwick-upon-Tweed, all on the east coast main line, although only Berwick and Alnmouth are served by long-distance trains. Berwick serves the whole of the eastern borders, and Alnmouth serves the whole of mid-Northumberland. In the case of Berwick, the train is vital to communication. It is a much quicker way of getting to central London than travelling by either air or car, because the town is a long way from the nearest airport. The train is unusually important in the economic life of the town.

Acklington, Widdrington and Chathill stations are served only by a minimal Northern Spirit service, which also stops at Alnmouth. Alnmouth station is operated by Northern Spirit, despite the fact that most of its passengers actually use GNER services. I hope that, in the longer term, the smaller stations will get an improved service from local trains. The service could run from Newcastle to Edinburgh. The trains could be electric, as they would run on the main line, stopping also at existing and reopened stations between Berwick and Edinburgh. Some stations have been reopened, and there are plans to open one or two more.

My main, immediate concerns are the east coast main line services, which have been badly affected by the Hatfield crash and its aftermath, and the unnecessary obstruction of the building of a platform at Belford for local services. I have said that GNER is the main operator on the east coast main line, but I should also mention Virgin Cross Country, which provides daily services to the west country and the south coast. Nobody I know wants Virgin to get the east coast main line franchise. The company would have a monopoly on Anglo-Scottish rail travel, and GNER has shown that it is worthy of the franchise. We all hope that that will be tied up soon, giving GNER the opportunity and encouragement to invest further in its services. Any other outcome would be greeted with absolute horror from end to end of the east coast main line.

However, the Virgin Cross Country service is extremely useful. When it goes wrong, it tends to do so pretty disastrously, because it intersects with so many other lines as it works its way from Dundee to Penzance or from Edinburgh to Bournemouth. It provides connections right into the midlands, into south Yorkshire and other areas for passengers from Edinburgh, Berwick, Newcastle and further south. Standards on the Virgin services have never been as good as those on GNER, nor is Virgin as good as GNER at looking after passengers when something goes wrong, and I have considerable experience of that. Nevertheless, it is an important service.

One problem caused by the services being divided among three train operators is that they frequently fail to give adequate information on one other's services. If there is a limited service, another operator's train may be a vital link in one's journey. I also receive many complaints from constituents about the complexities of ticket pricing. There are some good offers, but if they do not fit with people's journeys, if people do not know about them, or if they are not told about them because they ask a particular company whereas it is another company's offer, they are left with a very high standard fare to pay.

GNER's standard of service prior to Hatfield was generally very high—both speed of journey and on-train service. I feel sorry for the GNER staff, given all they have been through in recent months. I admire the way in which they have coped, not least with the terrible trauma of the Selby crash, in which regular passengers, whom they knew well, and rail worker colleagues lost their lives. Journeys in this period, especially during the floods, have sometimes been a nightmare, but GNER has made great efforts to help passengers to get through it. Thanks to Railtrack's restrictions, and Railtrack's failure to meet targets, journey times are not back to pre-Hatfield levels, and they will not be back to that level by the promised date of Easter.

We heard yesterday that the Rail Regulator has had to place an enforcement notice on Railtrack. Will GNER be able to return to full, normal services by 21 May, the new date set by Mr. Winsor in that notice? Before Hatfield, the journey from Berwick to London on GNER took as little as 3 hours 35 minutes, which is pretty good timing for a 350-mile journey; but that journey now takes another 40 minutes. The quality of service has been reduced, and the full timetable has not been restored. For example, the 7 pm train to Edinburgh from King's Cross station has not been restored to the timetable, and there are other gaps. The total capacity of train spaces available is not what is was before Hatfield.

In recent years, GNER has added stops at Berwick and Alnmouth stations. Alnmouth has a much more limited service than Berwick, but the service meets people's needs very well. I hope that GNER will continue to be sensitive to local demand and consider making additional stops, as it has in the past, if it can attract additional business. All three companies should realise that normal fare structures do not always take account of the benefits of charging a reasonable fare for commuting and shopping trips to Newcastle and Edinburgh, especially as it can cut road traffic to both cities. Berwick provides a striking example of the extent to which people use the long-distance train to take major shopping trips to Newcastle and Edinburgh. It is quick and it takes them directly to the shopping centres. Reasonable fares are important because they will encourage such journeys.

Early every morning, a train leaves Belford station for Newcastle. Every evening, it returns to Belford. It would be an ideal train for commuters—people with jobs in Newcastle or people who want jobs in places on that route such as Cramlington—and students going to college. It would take traffic off the A1, and would be much better than going by bus, which sometimes involves two or three changes. However, no one can get on the train. The station was closed years ago, and there is no platform in the siding where the train now waits twice a day.

A group of local people, the Belford rail users group, has set out to put that right. People from that group made sure that everyone in the country knew about the closure of the Belford branch of Barclays bank. They are among the most energetic of campaigners. They have set their minds on getting the rail service at Belford restored, and rightly so. They secured a design for a platform that could have been built in eight days and craned on to the site overnight, and no track or signalling alterations would have been necessary.

Northern Spirit, the company that runs the train service, showed interest and has been supportive. The group secured funding commitments from Berwick borough council, Northumberland county council, the Countryside Agency, Belford parish council and the Johnny Johnson trust. The Strategic Rail Authority indicated that funds could be made available and fast-tracked, because the project would have cost less than £100,000. The Department the Environment, Transport and the Regions, represented by the Minister, seemed encouraging, and the project fitted well with the Government's policy on rail development and their rural transport initiatives.

The next step was for Northern Spirit to carry out a risk assessment. Suddenly, obstacles started to appear. Railtrack told Northern Spirit that a short platform proposal would not be acceptable. I wrote to Railtrack and Northern Spirit on 5 February, and the group drew the attention of those companies to the fact that the leader of the Liberal Democrat party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), had opened a station with a short platform at Beauly in January 2001.

On that day, the Strategic Rail Authority issued a press release stating that Beauly had a short, 10 m platform and was

"a good example for the further development of integrated transport in the rural communities in Scotland and, indeed, in the United Kingdom as a whole."

However, Northern Spirit wrote to me on 19 February, saying that the Belford project

"is unfortunately prevented at present by an HMRI"—

Her Majesty's railway inspectorate—

"restriction on construction of 'short' stations on safety grounds".

Northern Spirit enclosed a further letter referring to the Beauly case, in which it said that Railtrack had said that

"safety approval would not be forthcoming for a new facility at Belford, permission for the development at Beauly having been secured under a previous regime."

What is that previous regime? There has been no change of Government during that time, and there has been no change of railway inspector. No one, least of all the railway inspectorate, could understand to what that referred. Indeed, Her Majesty's chief inspector of railways is a little puzzled—possibly even a bit annoyed—to find someone else representing his views before he has uttered them. Mr. Coleman wrote to me:

"I am able to inform you that the Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) has not vetoed the opening of Belford station on any grounds."

He then set out earlier correspondence in which the inspectorate had pointed out what procedure needed to be followed—it had indeed been most helpful and constructive.

Railtrack is claiming an objection from the railways inspector when no such objection has been entered, and using that non-existent objection to tell Northern Spirit not to proceed in the matter. If Railtrack's advice had been followed, it would have required a full-scale platform 51 m long that would have cost £250,000 to build. That would have been completely over the top, quite out of scale and definitely not the solution followed at Beauly. A perfectly acceptable procedure currently operates at more than 150 stations for single-door operation at short platforms. The Northern Spirit trains, which provide the service, are equipped for single-door operation. If Railtrack stopped being obstructive, Northern Spirit could submit a risk assessment in terms that the inspector would be likely to accept on the same basis as the Beauly platform.

I am also told that Railtrack is now saying that any station project must be submitted by Northumberland county council. No one said that previously, and that was not the advice of the railways inspector. That may be possible, but it adds an unnecessary complication, and is another moving of the goalposts, such as happens at every stage. Railtrack must now put its weight behind the proposals and take a positive approach. I appeal to the Minister to do whatever he can to remind Railtrack that it is Government policy that a flexible approach should be taken to such matters.

While I am on the subject of Railtrack's approach, I add a further plea for it to take a more positive attitude to the Aln valley railway project, which is a scheme to reopen the line between Alnmouth and Alnwick. It is a widely supported scheme with major tourist potential that has secured big funding pledges from many sources. It would adjoin the east coast main line at or near Alnmouth station on derelict land, but with no direct connection currently proposed with the main line. Again, Railtrack constantly produces objections rather than looking for solutions. That scheme is an opportunity for Railtrack, not a problem. It would greatly increase the use of Alnmouth station. I gather that a meeting is scheduled for 27 March to try to sort out Railtrack's latest concerns about the lease needed, and I very much hope that it will approach that meeting in a positive spirit, and that someone will attend who will have the power to make a decision and get things moving.

Railtrack should get on with it—get the east coast main line back in a condition that will enable GNER to run fast and frequent services once more and cope with rising demand; get on with it by enabling Belford passengers to use the train that already runs to Belford twice a day; and get on with it by dealing with the Aln valley railway project. The three rail operating companies should recognise that there is a local market of people who will use trains if their services, fares, information and promotion take account of what people need from the railway. When companies have done so, it has shown to be effective. I want the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to use every effort to get Railtrack to deliver, to secure a more positive attitude by the company to new facilities, in line with Government policy, and to encourage traffic on to the railways.

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on securing this debate, giving the Chamber the opportunity to discuss the east coast main line rail services in his constituency.

In the aftermath of Hatfield, most services were disrupted due to speed restrictions imposed by Railtrack for safety reasons. Further disruption was caused by the adverse weather conditions over Christmas and the new

[Mr. Robert Ainsworth]

year. Virgin west coast services were severely disrupted by problems associated with modernisation work at Willesden and in the Euston area. The disruptions have shown how important the railway is to its customers and to the economy. Much of the network is now operating reasonably consistently, although several long-distance services on the main Great Western and west coast main lines will continue to be affected beyond Easter. The east coast main line should resume normal service in May. The hon. Gentleman referred to what the Rail Regulator said yesterday about getting the service back to normal as soon as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman specifically referred to the performance of Virgin CrossCountry. While a revised timetable remains in place, the service is becoming more stable by the week. I am pleased to say that improvements are in the pipeline, and Railtrack and the regulator agree that services should be back to normal by the start of the summer timetable on 20 May.

New rolling stock is to be introduced from next year and, by 2003, that will facilitate an improved timetable with faster journey times, a clock face timetable, a doubling of train mileage and new services on new routes.

The Strategic Rail Authority has considered the proposals put forward by Virgin Stagecoach and GNER for a replacement east coast main line intercity franchise. An initial recommendation has been made to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, which is being considered. The authority has been criticised for the time it has taken in awarding some of the new franchises. However, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that, when awarding franchises for up to 20 years, it is imperative not only to secure the best possible deal for passengers, but to ensure that the preferred counter-party has the capacity to deliver the proposals. Franchise replacement aims to secure a sustained improvement in performance and a step change in customer service through increased investment. The authority is currently replacing those franchises that are due to expire in 2004.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the need to improve and increase the frequency of local services, including services from Berwick-upon-Tweed to Alnmouth. The authority will not specify particular improvements to services and make them a condition of acceptance of franchise bids, but will expect bidders to propose improvements where they see merit in doing so, having consulted local stakeholders, local authorities, rail passenger committees and rail user groups.

Services currently run by Northern Spirit and First North Western will be combined to provide a coherent network of local services throughout the north of England. That will exclude fast inter-urban services, which will be provided under a separate new trans-Pennine express franchise. The northern franchise will focus on working with the passenger executive committees, with a separate business unit in each area.

I understand that the Belford rail users group is pursuing proposals for extended platforms at Belford station with Northern Spirit. That is the most appropriate way forward pending replacement of the Northern Spirit franchise. Funding for that proposal, as well as for the Alnwick proposals to which the right hon. Gentleman also referred, may be available from the rail passenger partnership scheme, which is administered by the Strategic Rail Authority.

The rail passenger partnership scheme was set up by the Government with £105 million of new public funding to encourage local rail initiatives. The fund offers support for new investment proposals that produce significantly wider benefits for both integration and modal shift. To take forward a rail passenger partnership bid for Belford, a business case will need to be prepared to satisfy the authority's planning criteria. Bids must demonstrate value for money and the delivery of the scheme.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke at some length about what he considered to be the obstruction of the proposals for Belford station. I am told that the Belford proposals will be considered under a regime similar to the one that applied to the facility that was agreed in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy). No new regime is to be imposed on the Belford proposals. The right hon. Gentleman may have been told that it will, but it is not true. The Belford proposals will be treated similarly to those in the example that he gave.

I am told that the reason for the current delay is that we are awaiting further submissions from the Belford rail users group. If, as the right hon. Gentleman seemed to imply, that is not now the reason, we need to ensure that progress is made. My information is that a submission will be needed. It will be necessary to know, for example, what types of trains will be used at Belford station, how many services will stop there and what passenger numbers are likely. Attention will need to be paid to control of the situation and, with respect to a guard, establishing that there is only a single-door operating system. If the relevant matters are dealt with, there is no reason for a block on the proposal.

Mr. Beith: The Minister is being very helpful, but perhaps he should be told that three of those four points are well known to all the parties concerned. The train is a known feature; it is the same one that arrives every day. Its facilities and requirements are all known. However, new submissions keep being required. Nevertheless, I know that the campaigners will urgently provide all the information that is required, as long as the goalposts do not keep moving. I am grateful to the Minister for telling us that there is a basis on which to proceed.

Mr. Ainsworth: The right hon. Gentleman's account was clearly not in line with the information that I am giving. We need to establish whether my information is correct and, and if it is not, we should get to the bottom of it and understand the hold-up.

I now want to mention the east coast main line upgrade. The east coast main line is the high-speed link carrying Britain's fastest train service between London, Yorkshire, the north-east and Edinburgh, and linking into Scotland's prime routes to Glasgow, Aberdeen and Inverness. It also handles cross-country, commuter and local passenger services, and carries considerable freight and mail traffic. The route is primarily a two-track railway, with four tracks in certain sections—mainly at

the southern end. Speeds over the northern third of the route between Newcastle and Edinburgh range between 80 and 125 mph. On an average day there are 1,900 passenger trains carrying 200,000 passengers, and 250 freight services with a loading of around 200,000 tonnes. The route is therefore vital to the economic health of many regions of Great Britain.

It has long been accepted by all parties that the upgrading of the east coast main line is a necessity and a priority. It would provide additional capacity for both passenger and freight demand while improving the network, enabling train operators significantly to improve the quality and reliability of their services as their customers expect. Railtrack has had a substantial design team working on the scheme for nearly three years to enable the route to carry more passenger trains, faster trains and more freight services. The creation of a four-track railway for much of the route is also a fundamental part of the scheme. The authority was informed by Railtrack in early February of an increase in its cost estimates for the upgrade, and they have recently examined the details of the increases together. As a result, there has been a temporary pause in the franchise replacement process for the east coast main line inter-city services. As I have mentioned, it is important to get the franchise right, even if it means waiting a little longer. It is hoped that there will soon be an announcement about the way forward.

Earlier this year, the authority announced the prospect of a new, purpose-built railway, capable of running trains at 200 to 225 mph. Such a line would provide the necessary capacity and make possible journeys between major cities that were dramatically faster as well as more convenient, comfortable and reliable. Depending on the route, journey times from London to Manchester or Leeds could be reduced to less than one hour 30 minutes; journeys to Newcastle could be reduced to around two hours and those to Scotland could take less than three hours.

The authority's preliminary work has enabled it to develop a better understanding of the potential costs and the benefits of a dedicated high-speed line running from London to the north. The authority is now inviting consultants to bid to develop the case for a new line with the aim of determining the best concept by the end of March 2002. Including destinations and corridor options, this stage of the study will need to assess the environmental issues relating to a high-speed line, together with the implications for the existing rail network and franchises, which are unlikely to cope with the demand expected in 10 or 20 years. The high-speed line is a project for the second decade of the 21st century, if the case for it is acceptable. For that reason, the need remains to press on with the planned upgrade of the east coast main line and the replacement of the franchise so that journey times and capacity can be improved as early as possible.

We want to deliver a bigger, better and safer railway, with improved punctuality and reliability, reduced journey times and higher standards of customer service. Our intentions are clear and our 10-year plan provides the mechanism to achieve our aim of 50 per cent. more passengers and 80 per cent. more freight over the next decade.

The £180 billion investment programme of public and private money will include £60 billion to improve the national rail network with new track, signalling, stations and rolling stock. I have already stressed the importance of franchise replacement, which the Strategic Rail Authority will take forward, as well as working closely with other transport providers and promoting integration of different modes of transport.

The authority published its strategic agenda on 13 March. That sets out the course that it will follow to achieve improvements for passengers and freight, and the way that the infrastructure will be enhanced. The agenda reflects considerable consultation and discussion with the industry and other bodies. It describes progress with franchise replacement and sets out clearly the next steps, including details of how the remaining franchises will be replaced.

Freight development will be based on encouraging competition and innovation, increasing capacity and providing more terminals and providing financial support to get the freight off the road and on to the railway. Infrastructure enhancement recognises Railtrack's two distinct businesses—operations and maintenance, and major projects. The agenda sets out how, assisted by the rail modernisation fund, the authority will work to deliver the biggest public-private partnerships in Europe. It also focuses on necessary developments in other areas—including better training and development of staff and building project management skills—as well as more research, new equipment and information systems for passengers.

The authority intends to publish a more detailed strategic plan in the autumn. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is encouraged by the planned improvements that will benefit passengers using services from Berwick-upon-Tweed. We expect the privatised train operating companies and Railtrack to work in partnership with one another and the authority to turn the vision of the 10-year plan into a reality. With the amount of public money that is being invested in the railways, we expect the industry to deliver the goods. With sustained Government investment and determination, we shall get Britain moving and give people a transport system on which they can rely.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 March 2001

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Poverty (Scotland)

[*Relevant documents: First Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee of Session 1999-2000, HC 59, and the Government and Scottish Executive's response thereto, Session 2000-01, HC 55.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): I wish first to say how grateful I am to my colleagues on the Liaison Committee for agreeing to my request that the report be debated, not filed away like so many other reports. As some hon. Members are aware, it was due to be discussed here on Thursday 1 February, but the debate was postponed because of the ministerial reshuffle that took place at the time. The postponement has been advantageous to this debate because much has happened since then and many issues have moved on. A lot has changed.

We have had the statement on the uprating of the national minimum wage, the Budget and a new Secretary of State and Minister of State at the Scotland Office. I am particularly pleased to welcome to the Chamber my hon. Friend the Minister of State who will wind up our debate. Before he became a Member of Parliament, his role as the Scottish representative for Age Concern Scotland gave him a long-standing interest in, and experience of, many of the issues that we shall be discussing today.

As Chairman of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, I wish to express my gratitude to its members who represent all four major political parties and to the Committee staff for the hard work that went into the inquiry and the compilation of our report. I thank our two specialist advisers, our old friend Professor Alan McGregor of Glasgow university, and David Webster, a chief housing officer at Glasgow city council. Thanks are also due to those who gave oral evidence to the Committee, either formally or informally, and to those individuals and members of organisations who submitted memorandums or participated in our informal visits to many parts of Scotland and in our short visit to Finland.

We announced our inquiry in February 1999 because we were only too well aware of the tragic consequences of poverty and deprivation for society in Scotland and the desperate need to tackle its causes and effects. It was also clear to us that, as the inquiry was our first after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, although we would try our best to stick to reserved matters, there would inevitably be overlaps with issues such as health, housing, transport, the environment, crime, drugs and law and order, all of which are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. However, that gave us the opportunity to co-operate with the Scottish Parliament and the Executive and to comment on the practice of joint working.

It was inevitable that there would be some cutting across the remit of other Select Committees and I express our thanks to the Select Committee on Social Security, in particular, and its Chairman, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), for the way in which we were encouraged to conduct our inquiry in respect of social security matters. We took a great deal of evidence in the House and I wish to highlight the input from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), Professor Peter Townsend and Professor Mark Shucksmith, all of whom gave us invaluable evidence. We were especially grateful to Wendy Alexander, a Member of the Scottish Parliament, then Minister for Communities in the Scottish Executive. She was the first Scottish Parliament Minister to appear before a Select Committee, and her evidence was extremely helpful to us. She co-operated fully in every way.

Much can be learned about the theory of poverty sitting talking about it here in the Committee Rooms of Westminster, but we realised that we had to go out into the community, talk to those affected by it and see the situation at first hand to appreciate fully the horrible effects that it has on less fortunate fellow human beings. We talked to people who, in usual circumstances, would not appear before a Select Committee, either formally or informally. For example, we visited the Wayside club in Glasgow, where we met people who were homeless and rough sleepers, who had particular problems. However, they were prepared to talk to us. Many members of the Committee were impressed that some of the people we met cared about the problems of others, although they had problems themselves. For example, one of the first questions asked by *The Big Issue* sellers in Glasgow was what we were doing for those who were not as fortunate as them and who did not have *The Big Issue* to sell. That took us all aback, but they are experiences that are remembered with a degree of pleasure.

We had to conduct the inquiry with proper sensitivity and respect for the dignity and feelings of people, and without stigmatising any of the areas that we visited. I hope that we achieved that, and I am grateful to all members of the Committee for the way in which the inquiry was conducted.

It is not a crime to be poor, but it is a crime committed by society if it chooses to do nothing about poverty in this day and age. I congratulate the Government, particularly on bravely setting the target to eradicate child poverty in 20 years. No other Government have had the courage to set such a target, and I sincerely hope that the target will be met several years before the target date.

On a personal note, the inquiry took me back to my roots, which I hope that I have never forgotten. I was unlucky enough to be homeless until I was 23, and I went to 12 or 13 different schools—I cannot remember the exact number. I wore hand-me-down clothes, and sometimes I had to live with friends when my mother went into hospital for treatment, as she frequently did because she was badly crippled. For about six months, I lived in Blinkbonny in Falkirk, which is the local poor house. Believe me, it is not a nice experience to go to school in such a situation.

I left school at the age of 15 and spent some time during the next few years penniless and unemployed. That experience returned to my mind repeatedly during

[Mr. David Marshall]

the inquiry, especially when we spoke to the young people that we met, such as *The Big Issue* sellers. I had hoped that the passage of 40 years would have changed the situation. In some ways it has changed, but not necessarily for the better. When I was young, we did not face such problems as drugs, or the other pressures that exist today.

Some commentators refer to poor people as the underclass. I find that a horrid word. Such people are our fellow human beings and citizens, and I hope that the word will disappear rapidly from everybody's vocabulary.

Our report was published on 19 July 2000, just before the summer recess. The response of the Government and the Scottish Executive was received in memorandum on 4 December and published on 18 December as the first special report for the current Session. It is best summed up by quoting from Glasgow city council's development and regeneration service department's analysis of it, which said:

"The Report is to be welcomed as a thorough and authoritative overview of poverty in Scotland, its causes and consequences."

I am grateful to Roger McConnell, the director, for those remarks.

When conducting the inquiry, the Committee made a detailed review of the extent of poverty in Scotland, its causes and consequences. We examined the Government's response to poverty up to that time, including the role of benefits, actions by the Scottish Executive, the role of local government and the voluntary sector, and joint working arrangements. We drew conclusions, or made recommendations and suggestions about the provision of data, or lack thereof; rural and urban poverty; activities of licensed credit brokers; the promotion and expansion of credit unions, money advice centres and projects; the minimum income guarantee for pensioners; linking the state pension to changes in average national earnings; take-up targets for the Department of Social Security to encourage benefit advice and the take-up of benefits; the appointment of a Minister for the elderly; increasing the earnings disregard for disabled people; introducing a proper measure of income adequacy; adjustments to the new deal; job creation schemes; making more information available about the joint ministerial committee on poverty; and a request for formal meetings between Select Committees and Committees of the devolved Assemblies. Those are not all of the issues, and no doubt colleagues will refer to others that I have not mentioned.

The response of the Scottish Executive came as a welcome surprise to us and was warmly received by the Committee. Rather than telling us to mind our own business—which they may have been entitled to do—it was clear that our report had been well received, carefully considered and, even more importantly, acted upon in a positive way. I give the Scottish Parliament and Executive credit for the constructive and helpful response to the numerous suggestions we made, especially on matters such as homelessness; health inequalities; money advice and debt management; transport costs and living allowances for island and remote areas; cold damp homes and fuel poverty, and concessionary travel. Anyone reading the response cannot fail to be impressed, and the Executive's action since then shows that they are tackling the problems that have been handed down, and that devolution is working to the benefit of people in Scotland.

Turning from devolved to reserved matters, I need not remind colleagues that the legacy of 18 years of Tory government is that some of the most deprived communities In Europe live in Scotland. The west of Scotland has suffered particularly badly, with approximately 50 per cent. of deprived areas located in the city of Glasgow. Life expectancy is three to four years lower in Scotland than in the United Kingdom as a whole. The main cause is well-known—massive unemployment resulting from the destruction of our traditional industries and our manufacturing base since 1980, by Mrs. Thatcher and her friends, although it is almost impossible to find a friend of Mrs. Thatcher now.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I am one.

Mr. Marshall: Guilty. The hon. Lady is courageous to say the least.

To be frank, my first reaction to the Westminster Government's response was disappointment, because it was more of a holding reply and less positive than I would have liked, but a lot has changed since then. Much water has flowed under the bridge, and it is fair to say that when our inquiry was conducted and the report was published things were starting to happen. Joint working arrangements and spending priorities were being considered, structures were being set up, and much of the planning process and the necessary actions were in the pipeline. Perhaps the timing was one of the reasons for that.

A great deal has changed for the better since our inquiry started two years ago. I have often said that nothing concentrates the minds of Ministers and civil servants more than a Select Committee announcing an inquiry and they realise that they will have to respond to the questions that arise. Even though the initial response is not necessarily to accept or agree with conclusions of Select Committees, it is remarkable—though probably purely coincidental—that many of the recommendations eventually come to pass. That is one of the greatest benefits of Select Committees.

Tremendous credit must go to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, not only for his anti-poverty measures in the United Kingdom, but for his global leadership in tackling poverty and debt among the world's poorest nations. We talk about poverty in Scotland but the concept is relative. One should travel to some third-world countries. I have never been to Mozambique but—goodness knows—we are not comparing like with like when we talk about poverty in our country and in countries such as Mozambique. It is to the Government's credit that my right hon. Friend is probably the recognised world leader in attempting to help the rest of the world in that respect. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, who was a successful Minister in the Department for International Development, will confirm that in his closing remarks.

The Labour Government have turned the problem around. They have made a substantial difference. The Scottish economy is performing strongly and

unemployment is at the lowest level ever recorded, while the number of people claiming unemployment benefit is the lowest for a generation—since the days of the last Labour Government. We are embarking on the biggest post-war hospital and school building programme. For example, Glasgow is rebuilding all its secondary schools to give state-of-the-art educational facilities to all its pupils.

My role in opening the debate is mainly to explain the background to the inquiry, its nature and extent, and to set the scene for the debate. I have raised many issues, but there are others that I have not mentioned. I have also refrained from quoting figures and statistics. I expect subsequent speakers to do that, and to raise new issues. However, I wish to flag up several points, which I hope will be considered by the appropriate Ministers.

With regard to the lack of adequate statistics, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for his extensive written reply of 23 February to my parliamentary question. It was 17 pages in length, and it quoted statistics for every Scottish constituency on benefits, families, pensioners, unemployment, winter fuel payments and other subjects.

It is important to collect useful, accurate and up-to-date statistics, especially on poverty matters. Such information is neither useless nor a waste of public money. It is necessary in order to do the job properly. The lack of such statistics was one of the difficulties that the inquiry encountered. Many statistics are outdated; some are based on the 1991 census, although we are embarking on a new census. As those statistics are 10 years old, they do not even relate to the new constituency boundaries. It is even worse that statistics on matters such as poverty are not collected at all in some parts of the country. Given the cost of collecting them, that is understandable, especially in remote rural areas. However, it could be argued that they are even more necessary in such areas: it is alleged that there is great poverty in rural regions, but there are no statistics to back that up.

The Committee made several recommendations with regard to the new deal. The new deal has been a great success and we would like it to be even more successful. Therefore, I hope that the Government will reconsider our arguments for longer work-related options and for parity between the various programmes.

I hope that the promised Government review of consumer credit legislation will tackle the ease with which people can obtain substantial credit, frequently at excessive rates of interest. The methods employed by credit companies must be investigated. I do not know how some of them manage to stay within the law. It is also necessary to investigate interest-free credit arrangements whereby customers make a number of low payments followed by a substantial final instalment. If £1,500 is borrowed at interest-free credit for 12 months, the customer might pay 11 instalments of approximately £68, followed by a final payment of £750. If that sum is not paid on time, the customer will fall foul of the agreement, the small print of which might state that interest at a rate that is frequently as high as 30 per cent. is owed on the sum that was borrowed at the outset, rather than the sum remaining at the end of the year.

If that is the case, a letter might be sent, inviting the customer to pay low sums for the next couple of years. Therefore, instead of borrowing £1,500 interest-free for a year, the customer will pay many hundreds of pounds more, although I have forgotten the precise figure for this example. Finance companies know that many customers will not be able to afford the final instalment, but they encourage them to keep paying, and then to pay the extra interest, because they make fortunes out of such arrangements. That is sharp practice and it should be outlawed. I know about these matters, as I have entered into such an arrangement. Interest-free credit deals should be arranged so that people pay only a series of equal payments, rather than commit themselves to a large final payment.

Credit unions, money advice projects and citizens advice bureaux perform a valuable role to help people with money problems in my constituency. As debt is one of the major problems in contemporary society, along with drugs and crime, such organisations must be supported. They are making an increasing contribution to dealing with the problems that are caused by poverty, and they deserve more recognition.

I am angered by the negative coverage that my constituency receives. Opposition politicians who know better condemn the people of Shettleston. The east end of Glasgow was once the workshop of the city, but the selective overspill policy that built the successful Scottish new towns has created great problems for the area and its people. On top of that, they had to face 18 years of the ravages of a Conservative Government. Despite all that, a tremendous and excellent community spirit exists in all areas of my constituency. I get angry when I see the same old photos of derelict land and graffiti in the media. That is all that is portrayed. My constituents also get angry because they do not recognise the area in which they live in such portrayals.

Why do we never see photographs of Glasgow green and the People's Palace, which is a world-famous museum? Why do we not see the international rose trials held in Tollcross park, which must be one of the loveliest places in the whole city? Why do we not see the winter gardens, which have been recently restored thanks to a heritage lottery grant of £2 million? Why do we not see the £9 million Olympic-standard swimming pool, which is part of the east end leisure complex visited by many thousands of people each week? Why do we not see the new Gorbals leisure pool, which is a model of its kind? Why do we not see the multicultural, multiracial gala day held in Govanhill park, which involves the entire community? Why do we not see some of the enchanting school concerts, especially the annual concert by Quarrybrae primary in Parkhead, in which every child performs and does so brilliantly? Why do we not see the east Glasgow music festival in which a great variety of musical talent is displayed every year by secondary school pupils? Why do we not see some of the many social activities organised by pensioner groups in the area? Why does the media not have a good news week and cheer people up for a change, instead of knocking the area with all the depressing articles about people who are very kind and generous whenever there is an appeal or a good cause, and about people who have helped to build the wealth of this country but have been

[Mr. Marshall]

cast on to the dole or the slag heap as a result of the closure of traditional industries—steel, engineering, coal mining and the rest?

Of course there are problems in my constituency. There are problems in every constituency. However, the problems are being tackled. The blight and uncertainty caused by the future and the route of the M74 has gone away. The future of Celtic Park, which delayed the development of the Parkhead area for several years, has been resolved. Celtic now has one of the best stadiums in the world, as befits the first United Kingdom team to win the European cup, champions-elect of the Scottish premier league this year and potential treble winners. It is now building a team to match. I say that, and I am not even a Celtic supporter. It is an example to other clubs in the UK.

Health in the constituency is improving, despite periodical reports from academics that seem to show that merely to live in Shettleston is to take one's life into one's hand. I have stayed right in the centre of the constituency for 30 years, and I would not wish to stay anywhere else. I have good neighbours and one of the best outlooks in the city beside a park. It is a place to be proud to live in, and not as the media portray it.

Educational standards are rising. Last Friday, I attended an event at the John Wheatley college, which is named after one of my predecessors. He was the most famous Member to represent the constituency and the first Minister for Housing and Health in the 1926 Labour Government. I spoke to three sixth-year girl pupils from Eastbank academy. One of them is going on to Glasgow university and hopes to do research into AIDS and other diseases, one is going on to Strathclyde university and hopes to become a teacher, and one is going to the Glasgow College of Building and Printing to study photography and hopes to specialise in forensics. That is typical of the vast majority of young people in my constituency today, which is totally different from media portrayals.

For many years, Shettleston had the highest unemployment in Scotland, and was in the top 10 in the UK. The House of Commons Library figures for February show that it is now No. 9 in Scotland and No. 54 in the UK. From a high unemployment rate of about 20 per cent. under the Tories, it is now 7 per cent. That is real progress, and it is all down to the change of Government. The Tories wrote off cities like Glasgow. Labour cares and is proving it.

Rising employment, low mortgage rates, stability not boom and bust, the national minimum wage and its uprating, various Budgets and changes to taxation rates, various tax credits, winter fuel payments and pension increases have all resulted in most people becoming better off, over the lifetime of this Parliament, by several hundreds of pounds a year, and, in many cases, by thousands. No doubt colleagues will quote specific figures. As I said earlier, the Labour Government have made a difference; things have got better. Our record contrasts that of the Tories. To misquote Mrs. T yet again, they are no alternative.

Our inquiry and report were well worth while. I look forward to a constructive and interesting debate and, most of all, to the response of my hon. Friend the Minister.

2.55 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): This is a major report on a crucial subject that the Scottish Affairs Committee studied in depth. It is to the Select Committee's credit that it chose such a complex and wide-ranging subject for investigation and recommendation.

I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) about the Select Committee's approach being always sensitive and respectful. That is how we should all approach the work to which the Select Committee directs us.

I also echo the hon. Gentleman's positive approach. Only by accentuating the positive can we deal with the problems and give people the decent future that I am sure that we all want for all our fellow citizens. All Select Committee members hope that our findings will be of some practical help to our fellow citizens and the people whom we met during our detailed investigation.

The statistics on poverty are bleak. More than one in five people in Scotland live in households on less than half the average income—that is some 1.1 million people. Even more worryingly, the number has risen by between 2 per cent. and 2.5 per cent. compared with 1979. Research also shows that in recent years the number of people on very low incomes has increased. Those people must always be our concern. Worse still, the majority of Scottish low-income earners earn less than 40 per cent. of average income and are at the lowest end of the earnings league.

More than 350,000 children in Scotland live in households on less than half the average income—almost a third of Scottish children. In such debates it is easy to get lost in statistics, but our Committee has always realised that we are dealing with real people and real life, and it is our duty to try to improve living standards for all of them.

We also know from the statistics available that one fifth of working-age families live in poverty, as do one quarter of our pensioners. That is unacceptable in one of the wealthiest countries in the world per head of population. The scale of poverty shows the challenge that faces both the United Kingdom and the Scottish Executives.

The consequences of poverty are well understood and documented. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children states:

"Inadequate income causes stress, which exacerbates the health problems experienced because of poor diet, inadequate heating and poor housing."

We are not here to dwell on other people's misery; I hope that we can cure the problem and give people the decent start and the chance in life that we all want.

According to the NSPCC report,

"Low benefit levels also increase the likelihood of family tension and breakdown which compounds the distress to children."

The report also states:

"Most ... children on child protection registers are from low income families ... while ... the most commonly identified stress factors in all registered cases of child abuse are unemployment and debt."

Those are just some of the consequences suffered by those who live in poverty.

Such complex and difficult problems and demand a multifaceted response. There is no instant or quick solution. Present Government policies to deal with low

income are built around the minimum wage and the system of tax credits for those in work, and minimum income guarantees through the benefit system for disabled people and pensioners. If those policies are to succeed in combating poverty and its consequences, people need to receive an adequate income from their pay, enhanced if necessary through the tax credit system or benefits payments. However, neither benefits, including tax credits, nor the minimum wage are based on an assessment of need. The European Commission recommended that all European Governments should set minimum income standards at a level

"considered sufficient to cover essential needs with regard to respect and human dignity".

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he and his Scottish National party colleagues were not even here to vote when we passed legislation on the national minimum wage?

Mr. Welsh: I know that the Minister cannot let such an opportunity pass by, but the Scottish National party has always supported a national minimum wage.

Mr. Foulkes: Where were you?

Mr. Welsh: If the Minister wishes to reduce the debate to petty party politics, he is entitled to do so, but it is out of place. We are discussing a subject that is crucial to everyone in Scotland. The Scottish Affairs Committee has produced a consensus report. The Minister is not on the Committee, and perhaps he does not believe in consensus reports, but all Committee members have together produced recommendations that I hope that his Government will implement. If he must lower the tone of the debate, he can go ahead, but I will not join him. I join my colleagues in support of the recommendations and if the Government listen to them, our people will be better off.

Mr. Foulkes: Where were you?

Mr. George Stevenson (in the Chair): Order. The Minister has made his point and the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) wants to proceed with his contribution.

Mr. Welsh: The point is that I serve in two Parliaments, whereas the Minister serves in only one. All hon. Members, including Members of the Scottish Parliament, know that it is not possible to be in two places at once.

The minimum income standard was proposed, not as a guarantee of minimum income, but as a benchmark or standard against which earnings, benefits and pensions could be judged. The European Union is now seriously considering the matter, but it has not yet received any contributions from the Scottish Parliament. I hope that the Minister will encourage his colleagues in Scotland to contribute to the European measures to improve conditions for people throughout Europe.

Targets for the elimination of poverty are meaningless without a measurement of need, and the lack of such measurement is a fatal flaw at the heart of our efforts. There must be a measurement to allow us to set targets that can raise living standards. The Committee report recommends that the Government should have a proper measurement of income adequacy. Unfortunately, the Government do not accept that there can be a single research method that could calculate a minimum income standard for all families. I suggest to the Minister that by commissioning a study using existing research by the family budget unit at King's college, London and the Scottish poverty information unit, the Government would demonstrate fairness and a commitment to overcoming poverty.

In addition to implementing general policies, the Government must look at the specific victims of poverty—in Scotland one quarter of them are pensioners. The Department of Social Security argued that

"overall, pensioners have done relatively well during the past 20 years or so."

However, the evidence that the Committee received suggested that many pensioners struggle on a miserable income or live in the shadow of uncertainty about their long-term care in old age. Scotland's pensioners deserve respect and a decent standard of living after a lifetime's work.

Some 41.1 per cent. of all income support claimants in Scotland are pensioners, which means that about 172,000 must rely on state benefits to supplement pensions. Pension provision must therefore be the key element in tackling pensioner poverty and in meeting the needs of the Scottish people. The minimum income guarantee, free television licences for those over 75 and the winter fuel payments to pensioners are the Government's chosen vehicles to eradicate pensioner poverty. However, the minimum income guarantee relies on pensioners applying for income support by filling out a 100-question, 40-page form, which even asks whether they are pregnant—a strange question. It is of little surprise that between 21 and 32 per cent. of pensioners who are entitled to income support do not claim it. The Government must consider how they could further promulgate advice to pensioners to maximise the take-up of benefits. Local government could be a valuable assistant in complementing the Government's actions.

Our report recommends a simple practical step: to ensure that a full benefits check is offered to those of retirement age and that they are encouraged to take up that offer. That would help many people in Scotland. If a serious attempt is to be made to alleviate pensioner poverty, the process must be simplified, but the minimum income guarantee would not lift pensioner incomes above 60 per cent. of the median income after housing costs. If we are serious about wanting our pensioners to be able to live free of care and with dignity, we must direct attention to the universal state pension. The Government must consider linking the state pension to the increase in average earnings. As the report states, the resulting extra income would reduce the need for benefits and the accompanying claim forms,

[Mr. Welsh]

and would overcome some of the time and effort required to administer the minimum income guarantee. It would allow the Exchequer to receive the extra tax from more affluent pensioners and enable the increasing wealth of a prosperous society to be shared by the elderly. The Select Committee also recommended other measures to benefit the elderly and I encourage the Minister to implement them.

Those living in rural Scotland comprise a particularly vulnerable group who do not have to seek trouble. According to Wendy Alexander, former Minister for Communities at the Scottish Parliament, a quarter of the 1.1 million people in Scotland who are living in poverty live in rural areas. Higher transport costs, low-paid jobs and a higher cost of living are all reasons for poverty being a particular problem in rural communities.

Our report recommends that the Scottish Parliament should watch the cost of sea ferries and seriously consider the innovative scheme proposed by the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) to enable the proposed new highlands and islands transport board to sell petrol that it has bought in bulk on the open market direct to retailers. The savings would not be huge, but they would help to offset the higher price of petrol in rural areas. There is no quicker way to lower living standards and quality of life throughout Scotland than raising petrol costs. Anything that reverses that would be of great assistance to everyone in those areas.

Even greater inroads could be made into tackling rural poverty if the Scottish Parliament would consider introducing and financing a remote living allowance. It is disappointing that that has been ruled out because such a scheme would effectively compensate for the higher cost of living.

The issues in our report are of enormous importance and have implications for both devolved and reserved policy areas. I have been able to address only a few of the many issues covered by the report, but it is clear that much must be done to tackle what has openly been described as the

"biggest scar of a civilised society".

The Scottish Affairs Committee has made a serious attempt to investigate poverty and to recommend practical solutions. The United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Parliament should not only take note of our recommendations, but set about implementing them. The report goes some way towards addressing the acute problems and if the Government fail to take notice, they will be judged by that failure.

I am the longest serving member of the Scottish Affairs Committee and I am making what may be my last speech here as we head towards a general election. That gives me the freedom to say what I like. It has been an honour to serve with Chairmen present and past and with colleagues throughout the years. I retire undefeated from Westminster to concentrate on my work in the new Scottish Parliament and I would like to thank the Clerks and officials who have served our Committee and Scotland well over the decades. At the end of this Parliament, our report on an important subject is a substantial legacy to leave as a guide for action on behalf of a major sector of the Scottish people. I wish all my colleagues well, whatever the future may bring.

3.8 pm

Mrs. Irene Adams (Paisley, North): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) on pressing for this debate. I also congratulate him on his speech. His insight into poverty and his description of his background has helped the Committee, and no hon. Member could have stood the inquiry in better stead. He has been superb throughout in pointing us in the right direction and we have been lucky to serve with him.

I do not have many notes and I do not intend to use a lot of facts and figures. If I cannot speak about poverty from the experience of my background and my constituency, I should not be here. Unlike my hon. Friend, I never suffered homelessness, but I came from a poor home. It was poor in money, but not poor in spirit—it was a stable, happy home. However, I should not like hon. Members or those who read my remarks to think that it is the norm for people such as me and my hon. Friend to end up in a job such as this having started from where we did. We are the exception that proves the rule, not the people who make the rule. Nobody should run away with the notion that anyone from our background can get here. They certainly cannot—it is very difficult indeed.

I start where we started when we produced the report, by asking what poverty is. Poverty is not always due just to lack of money; it can also be due to lack of opportunity. As a child, poverty was mostly clearly spelt out to me at my grandfather's knee. In 1926, he came to Westminster, not to serve as a Member of Parliament, but to knock on doors with other hunger marchers. He came here three times and was thrown back on a train to Glasgow. He was quite glad about that, because he had walked all the way here. He left school at 14, forged his birth certificate in order to join the Army, and served for four years in the first world war, having been a boy of 15 when he went to the trenches. He was wounded three times and gassed, and was twice sent home and returned to the trenches. He joined as a regular soldier, then served in India and Ireland—although he was not allowed to serve much in Ireland because he was of the wrong religious persuasion, and was often sent back to barracks.

My grandfather then married and had his family. Throughout the hungry 1920s, he often walked 15 miles a day for work. In those days, parish councils paid people's relief. His parish council was Greenock, but he had gone to live in Paisley. Therefore, to receive his parish money every six weeks he had to do six weeks' work in Greenock. He had no bus fare to get there, so he walked the 15 miles from Paisley to Greenock in the morning, did his 10 hours at Tate and Lyle—the sugar house—and walked back 15 miles in the evening: not an easy task. Throughout the 1930s, he had jobs on and off. In the late 1930s, he went back to the Army, and served in Orkney and Shetland during the second world war. After that, in the early 1950s, he got a job in the shipyard. I was brought up by my grandparents, and I remember him working there. When he was in his early sixties, he had an accident in the shipyard. A plate buckled and fell on his leg, practically crippling him. He received from his apparently unappreciative employers the grand sum of £50 in compensation for a life's work for his country.

Mine was a rich childhood in terms of hearing such stories from my grandparents. We had no money at all, but I never suffered poverty of opportunity, because they ensured that I had every possible opportunity. They also instilled in me the need to learn and achieve as much as I could at school. Not every child in my circumstances had someone like my grandfather with a huge personality to push them on their way. That remains true today. Children born into such backgrounds are too dependent on meeting one person along the way who will set them on the right road. That should not be happening. As a society, we should be ensuring that all children are set on the right road and have the opportunity to do what they want to do in life. The Government have begun to put children on that road. It will not be an easy task, but the Government tackled it early on, and I hope that they will continue to do so.

By the time that I had my own three children, I hoped that things would have changed, but each time that I was in the maternity hospital I was able, sadly, to pick out the children who would succeed in life and those who would fail. Mine is a small community, and I have been able to watch a lot of them grow up. To my eternal sorrow, I was absolutely right. Their fate was predestined, and that should not be so. If we as a Government cannot tackle that, we are not doing all that we should. However, the Government have taken 1.2 million children out of poverty, which is a good first step on the ladder.

Children who are born into such backgrounds experience poverty in a wide variety of ways. If there is not enough money for the electricity meter by a Thursday night, they have to sit in the dark with no supper, but they also have no heating or hot water when they get up on Friday morning. As a result, they do not smell too nice when they turn up for school; they are also tired and hungry and unable to attend to their morning lessons. That is the poverty faced by people at the bottom of society in this country. I agree that such poverty does not compare with the absolute poverty of the third world, and we should not forget that, but the poor in our society are 100 per cent. poor, and it is sometimes worse to be poor in a society such as ours. Here, the poor are surrounded by riches to which they and their children do not have, and never will have, access.

It is no wonder that it is easy for people from such backgrounds to drift into crime. I am not arguing that the poor always become criminals, but someone who is poor is more likely to go down that road than someone who is not. Poverty also leads people into drugs, which has been a sad blight on our society in the past 10 years. Sometimes, one has to forget the circumstances in which one lives and what better than to take the odd upper or downer? To begin with, the drugs are offered for free, and then at a low price, until one is hooked. As a result, the children of such parents are in an even worse situation—indeed, the worst of all. They must not only combat all the experiences of poverty, but cope with a parent who is out of it. Such parents are out of touch with all that is happening in society, and they end up providing little in the way of care for their children.

Such people get caught up in debt, which rules the lives of those in poverty. As the report demonstrated, often debt is not illegal but owed to reputable companies. In the light of one case involving a well-known company—we decided not to name it because it was far from alone—one might ask how reputable such companies actually are. We discovered that a loan of £500 from that company incurs an interest repayment of £310. In other words, one would have to pay back a total of £810 on a £500 loan. Often, people will get half way through such a loan and start to miss a few repayments, so the company says, "That's OK, we'll offer you another loan to repay the first one." A further loan of £500 would enable repayment of, say, £350 outstanding from the first. That would leave £150, but one would still have £800-worth of debt. On and on the circle goes, and such people go ever deeper down a spiral of debt from which they can never escape. I am delighted that the Government are to undertake a long-overdue examination of credit controls. It is certainly the people at the bottom of the pile who are being ripped off.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston, I am pleased that the Scottish Executive responded so quickly. I say that as a great supporter of devolution. It proves how much we needed a Scottish Parliament. We have three hours here today to debate poverty in Scotland, but it is a subject that requires much greater debate. There are people in this Parliament who recognised the need for another Parliament that could take time to look at such issues. Many of us here get sick of people asking us what we do now that there is a Scottish Parliament. The whole point of having one was to provide another chamber in which to discuss the things that we never had time to discuss here.

The Scottish Executive are in their infancy and have had problems. They will make mistakes, but we all do that. Mistakes are made even in this Parliament, which is of such great age. The problems will iron themselves out. The Government have tried desperately hard to tackle poverty, and are still doing so. I hope that they will continue, because we cannot let our children down for ever. Many children today are born at the bottom of the ladder, because the upper middle classes are not having as many children as they once did. It is up to society to look after those children, and we are the poorer if we do not. They are all our children.

3.21 pm

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Paisley, North (Mrs. Adams). Like her, I welcome the fact that the Scottish Parliament is finally providing the forum for proper debates on issues that affect poverty in Scotland. The Select Committee had chosen the subject of its inquiry before I joined it, and I was pleased to be able to participate. I join in the thanks that have been offered to its Chairman, the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), and to other members of the Committee, for the work that they have done.

It is possible, constitutionally, that there will be a general election soon. There has been a debate in the press on the thoughts of a party—one that might be elected—on what will happen to the Scotland Office. In such a debate, we must not lose sight of the need for scrutiny of the reserved matters that affect Scotland. Ministers of all Departments might be tempted to think that, as there is now a Scottish Parliament, they no longer need to worry about Scotland. However, they do

[Sir Robert Smith]

need to consider Scotland where reserved matters are concerned. The inquiry might have helped to remind Ministers in the Departments responsible for reserved matters of that, and to refocus their minds.

The inquiry will not be the last one into poverty in Scotland. Tackling poverty is a long, hard job. The inquiry has helped to focus minds, enabling us to begin to tackle the problem, but one Select Committee report cannot provide all the answers. However, we have raised important issues, stimulated people, and provided those who gave us evidence with a forum in which to have their voices heard in Parliament and their concerns placed on to the agenda. Like the Chairman, I was impressed by the witnesses and their evidence. I remember in particular the evidence of some pensioners who took over the Committee, welcoming and introducing themselves to it before the Chairman had had a chance to speak.

It is also important to go out and meet the people who will not come here and give evidence in a formal setting. They need a chance to have their voices heard by those who can influence reports and decisions, and bring their concerns to the attention of Ministers.

The Scottish Executive's response was positive and pleasing, and recognised that the establishment of the Scottish Parliament should not end all dialogue between Westminster and Edinburgh. It is important not to tread on each other's toes, but it is also important to keep working together. The hon. Member for Paisley, North pointed out the need for someone to get children on the right road. We need such a person in education, which is a devolved matter, and the Scottish Parliament must ensure that someone breaks the cycle and helps young people to make the most of their potential.

The Chairman mentioned that the economy is picking up, but we must test our strategies and policies in the light of events in the United States because there may be a more difficult economic climate in years to come, which will be the real test of how effectively we are tackling poverty and its causes. I welcome the report's recognition of poverty as a major issue not only in the urban areas that have been identified in the past, but in rural areas. The hon. Member for Paisley, North discussed living in poverty in an area where others do not. Obviously, poverty anywhere is a serious problem, but we must recognise that added dimension in the light of the widening crisis in the rural economy. Foot and mouth disease has affected not only farmers, but small businesses that relate to the tourist industry. The Government must recognise the problems in rural life.

Foot and mouth disease is linked with the impending general election that may or may not happen. My wife keeps saying, "I told you four years ago that the election would be on 3 May 2001." However, I do not think that she is privy to the private thoughts of the Prime Minister. We would know when we were working if we had fixed-term Parliaments. If the foot and mouth crisis happened in the fifth year of such a Parliament, debate about the date of the election would be academic unless there was a major constitutional crisis. We would not be in this pre-election purdah if the Prime Minister had said from the outset that he would serve for five years.

As a Member of Parliament, one issue connected to rural life and poverty that is proving difficult to tackle is the future of our post office network. Liberal Democrat Members wanted to meet the new post office regulator, but because the Budget was moved from Tuesday to Wednesday that was not possible. The regulator now says that he should not attend meetings with representatives of political parties because we are close to a general election. Effective political scrutiny will be closed down if we do not clear the air about the date of the election. The future of rural post offices is extremely serious because they are part of the social network that helps pensioners to link up with and obtain access to facilities in their communities. Rural shops tend to be supported by rural post offices; if the post offices go, the shops will follow. There have been few signs that that problem is being tackled.

The Government have gone for the means-tested approach to pensioner poverty. My party has attempted to impress upon the Government that if they pay a greater pension it will reach all pensioners, which means that the poorest will not have to make a claim. We have also highlighted the fact, which is supported by the evidence of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), that older pensioners tend to be poorer pensioners. If a major pension increase were targeted at older pensioners it would reach them immediately.

I have tried to improve the take-up of the minimum income guarantee in my constituency by putting out literature advertising the helpline. I have also arranged special surgeries to encourage people to come for advice, and I should like to thank the Benefits Agency for its support and hard work. As the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) said, the minimum income guarantee form is challenging, and, in reality, is an income support form with a new cover. I understand that the Government are discussing bringing in a smaller form tailored to the needs of pensioners. It would be helpful if the Minister would outline the progress that has been made and when it will be introduced. I sat at home before one of my surgeries thinking that I should get to grips with that form. When I examined it I was glad that Benefits Agency staff were attending the surgery to give advice because I would not have been able to help. However, that does not mean that people should not be claiming. Indeed, the Government may send out a wrong signal in trying to tackle that problem. My contention is that the poorest pensioners in our society are those who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee but do not claim it. Unless we tackle that problem urgently, we will be letting down those people badly. The message that I try to get across is that society wants to support our pensioners and to ensure that they have a proper retirement. Therefore, claiming the minimum income guarantee should not be stigmatised—it is their entitlement. Society has voted on that through Parliament, and it is there for pensioners to claim.

I am slightly disappointed about the timing of the Government response. The Select Committee published the report in July, but there was no response from the Government until December. I hope that the new brooms in the Scotland Office will sweep more quickly when responding to future Select Committee reports.

Mr. Foulkes: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is right about the new brooms, but I remind him that

Parliament was in recess for about two and a half months between the publication of the report and the reply.

Sir Robert Smith: I thought that the Government carried on over the summer; I did not realise that they went into recess as well as Parliament. I thought that the Government still tried to run the country during that time, but if I am wrong, I stand to be corrected. If that is so, perhaps the policy of less government could carry on throughout the year, rather than only during the three summer months.

Paragraph 33 of the carefully worded reply refers to

"Winter Fuel Payments of £200 this year for households".

It is my understanding that next year's winter fuel payment will be £150. It is important to get that across to people. The Minister indicates that that is not the case, which is interesting, because that does not chime with what others have said. It would be helpful, therefore, if he could make it clear when he replies to the debate that the payment will not drop to £150 next year. That would provide welcome reassurance for people who are budgeting for their expenditure next year, especially as we have had such a bad winter this year.

I want to deal with the concept of take-up, because the Government have gone down the road of means-testing with the working families tax credit. That involves encouraging people to get involved in the system and to fill in forms. The part of the report that particularly needs to be taken on board is the part that deals with the need to ensure that people receive advice. The reality on the ground is that advice centres in many areas are suffering cuts as a result of local government settlements and the problems and challenges facing local government. It is in the interests of the Benefits Agency that there is effective funding from the centre. The Government should ensure, through whichever Department—perhaps the Department of Trade and Industry—that advice and resources reach citizens advice bureaux and that people receive information. Obviously, well-informed people mean effective take-up. In addition, if people are better informed, less goes wrong with the benefits system and the Benefits Agency.

It is also likely that fraud would be reduced if people knew what they should be doing. Quite a lot of problems with benefit claims result from people thinking that they are doing the right thing when in fact they have misunderstood the system. I received some statistics for July 1999 from the Library. Of appellants who were at social security appeals tribunals by themselves, 44.9 per cent. were successful. With a representative to help them, however, 57.2 per cent. were successful. Having a representative makes quite a difference to outcomes and how well people do. We are dealing with benefits and people on the margins, so if they are not successful at appeal, that really hurts. Perhaps it should be worrying that 38.5 per cent. of all appeals are successful, because that suggests that we need to improve some of the earlier decision making. Those who appeal are probably the tip of the iceberg. Not everyone goes to appeal; many may feel that they are not entitled to a benefit and just walk away.

I am also concerned that the Government have reduced the ability to backdate claims at times of bereavement or other major family change, when people are not necessarily able to focus on paperwork and bureaucracy because they are focusing on coming to terms with what has happened in their lives. The Government should regret that and consider whether there should be more flexibility. If a person is meant to receive a benefit, the fact that he does not claim it does not mean that society has not seen his need for it.

That brings me on to the services that we provide. I say again that the Benefits Agency staff whom I saw were extremely dedicated in trying to help people. I particularly welcomed the fact that when someone came into the office but was not likely to be successful in claiming the minimum income guarantee, the staff might instead spot that he had a severe disability and ask whether he was receiving other benefits. That helps people: they might come in through the door for one benefit, but go out with another.

The computers that support the Child Support Agency and the Benefits Agency are a disgrace. A colleague looking over the shoulder of someone using the software for jobseeker's allowance noticed that a worksheet with workaround No. 155 was being used to deal with software problems. The computers had green screens, which some of us might remember from our university days, before we could afford proper modern screens. The Government are starting to talk about providing money for computers. The public service and major corporations underestimate the challenge of using new technology. Effective investment is required to get it right. Computer system failures mean that those who are most entitled to benefits do not receive them.

The credit system and the manner in which people are lured by interest-free credit is appalling. It used to be that a discount would be given to anyone who offered cash for goods that were offered on credit. There are no discounts for cash now, but deals that lock one into paying a lot of extra interest.

Another group that falls through the net is students. The problem first arose under the previous Government. I have never understood why students who fail to get a job in the summer months when they are not in education and have no means of support should fall through the net. We need to re-examine how we treat students and young people who receive housing benefit or other forms of support.

An issue that was rammed home to members of the Committee during the Western Isles visit is transport costs. It almost seemed that someone had briefed everyone on what they should say to us. I know that that was not the case and, therefore, how serious the issue is. The Western Isles is an extreme case. Those of us with rural constituencies know that transport costs are a problem nearer to home, but the Western Isles strongly highlight the difficulties. The mantra elsewhere is "education, education, education", but it was "transport, transport, transport" in the Western Isles during our inquiry into poverty. That is a challenge for the Government.

The Government emphasise work for those who can and security for those who cannot. A lot of the talk, action and initiatives centre on work for those who can. It is extremely important to encourage people who can to work, but there will still be those who cannot work who need security. Whoever is in power after the election—whenever it takes place—will have much to do

[Sir Robert Smith]

in that area. The social fund's cash limit is a serious challenge. It is farcical that in some areas, at the wrong time of the year, people cannot get the grants or loans they need, whereas in another area they might be able to. Housing benefit still needs to be addressed.

Overall, we need to examine how we assess the adequacy of benefits. Water and sewerage charges are going through the roof in Scotland. They are increasing dramatically because of past under-investment and the need to catch up. However, that does not play properly when it comes to benefits uprating. Water and sewerage charges must be paid. If they have increased by 10 or 15 per cent. but benefit has increased by only 3 per cent., the crunch is on. We need to re-examine how we define long-term benefit levels, especially for those who cannot work. The benefits system is still as it was in the days of the safety net, catching people between jobs. Some need support for a longer period.

The issue that frustrates me most is that of medical assessments for incapacity benefit and disability living allowance. The examples that we hear from colleagues about the number of successful appeals may be anecdotal, but there is a genuine sense that something is very wrong with the system. The National Audit Office is now reviewing its operation. I do not understand why some people are refused at the first hurdle. One person who had had his joints replaced because of a wasting joint disease was told by the benefits assessor, "You should be going back to work," but his surgeon said, "If you go back to work, you'll be back on my operating table and I will have to replace your joints." They may have been able to pass the tick-box test, but the long-term prognosis was not good. In that particular case, by the time that the appeal was won the person had died, and it was the widow who got the results of the successful appeal. That brought home to me the need to be far more sensitive when we deal with medical appeals and assessments. We must recognise that at the root of all these policy suggestions are individual people who are affected by our decisions.

3.40 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Listening to the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), I was reminded of my own childhood. I cannot compete in the poverty stakes. I grew up in a household in which I was secure and warm. I do not know whether we had a lot of money, because that was not something we were conscious of. We did not have a car, telephone, washing machine or a fridge until my mum went back to work when I was eight, which brought more income into the house, but it was a secure and loving home. The amount of money that family had was not something of which I was aware. My father worked seven days a week and that seemed to bring in enough money.

I was reminded of one of my first political experiences, which has helped to influence why I am here, sitting on the Labour Benches. The house that I lived in for the first 16 years of my life was a two-bedroomed council flat. It was a Wheatley house, one of the first council flats in Brechin. In my street there were two blocks of those flats and, a few years later, a whole housing estate was built to the same design—presumably to the same architect's plans—in what was called the "bottom end" of the town. The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) will know them well, because they used to be in his constituency.

I remember a friend from school taking me into her house, which was the mirror image of my house. As I said, mine was a warm, loving home. We did not have fitted carpets, central heating or double-glazing in those days, but we had beautifully polished linoleum with rugs and nice, well-kept furniture. My mother is still incredibly house-proud. As I walked into the mirror-image of my house, I was struck by the contrast. There was no carpet or linoleum on the floor of the hallway. In the living room there was a bit of linoleum, one seat and a broken settee. As we walked down the hall I looked into one of the bedrooms and noticed that the floorboards had been lifted and used as firewood. The poverty in that house—not merely in terms of the amount of money coming in, but the poverty of spirit and opportunity and of my classmate's aspirations—was so evident that it had a fundamental effect on how I perceived the world from then on. It made me realise how lucky I was and helped to influence my belief that it is crucial for any Government to deal with the problems caused by poverty. Poverty can devastate people's lives and grind people down. Even with a good education and health service, the low expectation is such that people living in poverty will never be able to lift themselves out of the cycle of deprivation.

I was glad when the Scottish Affairs Committee decided to look at the issue of poverty in Scotland because, when we were deciding what our next subject for investigation should be, there was some debate as to whether the Committee should exist at all. What was the point of a Select Committee on Scottish Affairs when everything Scottish had gone up to the Scottish Parliament? Those of us on the Committee argued strongly for its existence because there is still a great deal that is relevant to Scotland that is part of the reserved matters. My hon. Friend the Minister will put me right if I am wrong, but 55 per cent. of the budget spent in Scotland is still controlled by Westminster. Only 45 per cent. of it is at the disposal of the Scottish Executive. A great deal can still be done. A huge amount can be done by the Westminster Parliament to alleviate poverty, because social security, pensions and the tax system can make a fundamental difference to people's lives.

When I talk about poverty and people realise that I am a Member of Parliament for Aberdeen, they say, "Aberdeen is really affluent. Why on earth do you have an interest in poverty?" Yes, we in Aberdeen are lucky. We have a vibrant economy. The oil industry is going especially well at the moment, although I could not have said that two years ago. There is a huge amount of new investment in the North sea. We have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the whole of the United Kingdom—well under 2 per cent. in my constituency and falling. It is a well-heeled, affluent area, but it has pockets of poverty and deprivation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, North (Mrs. Adams) said, that can often make the poverty seem worse. If a person lives in an affluent society, what he fails to have is shoved in his face every day.

My constituents who are unemployed in an area of low unemployment face difficulty. If they cannot get a job, what does that say about them? If jobs are available,

there is a skills shortage and people are crying out for people to work for them, but if they still cannot get a job, it reflects badly on them as individuals. That can cause psychological problems, which is perhaps why such people suffer stress and depression. If they could get themselves into work, out of poverty, many such problems would be alleviated. However, many people cannot break out of the cycle because it has so much of a grip.

When compiling the report, we recognised that the main route out of poverty is work—work for those who can, security for those who cannot. When the Select Committee was formed in 1997, we examined the new deal for the young unemployed. The most recent figures in Aberdeen, South show that youth unemployment has fallen by 90 per cent. I found out about that from the Lobby correspondent for the *Evening Express*. He telephoned one morning and said that he needed a comment from me about such a drop in unemployment. Without thinking, I said, "Bloomin' 'eck, that's amazing." It was amazing. I could not believe the figure. A reduction in youth unemployment of 90 per cent. is fantastic.

However, it is not only the young, but the long-term unemployed, who are finding jobs in Aberdeen, South. When we came into government, we were told that such people would never get jobs and that they were unemployable because they had been out of work for too long. It was said that they were no longer job ready and would not be taken on. The number of long-term unemployed in Aberdeen, South has dropped by 64 per cent., which is again a huge drop. People are now in work. I hope that they are earning enough to be paying taxes. They are now contributing to society and coming out of poverty.

I am glad that the national minimum wage will increase to £4.10 in October this year. Like many, I was desperate for provision for a national minimum wage to be on the statute books. I was disappointed that it was only £3.60, but I was aware that putting it into law was the first stage. We had to prove that it would not lead to unemployment or destabilisation of the economy.

I am glad that the Low Pay Commission recommended that the national minimum wage should increase in line not with inflation, but with earnings. The rate of £4.10 will make a huge difference to my constituents. At first, I thought that the minimum wage would not affect Aberdeen, South, it being an affluent area. I then discovered that the second highest number of people in any one constituency in Scotland who benefit from the minimum wage lived in Aberdeen, South. That was a puzzle, until I worked out that it was because people were in work and because we have a large sector that services the oil industry. Many women are in low-paid cleaning jobs or service jobs or are working in pubs. The minimum wage affects areas with low unemployment more than areas with high unemployment, because a person who is not in work cannot benefit from the minimum wage. My constituency has benefited from the minimum wage and I am sure that it will continue to do so.

If one adds such policies to the raft of social inclusion policies that the Government have introduced, we begin to see a difference. In the first two years of the Government's term—when we embarked on the report—such changes were not seen. Legislation was being passed in Westminster, but the effects on our communities were not seen. Four years after the election, people on the ground are noticing the policies' effects. Policies such as early intervention and the provision of money from the new opportunities fund have improved schools, and that extra funding is beginning to break the cycle of poverty and lack of opportunity for many children in my constituency. There is a different atmosphere in many of the schools that were beleaguered before 1997 and a new sense of optimism. The McCrone report and the McCrone settlement for Scottish teachers have also helped. Schools that were struggling now feel that they can play their part in ending the cycle of poverty and deprivation.

The Government were right to begin with children, and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, North was right to say that the Government's emphasis on children has lifted 1.2 million children out of poverty since 1997. I was interested to note that the Government claimed to have lifted only 1 million children out of poverty until the figures of the Child Poverty Action Group were published a few weeks ago, which told us that we were doing better than we had thought and that the figure was 1.2 million. Children are being looked after.

At the other end of the scale are people who cannot work because they are beyond working age. The Government have helped pensioners. Our report was slightly critical of the Government's action for pensioners. However, with the increases in the basic state pension and the minimum income guarantee, most pensioners—certainly pensioners who claim everything to which they are entitled—should be coming out of poverty. I accept the comments made by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) that we have much to do to ensure that pensioners claim what they are entitled to: it is not charity, but their entitlement. Anything that can be done to simplify the bureaucracy, administration and form filling of the claiming process should be done, and the helpline has assisted pensioners in dealing with such processes.

The hon. Member for Angus said that there should be a measure of poverty based on need; we should calculate how much money people require to live, and ensure that they have that amount. I contend that the minimum income guarantee does that. A person who works in the citizens advice bureau in Aberdeen compiled some figures for me. He examined the benefits that a pensioner couple on the minimum income guarantee receive. Such a couple would claim housing benefit, a council tax rebate and the £200 winter fuel allowance. They would also probably be exempt from tax and national insurance, and would not pay into a pension scheme. If one compares such a couple with a person in work, their disposable income is equivalent to that of a person who earns £16,000 a year. That is a stunning figure, and the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine would agree that it is a reasonable amount based on need. The minimum income guarantee has delivered that to our pensioners. Clearly, people who are in work have to pay for things such as travel to work, taxes and national insurance which pensioners do not.

[Miss Anne Begg]

On top of the minimum income guarantee, there is a proposal to introduce a pension credit. During the recess last summer, I spoke to most of the pensioner groups in my constituency. They felt that it was not just pensioners living in absolute poverty who needed to be helped, but those living just above the minimum level. The pension credit should certainly achieve that. The comments of the chairman of the pensioners group in Aberdeen who was quoted in the local Aberdeen newspaper a couple of weeks ago, that the pension credit would affect only a few pensioners, were simply not true. It will affect 3 million pensioners, or perhaps 5 million—I have forgotten. The number of pensioners who will be better off in 2003, when the new pension credit will be introduced, is not inconsequential. I have spoken for longer about that than I had intended.

Disabled people, or people with disabilities, probably suffer more poverty than any other group in society. The statistics prove that such people are less likely to be in work and more likely to be dependent on benefits. They are more likely to be living in poverty than any other group in society. As a result of a constituent raising the issue with me, I have recently become concerned about the disincentives in the current system that do not encourage disabled people to get back into work, and about one of the problems in relation to therapeutic earnings. One reason why disabled people do not always want to take a job is that they are frightened that, if they cannot manage the job, they will begin to lose their benefits. The Government made that less likely by allowing a year's grace: if a disabled person's work placement fell through, he failed to carry on the work or the job became too much, and the period of work had been less than 12 months, he was able to return to his previous level of benefit. That was welcomed.

However, many such people want to work many fewer hours. They might not want to go back into full-time work or even do 16 hours of work a week, which would allow them to qualify for the new disabled person's tax credit. They might want to do only a few hours of work to see how they managed. They would therefore have to qualify for therapeutic earnings, which would give them some money and would not mean that they lost incapacity benefit. However, I learned from the example of my constituent that the process was unnecessarily bureaucratic and difficult. Everything had to be done in the right order: people had to get their doctor's permission before going to the Benefits Agency and before going into work. If they did not do it in that order, they lost their benefits. That is exactly what happened to my constituent, who experienced two months of absolute hell while she tried to get her benefits restored.

I am pleased to say that my constituent's benefits have been restored, and that she is still doing a couple of hours of work a week. However, it was a horrible experience. I have subsequently been in touch with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, and I am pleased to announce the answer that was given to a parliamentary question that I tabled today. Changes are to be made to the way in which the therapeutic earnings rule operates. From April 2002, the therapeutic work rule will be withdrawn. People will not have to prove that work will be therapeutic. Someone who is on incapacity benefit or severe disablement allowance and who wants to do less than 16 hours of work a week will be able to earn up to £60.50 without losing incapacity benefit.

That will make a huge difference to those who fell between stools in terms of the therapeutic earnings rule. Such people had to prove that the work in question would be benefit the condition for which they received incapacity benefit. Therefore, work would not be therapeutic for someone who had a chronic progressive disease. It might be psychologically therapeutic, but it would not meet the criteria set out.

I am sure that the change will make a huge difference and remove one of the blocks to helping disabled people get into work. They will receive £60.50 for only a year, but in that year they will be able to find out whether they want to work more than 16 hours, which would mean that they would qualify for other benefits or earn enough to live comfortably. If they cannot manage to do so, they can move back and continue to be able to earn the amount that they can earn at present, £20 a week. The amount is being increased from £15 to £20 a week. Disabled people will no longer have to go to their doctor to prove that the work is therapeutic. They will be able to earn that money. I have not been able to get hold of my constituent to let her know about that, but I am sure that she will welcome it.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.15 pm

On resuming—

Miss Begg: I was about to finish my speech before the suspension in any case, so I shall draw my remarks to a close. There is still a long way to go before poverty in Scotland is brought to an end, but to say that is not to underestimate the Government's achievements. I hope that the Committee's report has gone some way towards influencing the Government to ensure that poverty remains at the top of their agenda. There is no doubt that we are moving in the right direction for the first time in well over a generation and, given a second term, the Government can build on the excellent work that they have begun. It is essential that we continue to tackle the scourge of poverty, because eventually we must make it a thing of the past.

4.16 pm

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): I thank you, Mr. Stevenson, for the opportunity to participate, and I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) on securing this important debate. He made the wonderful suggestion that we should have a good news week, and I can list the things that I would mention in that regard. Certainly, I am exceptionally proud of the Hamilton water palace, and the new museum in Hamilton with its specific area for the Cameronians is most welcome. We also have a wonderful new shopping centre that I am delighted with, particularly as I can take some credit for it during the general election campaign.

It is particularly important that we provide sports facilities for young people, especially those who may turn to drugs and under-age drinking. If such facilities enable them to move away from damaging peer groups, we will make real progress.

I did not join the Select Committee until after the Hamilton, South by-election, so it had already begun its work. I discovered that its members worked together positively in their meetings, and in a way that differed from my expectation. However, back at the ranch—in debates such as this—the situation is rather different. If the poor had listened to the part of today's debate in which we tried to score points off each other, they might well have been horrified. It would be wonderful if we could concentrate our efforts on ensuring that the poor benefit from our expertise and see the positive, rather than negative, aspects of political parties.

I should like to raise a number of issues, including credit unions. We took evidence from the new credit union in Blantyre, which has 2,000 members, and the Hamilton credit union. Credit unions provide an opportunity for the poor to escape those who exploit them. Such people offer money at huge rates of interest, which makes it very difficult ever to escape their clutches. Often, the way to pay them off turns out to be selling drugs, so I certainly support credit unions. Last week, the Scottish Executive set aside £1.5 million to that end. That is a very positive step, and should be considered in the light of what we in the Westminster Parliament are doing.

Mr. Welsh: The corporate body of the Scottish Parliament, of which I am a Member, supported an initiative from Members of the Scottish Parliament to set up a credit union linked with the Parliament. I am happy to see that the hon. Gentleman's ideas are being put into practice, and I hope that credit unions will flourish and achieve a great deal for the people who join them.

Mr. Tynan: I concur with everything that the hon. Gentleman said. The research showed that credit unions gave people in the community the opportunity to look after and govern themselves. Credit unions are able to go to people who fall into debt and say, "If you need help, we are part of the community, and good practice operates."

During my time in Parliament, I have paid close attention to the continuing debate about pensioners, in the course of which some of my fellow Members have expressed the belief that pensioner poverty could be tackled differently. Over the past 20 years, the gap between rich and poor pensioners has widened. The income of the richest fifth grew by 80 per cent., whereas that of the poorest rose by only 30 per cent. Clearly, the Government had to address that imbalance. During this Parliament, more than half the extra money that has been spent on tackling pensioner poverty has gone to the poorest third of pensioners. That is to be applauded. The minimum income guarantee, as a tool for the specific purpose of narrowing the gap between rich and poor, has been central to that approach.

From this April, the figures will be £92.15 for a single pensioner and £146 for a couple. From 2003, those figures will be £100 and £154 respectively. I sincerely believe that we will be able to deliver that, because when the election comes we will manage to secure another large majority. I know that that is making a difference in my constituency, where 2,000 people are better off. However, take-up is a key issue. The Department of Social Security estimates that 500,000 people are not receiving this benefit and that between 21 per cent. and 32 per cent. of pensioners who are entitled to income support do not claim it. We must consider how best to reach those people, because that will make a real difference.

Every hon. Member has the opportunity to encourage people to take up the minimum income guarantee, regardless of how they feel about it. The Government's major publicity campaign has been one instrument in achieving take-up. However, the detailed claim forms are an obstacle, and the Minister must recognise that the best way forward is to make it much easier for people to claim. With regard to the phone line, someone on the phone is a faceless person, and having to give personal details in such circumstances often deters pensioners from making a claim.

The Scottish Pensioners Forum has spoken of the need for more pensioner advice centres. Such centres could have a larger remit than simply helping people to fill in forms. For example, they could be in well-publicised locations such as supermarkets or community centres, or arrange home visits to disabled people. About 18 months ago, South Lanarkshire council decided that it would contact every pensioner in South Lanarkshire, and targeted areas such as East Kilbride, Clydesdale and Hamilton, South. About 400 people in East Kilbride who were entitled to benefits had not claimed them. That initiative provided the opportunity to reach the people whom we do not normally reach, for whatever reason. Home visits and the establishment of pensioner advice centres would be a step forward.

The basic state pension must remain the foundation of any future provision. I recognise that there have been many calls to restore the earnings link, and we have discussed that. However, a universal increase in pensions would create an enormous funding problem. To tackle pensioner poverty, we must accept that the poorest pensioners in society need additional support. The minimum income guarantee provides such support. Simply to restore the earnings link would mean that people such as me, who can live on a pension after retirement, would receive the same benefit as those with no pension at the poorest end of the spectrum. The Government have recognised that, and are making real progress.

The Government are right to target those in greatest need. Changes resulting from the pension credit will enable us to make some progress in convincing people that they should be saving for their old age. Those with, say, £100 of credit who are entitled to a small pension of £90 will still benefit, in that they will receive 60 per cent. of that pension. It is essential that we deal with such situations.

We need to look at the operation of the social fund. The people who apply to it are those who most need our help. The current management and distribution of the fund are not the best ways of resolving the problem of poverty. I would like the social fund to be reviewed so that money from it is available to the poorest in our

[Mr. Tynan]

society, enabling them to have a better standard of living. I do not want to mention my own background. When my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) spoke, I thought that she was describing my house. The only difference was that we burnt the doors as well.

4.27 pm

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): I am not, and never have been, a member of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, but I chair the all-party poverty group. I was partly responsible for establishing the group after the international UN year on poverty. All the Governments that signed up to that year had to demonstrate how they were going to tackle poverty, and the UK coalition against poverty was established. It approached the House in 1996-97 to ask if we were prepared to establish a group on poverty.

The group has campaigned in a rather unique way, which has been, I think, the best way to tackle poverty. The Scottish Parliament has looked at using the same method, although I do not know whether it has made a decision. I do not want to knock the Select Committee report. It is excellent, and I support it in its entirety. However, the Committee did not consider that method of tackling poverty, as I discovered when I asked its chairman about it. I will return to that later.

Hon. Members on both sides have referred to credit unions, which are important. In such a subject, we can see the best of devolved government, with the Westminister and Scottish Parliaments working hand in hand. Financial services is not a devolved matter. The consultation period on document CP77 ends tomorrow—23 March—so some comments made today might become part of the consultation process. The document sets out the strategy for a new form of credit union and new regulations for credit unions. Last week, the Scottish Minister for Social Justice, Jackie Baillie, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland made an announcement, followed by a debate in the Scottish Parliament, that £1.5 million will be made available to the credit union movement in Scotland.

That money will be used to develop the sustainability of credit unions and to increase their membership from 120,000 people to 5 per cent. of those involved in Scotland. It is also to be used to increase the number and skills of volunteers, to bring about a change in public attitudes and to assist all credit unions to meet the new regulatory framework. Credit unions themselves will be able to access the money, although I know that they have concerns. From talking to my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary, who has responsibility for credit unions, I know that their concerns are being heard. Eight roadshows on the consultation document have been held throughout the UK.

4.31 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.43 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Ross: I was saying that the Scottish Executive, working with the Westminster Government—that is how we envisaged devolution working—announced a £1.5 million action plan to help the credit union movement in Scotland. That was followed by a debate in the Scottish Parliament during which a document entitled "Unlocking the Potential: An Action Plan for the Credit Union Movement in Scotland" was launched. I recommend that all hon. Members obtain a copy of that marvellous document, which, unusually for an Executive document, not only sets objectives and targets, but identifies exactly who will be responsible for delivering them. That is an example of the new Parliament in Scotland doing something different and being held to account, which is to be welcomed.

Last Saturday, I went to a meeting of my local credit unions, which are worried about the consultation process because they believe that their concerns are not being heard. I took the opportunity to reassure them, because my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury has said that she has listened to those concerns. My local credit unions are also worried about the proposals for capital requirements and liquidity of assets—a subject that was raised at every credit union roadshow. The fear that they might have to hold 20 per cent. of their assets at all times has been listened to. I believe that, when the consultation has finished, there will be good news for my colleagues in the credit union movement.

Many credit unions fear that they will not be ready for the switch-over on 1 July 2002. The Treasury understands that and Shaun Munday of the Financial Services Authority, who will be responsible for the new regulation, made a speech in Blackpool two weeks ago during which he stated clearly that time will be given to credit unions to sort themselves out. They will be able to take advantage of the £1.5 million that has been given to the credit union movement in Scotland and sort out some of their problems.

Another anxiety is that regulation and registration will cost thousands of pounds. It would be ridiculous to ask small credit unions for such a sum. I have the impression that the sum will be much reduced to the low hundreds of pounds if any contribution is asked for.

The Scottish Parliament introduced the document in response to concerns expressed by Members of the Scottish Parliament and the credit union movement. It will be welcomed and I commend it to my colleagues. I am the chair of the all-party poverty group. If there is a weakness in the document, it is the lack of a recommendation to involve directly the people living in poverty and to hear their voices. During the past four years, Secretaries of State and Ministers of State responsible for dealing with social exclusion have come to this Room to meet people who are living in poverty. Three weeks ago, before he delivered his Budget statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer spoke directly to people who are living in poverty. Last night, my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury spoke to them about tax credits and other credits.

If Members of the Scottish Parliament want to deal with poverty, they must involve those who live in poverty. They must find a mechanism by which to hear them and enable them to talk directly to Members of Parliament, civil servants and Ministers in the Scottish Parliament. That was the recommendation of the recent "Voices for Change" conference. Young people from

Scotland said, "We want our voices to be heard; we are more than just a postcode." One weakness of the document is that it does not demand that we identify and directly involve people living in poverty, or allow them to demonstrate the effect of the policy and suggest how it could be improved.

I have been pleased to be able to participate in the debate and I should like to apologise to you, Mr. Stevenson, and to the Minister, because I must slip out to go to another meeting. I will not be able to hear the response of the Minister, who spoke about the issue only a few weeks ago in Dundee. He spoke about it in the global context rather than the local context, which the Chairman of the Scottish Affairs Committee mentioned at the time. The report is a marvellous document and has my wholehearted support.

4.50 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I am delighted to be able to take part in the debate, although I apologise to hon. Members for being absent for most of it. I suspect that they will understand my constituency pressures and that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross), I must dash off soon after my contribution. I apologise to the Minister if I am not present to hear his comments.

I joined the Scottish Affairs Committee in late November 1999 and it has been a pleasure to be part of the inquiry. I was somewhat thrown in at the deep end, but I learned to swim—against the tide on some occasions, I admit. I give credit to all Committee members and particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), who led the Committee so well during the inquiry. I was pleased that we were able to get out and about to different areas and see what was happening on the ground. This afternoon, hon. Members have mentioned the many elements that feed into the package of recommendations, such as health, housing, the environment and benefits—everything connected to poverty. However, I will limit my comments to only a few aspects of the report.

First, I wish to mention the national minimum wage. I come from a part of Scotland that was described as the area with the lowest-paid—sometimes the second lowest-paid—people in Scotland. The national minimum wage has made a significant difference to individuals and the local economy. Nearly £1 million has been injected into the economy of Dumfries. If we give £1 million to people on low pay, they will spend it and, in turn, that can create jobs. That has happened in the Dumfries area, and unemployment has fallen. The old saying that, "Money is made round to go round" is true in that case.

On the evening that the Low Pay Commission announced the level of the minimum wage, I was knocking on doors in Lockerbie. A man nearly tore the hand off me, asking, "How much will the minimum wage be? Will you explain it to me?" He was a forestry worker who worked 52 hours per week with top-line pay of £112. Forestry work is heavy, dirty and dangerous work and yet, at the end of the 20th century, someone was still receiving such poor remuneration for it. He was delighted with the national minimum wage and I am sure that his life is now somewhat better. However, that was only the start of lifting people out of poverty. Linking the national minimum wage with the working families tax credit boosted families in particular.

I come from a rural area and was delighted that the Committee visited my constituency to get a feel for what is happening on the ground. When people discuss rural Scotland, they normally think of the Highlands and Islands and nowhere else. Members of the Committee know that the reality is somewhat different and it is good that we got a flavour of other areas. As the report states, problems of rural poverty are easily overlooked. Rural poverty is no different from poverty in cities; poverty and affluence live side by side. There is a mythical view that country life is vastly different from what we here know it to be. Poverty exists in rural areas, which are not bright and shiny for people who are trapped there.

Life in rural areas is hard for many people. There is the compensation of the quality of life that people can experience, which is fine for those who move into a rural locality and begin to enjoy a different life style. My hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston mentioned that we paid a short visit to Finland and it was interesting to see what was happening there. We recognised during our visit that structural changes in farming and their human repercussions are not only a Scottish problem. It was interesting to see that the way in which things were restructured in Finland led to the loss of 30,000 farms.

Who knows what we shall see at the end of the current UK crisis? Clearly there will be fewer farms in the UK and in my constituency in particular. Some farmers may take the opportunity to opt out of their current means of earning a livelihood because it brings them a great deal of pain.

I spoke to someone today who has worked on a farm for 26 years. The farmer, who has lost his stock, does not want to return to the dairy side of the business. The farm worker is now surplus to requirements, but he did not seem downhearted when I spoke to him on the telephone this morning. He said, "All I want is a job. I want an opportunity to restart my life." He will get that because he has the right attitude, despite his difficult situation. The difficulty is that I cannot convince the local authority that he is a special case who should be quickly rehoused because he is about to lose his tied accommodation. We cannot help people through life if we are unsympathetic and do not listen to their difficulties. This is an extreme situation and I am disappointed when people cannot help. Unemployment could lead to a serious poverty trap.

As if poverty were not bad enough, the struggle of day-to-day living and surviving increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to become heavily indebted. The report gives an example from Glasgow where one company clearly operates to the disadvantage of poor people. The example was of a £500 loan that would generate £310 of interest, which is scandalous. We heard about credit unions this afternoon. The same loan taken out with Cranhill credit union would have shown an interest of £18.60.

My hon. Friends the Members for Dundee, West and for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) were exactly right when they discussed credit unions. The Scottish Executive must be praised for its action plan, elements of which offer real potential. We need to examine the

[Mr. Russell Brown]

social fund and how it operates. A plea was made to us during the inquiry about handing its operation to credit unions to get more value for money. There is a big question mark against that, but we must think seriously about how others can deal with poverty and use the finite resources better.

I am also worried about the way in which banks create problems for people. I have personal experience from constituency work. One example is of an experienced, elderly chap, who had continued to do a small amount of sub-post office work—filling in at holiday times—after he retired. He borrowed some money from the bank but, in his 74th year, he suddenly fell seriously ill with cancer. The bank had no mercy, and I had to intervene to stop it putting interest on top of interest and to let the man off from that spiral of debt. That bank responded. In general, banks are ready to hand out money to vulnerable people but are quick to chase them for it to be repaid. They often have no thought of how they could assist people's desperate plight; instead, they build more problems on top of it.

Undoubtedly, people in my area will get into serious difficulties, and I have appealed to the banks to be more responsive and show more heart. I am delighted that one major bank is taking the opportunity to meet me to examine not only the problems that farmers will have, but those that will exist for small and medium-sized businesses and self-employed people who find that they have no work.

The report and the Government's response offer a lot of hope. As Opposition Members would expect, I am delighted by much of what the Government have done on the national minimum wage, working families tax credit, the new children's tax credit and the minimum income guarantee for pensioners. Much has been done but, like many of my hon. Friends, I am convinced that there is still an awful lot more to do. We have not yet addressed all aspects of poverty, or the fact that many people are depressed throughout their daily lives. However, a start has been made, and I am confident that progress will be made through a second term of Labour government.

5.2 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I am not, and have never been, a member of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. I am a member of the European Scrutiny Committee but, like many hon. Friends, I have followed the many inquiries of the Scottish Affairs Committee since I was elected in 1992. The inquiry we have spoken about today was especially relevant and timeous, and I commend the Committee members, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall). I know a little of his history, and he did not mention all the places in which he had lived as he wandered around during his childhood. Many of them are in my constituency; I know that he went to Larbert primary school, which, at the time, was part of the old Larbert high school. It is now all to be swept away, because we have had five new high schools planned—including the new Larbert high school—in Falkirk, East since the Government came to power. My hon. Friend had better get back there quickly if he wants to take snaps of his former stamping grounds.

The Committee's inquiry was perceptive, with many excellent and well-targeted recommendations that I read with great interest. It was also effective because, from reading the Government's response to the report, it is clear that the report informed, often challenged and influenced Government policy. We are all here not just for power, but for influence, and the Government's response and shifts in policy have brought them into line with the Committee's recommendations. For example, concessionary travel for all pensioners is being introduced across the United Kingdom, not just Scotland, and the tax credit for disabled persons, which was highlighted in the report, has been introduced.

I want to highlight a serious point, rather than extend the work of the Select Committee, which did a stalwart job. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) referred to credit unions. In the previous Parliament, I was appointed liaison officer with the credit unions in Scotland. It was an interesting environment in which to work. I come from a large family. My granny ran a menage, which was basically a shilling club from which many people bought school clothes and winter blankets. I remember such transactions in my grandmother's home. Credit unions have now expanded greatly, so much so that they are in the White House. I often visited one that was operated by Strathclyde regional council, and Strathclyde police also has a large credit union.

Les Stalling from the credit union in Bo'ness and Abe Anderson from Grangemouth credit union approached me because they were extremely worried about the Financial Services Authority's approach to such matters. They are anxious that the burdens placed on them will be too great for them ever to become more than just fledgling organisations. They may be overburdened and even collapse. They are not concerned about hundreds of thousands of pounds, but a couple of thousand pounds for a union with only 300 or 400 members. However, that money is the difference between being able to obtain a cheap loan for a vital household commodity or school clothes for the children and not having such items. We must ensure that we follow up such matters. I welcome the document "Unlocking the Potential". I know that members of the Scottish Affairs Committee as well as Members of the Scottish Parliament will follow such a development. I should hate it to be stifled, preventing credit unions from growing into larger organisations.

I refer now to housing benefit and council tax benefit, which were not referred to in the report, and the need to link them automatically, so that they are passported as soon as someone applies for income support. I am sure that many others share my experience of people who fall out of employment and enter poverty. They must apply for income support and often, by default or bureaucratic muddle, it is months before they realise that they are not receiving housing benefit and council tax benefit. They usually find out when they receive a letter from the local council saying that they are £300 or £400 in arrears. That has a terrible effect on those who have lost their job or fallen ill. They find that they are stuck into a new phase of life from which they have to dig their way out.

Councils say that they will not backdate or write off such debts, but take money out of people's social security benefits for the next "X" number of years. It is a ridiculous situation. If it were backdated, the money

for which such people have applied would come into the local community, lift the burden from individual, impoverished families and, in a sense, boost the local economy. Instead of there being an infusion of cash from the national Government coffers, there is a drain on the resources of the very poor in Scotland. We must consider seriously how to link such matters and ensure that they are passported and backdated to the date of income support application.

The recommendations in the report on working families tax credit have been discussed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan). Job-poor means income-poor. It is clear that the effect of the credit on the family in work is substantial. In my constituency, 1,741 people have already claimed working families tax credit, which means that substantial increases in the resources are available.

The citizens advice bureau network has highlighted the fact that there are some serious problems with the way in which working families tax credit works. The first problem is that it is paid through an employer. I am not saying that employers are slow because they do not want to do the work, but they do not complete the paperwork quickly enough, which causes difficulties. People who should quickly be better off find that when they are working, they are worse off. Working families tax credit should be paid directly through the Inland Revenue, which would speed matters up considerably.

Another problem is that some people claim for child care, which is fundamental to getting families back into work. However, they have to make the claim for child care when they claim working families tax credit. Often, people get a job, claim working families tax credit and then make a permanent arrangement for child care. However, the claim cannot be backdated. Those affected must find the extra money until they get the child care element of working families tax credit. The claim for child care should be permitted at any stage of a working families tax credit application. That would be a substantial improvement.

The CAB has found that there is still a problem with the accuracy of information provided by the various tax credit offices. New deal advisers often fail to give people the correct information. The CAB suggests improving the training of those giving advice, so that they deliver one clear message.

People who receive the £70 working families tax credit should qualify for the same help as those who have means-tested benefits, because once a certain level is reached, they can no longer gain means-tested benefits assistance and end up no better off than when they started. I hope that will be taken on board when people examine the question of poverty.

On pensioner poverty, recommendation (w) about income adequacy has been mentioned. We must get a real measure of what is an adequate income for people to live on. The Committee recommended that strongly and the Government are taking it on board. The recommendation to increase the minimum income guarantee is an excellent one. In my constituency, 2,300 pensioners now have a vastly improved standard of living because of the MIG.

The link to earnings in recommendation (r) was dealt with by my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South. If we have the resources, we should use them to the best effect at the earliest possible moment. We must continue as we have done. Strangely enough, that was recognised in today's early-day motion 2, which states that the uprating in April

"for the first time in over 25 years, will exceed the percentage increases in both prices and average earnings"

Those whom we could call the usual suspects admit in the first part of that early-day motion that the increase is higher than if it had been linked with earnings.

A pensioner who received £84—the basic pension with a small addition—wrote to me to complain that his friend received the minimum income guarantee last year, which amounted to £78. That was all right, because he was receiving £84. However, this year, the friend was getting £92.50 and he was feeling aggrieved because he was receiving only £84. Of course, having only £84 means that he is eligible for the MIG. There is clearly a problem out there. People are wondering what they should be claiming and how they should go about it.

I commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) who is working with the churches in his constituency. Each church in his constituency has given a leaflet to every single parishioner, pensioner or not, and said, "If you're not a pensioner, give this to a pensioner relative or take it up with a pensioner friend," to increase the number of claimants. We could all use that network to bring everyone in. If we increase uptake, we will get the improvement that will greatly affect the level of poverty in Scotland.

I hope that the Committee does not see this as the last stage in its work. We now have a Scottish Parliament that will achieve many good things in partnership at a Scottish level and in a different way. However, the fundamental responsibility of the Government is to get the economy working right. In our last manifesto, we pledged that we would ensure that pensioners share in the increased prosperity. I hope that that pledge applies to everyone who is living in poverty. It is the responsibility of this Parliament to redistribute the resources of the UK to such people. I hope that the Labour party will be returned to government at each of the next two or three general elections. If that is the case, I predict that the economy will improve, and I believe that everyone in Scotland, and in the rest of the UK, should share in the increased wealth.

5.15 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I am pleased that today's debate is taking place. It is ludicrous and undemocratic to suggest that the Scottish Affairs Committee should be disbanded. The debate has shown that Scotland is relevant to Westminster and that Westminster is relevant to Scotland. That is an important point, and it has also been highlighted by the Committee's excellent report, which is very detailed.

I commend the Committee for its work and, in particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) on his commitment to the report and the subject that it addresses, and on his excellent presentation at the beginning of the debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) and for New Forest, West

[Mrs. Eleanor Laing]

(Mr. Swayne) have felt honoured to be members of the Scottish Affairs Committee, and they both apologise for the fact that they are unable to be present.

Mr. David Marshall: They have been good members.

Mrs. Laing: When the Select Committee Chairman says that my hon. Friends have been good members, I understand his meaning.

I am impressed by the way in which the Committee has gathered its evidence. It has not imperiously summoned people to Westminster. Its members have gone out and spoken to the people when they purport to represent, which means that the people are better represented.

I wish to point to a contrast. Other Select Committees enjoy travelling to California or Australia to gather evidence, or to other places with an agreeable climate. I am not criticising that, but the Scottish Affairs Committee evidently believes, as I do, that far more of life is to be seen in Glasgow than in most other places in the world—although I concede that the climate is bad, and nothing can be done to improve it.

I also agree with the hon. Member for Shettleston about the outside world's perception of Glasgow. On occasions, it is ridiculous. He offered an excellent list of some of Glasgow's good points; he stated that Glasgow is looking forward, and that the west of Scotland is at the forefront of many innovations affecting every aspect of modern life.

It annoys me when Londoners who visit Glasgow are surprised that there are trees in the city. They tell me that they were unaware that Glasgow has parks. They consider that the main reason why anyone would want to visit Glasgow is to view the Burrell collection. That is fine, but it is not what Glasgow is about, and neither is it what the people who make up the many communities in Scotland are about. However, I felt sympathy for a group of people who flew from London last summer to visit me in Glasgow. They telephoned from the airport to tell me that as the plane was coming in to land, they looked out of the window and were surprised to see that Glasgow was close to the sea, and had beautiful beaches. I asked them where they were.

Mr. Foulkes: Prestwick.

Mrs. Laing: The Minister is correct. It is apparent that he is proud of his constituency. However, to return to my story, Prestwick airport is referred to as Glasgow on the internet. That is why my guests thought that they were flying into Glasgow. I hope that the Minister will accept my anecdote in the spirit that it is offered; I wish to be nice about his constituency. Prestwick is a wonderful place. Immediately after they landed, my guests boarded a train to Glasgow.

As the hon. Member for Shettleston said, the purpose of a Select Committee is to hold Ministers to account and to make the Government sit up and take note. I sincerely hope that the report will do that.

Unsurprisingly, I take issue with the remarks of the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) on consensus. We have been happily sitting next to each other all afternoon, but the consensus will end now. Although it is good that the report is based on consensus, we in Parliament are supposed to argue and ask questions. It is only by doing so and by disagreeing with one another that points can be fully argued out, which is how the best conclusions are arrived at. It is not possible to take the politics out of Parliament—or, at least, not out of this Parliament.

I understand the position of the hon. Member for Paisley, North (Mrs. Adams). I am sorry that she had to leave the Chamber. She made a moving speech earlier. I know her constituency extremely well, and it is not easy to confront the social problems such as poverty that exist in places such as Ferguslie park. When generation after generation of people suffers the same deprivation and every experiment fails, it is difficult to deal with. The hon. Lady has herself acted courageously in her work on drugs.

The hon. Lady spoke about her grandfather and the real poverty and working conditions of the previous century. I could tell a similar tale about my antecedents. In listening to her, I realised how grateful I was to both of my grandfathers, neither of whom accepted the position to which they were born. They learned a trade, worked hard and did the best they could for their families. However, that does not change the fact that the goal of us all is to do something about the pockets of poverty that we find in every part of the country. We are all here because we want to improve our society; the question is how to do so. If I disagree with some of the comments made this afternoon and some of the report's recommendations, it is because I disagree not with the goal but with the method of achieving it.

I agree with the hon. Member for Paisley, North that a person's start in life means so much, and that is why educational opportunity is everything. No matter which type of home a child is born into, if that child is given the opportunity to broaden his horizons by receiving a good education and being encouraged to make the best of his educational opportunities, that is the best that a society can give the child. However, I agree with the hon. Lady that if a child is properly to benefit from the educational opportunities available, his home life must back that up.

I also agree with many of the comments of the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg). Poverty is not absolute. It involves a contrast; it is a relative concept. Indeed, hon. Members mentioned the Minister's previous ministerial position, in which he dealt with serious poverty in the third world, which makes poverty in the United Kingdom seem not like poverty at all. However, that does not mean that it is not poverty, because poverty is a relative concept. The hon. Lady was beginning to make me feel that I had been deprived as a child. We did not have a fridge or central heating and we had only a small black-and-white television, but it did not feel like deprivation, because no one was different. That was normal.

The pressures on families now are much greater. Perhaps it is a function of increased affluence that there is a contrasting increase in poverty.

Sir Robert Smith: If the hon. Lady wants to end consensus or feels the need for a debate—she mentioned increased affluence and the fundamental importance of

education—does she not believe that when there is a choice between tax cuts and investment in education, an affluent society should choose to invest in education?

Mrs. Laing: That is a very good question, and I am glad to see that the consensus has gone.

We should not have to choose between tax cuts and investing in education. Proper management of the economy and proper investment in education in a way that cuts bureaucracy puts money into schools and gives teachers the chance to teach will give children the opportunities that they need for the future. [HON. MEMBERS: "Come over to us."] It might be more comfortable here. I remember my allusions yesterday to Bannockburn. I prefer my splendid isolation.

The point is that a properly managed economy allows both investment in education and tax cuts, which allow people a choice on how to spend their earnings and thereby boost the economy. Both can be achieved if the Government manage the economy properly. However, I appreciate that the Liberal Democrat party does not understand that. That's fair enough.

In the spirit consensus I, was going to agree once again with Government Members, including the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan), who spoke about credit unions, as did many other hon. Members. Surely, that contrast that I mentioned between affluence and poverty puts pressure on families to spend more money and, therefore, to borrow more money and get into that dreadful spiral of debt. Society today is very materialistic because of advertising, commercial attitudes and information of an advertising nature, all of which put pressure on people. Some of the ideas in the report about the development of credit unions are highly commendable, and I hope that the Government pay attention to them.

As the hon. Member for Shettleston said, the main reason for a debate such as this is to hold the Government to account. They certainly should be held to account for their lack of achievement in relieving poverty. I say that with all due respect to the Minister who is with us this afternoon. He has been in his post for only a short time, but I am sure that over the next half hour he will give us some hope and ideas as to how he will tackle the problems. However, some of his predecessors have not done so. Their rhetoric is good, but talk about what a Government want to achieve is no more than a wish list if it is not backed up by action.

I wish to make three short points about the way in which the Government have dealt with the problems of poverty and the problems that they have created through their policies: first, there are too many small, unco-ordinated initiatives; secondly, there are too many targets; and, thirdly, the benefits system is too complicated—many other hon. Members made that point. I have a list of 12 initiatives. I will not read them out, as everyone knows what they are: health action zones, sure start trailblazers—they all have interesting names—the healthy schools initiative, sport action zones and so on. They all have good spinnable names, but the fact is that all those little initiatives—

Mr. Welsh: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Laing: I am sorry; I do not have time and I do not want to encourage consensus.

Those little initiatives are decent attempts to bring remedies to the problem. They do not, however, attack the underlying problem itself. The underlying problem can be dealt with only by providing educational opportunities, good health care and employment opportunities, to which the report alludes. If the society in which we live is not based on those three fundamentals, all the frothy little ideas in glossy brochures simply will not work.

My second point is about targets. I know that the Government are fond of targets, and I am not criticising the report in that respect. However, I may be more free to criticise the Government than are Select Committee members. If there are so many targets, how can we tell what we are achieving? The Government's first annual report referred to 40 indicators of success on which the Government wanted to be judged over the long term. Their second annual report on poverty referred to 43 different indicators of progress. The Select Committee report is therefore far more valuable than the reports being churned out by the Government. It is probably based on a far more general knowledge of the problem as well.

I do not need to discuss the complexities of the benefits system, about which several hon. Members have made good speeches this afternoon. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) introduced the subject and his comments on it are applicable throughout the country. I would not like to take an exam on the benefits system. I would not like to have to prove that I understand it, even though I try to do so. There is no reason why the systems should be so complex. There is no reason, as the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) said, why there cannot be better interaction between one department and another. If one department makes a mistake and does not tell a person that he is getting into debt, and another department says that there is no chance of the benefit being backdated, that person has no hope of getting back on his feet again. Those who suffer most are those who do not understand how to work the system. That is sad, because people who know how to work the benefits system get the best out of it, whereas people who are in real difficulty desperately need help to find out how to obtain support.

Recommendation (c) on page 56 of the report states:

"We believe a cross-departmental approach to the provision of support mechanisms within the agricultural sector is required which would also necessitate a close partnership working between the Scottish Executive and the UK Government."

The report was published well before the present crisis in agriculture and the countryside. The recommendations are good and I sincerely hope that the Government will pay attention to them.

The Minister has a lot of questions to answer this afternoon, so I shall conclude by saying that it has been a pleasure to examine this report and this subject. We are all trying to achieve the same goal. I hope that we shall hear from the Minister ideas for the future that will be better than some of the ideas of the past.

5.34 pm

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): Notwithstanding the most recent remarks, this has been an excellent debate. It has been enriched by

[Mr. George Foulkes]

the personal experiences of my hon. Friends the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), for Paisley, North (Mrs. Adams) and for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg). The quality of the debate has matched the excellence of the Committee's report, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston on that. On this occasion, I do not say "my hon. Friend" merely as a matter of form. He and I entered the House together, and I know of his deep and abiding commitment to the people of Shettleston—especially the poor people—whom he represents so well.

I congratulate all the members of the Committee on their work in producing the report. I agreed with the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) about one point—some of the Committee's critics, perhaps including hon. Members who are present, might now recognise its usefulness, as demonstrated by the report that it has produced and the debate that it has engendered.

I would recommend that anyone who is interested in poverty—and there are many such people in Scotland—should read the report. It describes the problems that we face and offers helpful comments both to the Executive in Scotland and to the Government in the United Kingdom. We have taken many of the report's recommendations on board in the eight months since it was published, and I am grateful to hon. Members for recognising the progress that has been made. Like many of them, those of us in government accept that there is much more to do.

It is a particular pleasure for me to be able to respond to the debate given my previous job in the Department for International Development—to which my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston referred—which was concerned with poverty eradication in developing countries. That gives me a particular empathy for the subject of today's debate.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) repeated the quote that poverty

"is the biggest scar of a civilised society."

However, he forgot to mention that that was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), the former Secretary of State for Scotland, when he gave evidence to the Committee. Even at that time, we recognised the importance of the problem and the ways in which we deal with it.

I have more time than I had yesterday to deal with the points that hon. Members raised. However, if there are any substantive points that I do not cover, I shall write to the hon. Members concerned.

We have taken a large range of measures to help to achieve poverty eradication. Several hon. Members referred to the working families tax credit, and it may be helpful if I outline some facts about it. About 108,000 families in Scotland benefit from the WFTC. The average award in Scotland was £75.25 a week, which is 23 per cent. higher than under the family credit that it replaced. It must therefore have improved the situation in relation to poverty. [*Interruption.*]

Mr. George Stevenson (in the Chair): Order. Hon. Members will note that the Division Bell is ringing. Are any hon. Members going to vote? [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] I have suspended the sitting, as I am obliged to do, but we shall now reconvene.

Mr. Foulkes: I must say that in terms of flexibility you are one of the most sensible and intelligent Chairmen I have ever served under, Mr. Stevenson.

I was talking about the working families tax credit. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his Budget that the basic credit in the WFTC would be increased by £5 a week from June 2001. We have already improved the position; people are already better off, and they will be even more so from June 2001.

In addition to the Government's work on tax credits, we have introduced the biggest ever increases in child benefit. From April this year, it will increase again to £15.50 for the first child and £10.35 for subsequent children. For the first child, that is a 26 per cent. rise in real terms. I am especially surprised that the hon. Member for Epping Forest—who, given recent announcements, should know about these matters—did not acknowledge that fact. It may not mean a great deal to her, but it will make a substantial difference for people in poverty in Scotland. In fact, the increases will help some 600,000 Scottish families.

My hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen, South and for Paisley, North raised the issue of child poverty and what was done about it in the Budget. That has been one of the significant changes since the report was produced. Yesterday, we had a debate on the impact of Government policy on families in Scotland. We have set ourselves child poverty targets, and in that respect I find the comments of the hon. Member for Epping Forest astonishing. How can one know whether one has achieved something without setting targets? That is what we did with international development, and we are doing the same with child poverty. Our aim is to halve child poverty in 10 years, with a view to abolishing it in 20. This is the first time that a Government have taken on that responsibility, and we are already making significant progress.

As a result of measures introduced in the most recent and previous Budgets, more than 1.2 million people in the United Kingdom—more than 100,000 people in Scotland—will be lifted out of poverty. By April 2001, a family with two children on half average earnings will be £3,000 a year better off as a result of measures introduced during this Parliament. A family with two children on income support will be £1,670 a year better off, and families in the bottom quintile will be £1,700 better off on average. How can Opposition Members say that people are not better off and not being pulled out of poverty by the actions of this Government?

A number of hon. Members have mentioned lone parents, and I shall talk briefly about the new deal for lone parents, which has been a remarkable success, in spite of the Jonahs who criticised it three or four years ago. More than 7,000 lone parents in Scotland, most of whom are women, have found work through the new deal. Our Green Paper on employment announced a new £100 million package to give lone parents the help that they need to return to the workplace. We believe that employment is the best way to tackle poverty, and the Select Committee recognised as much in paragraph 35 of its report, which states:

"The major cause of poverty in Scotland . . . is unemployment and premature economic inactivity".

The package to help more lone parents into employment must be welcome news, but I should make one thing clear: we are not forcing lone parents into employment. All we are saying is that lone parents on benefit should attend work-based interviews to learn about the opportunities that are available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) and others referred to the national minimum wage. Paragraph 36 of the Select Committee report makes it clear that, although employment is key, it

"does not necessarily provide a route out of poverty and low pay remains a problem."

That is why we have tackled low pay by introducing the national minimum wage. The Government are pleased that paragraph 149 of the report states that the Select Committee regards

"Both the working families' tax credit and the minimum wage as important weapons in the fight against poverty."

The report continues:

"The minimum wage, as well as valuing people, also sends messages to employers about their own responsibilities."

The Government believe that responsible employers value the national minimum wage, which ensures that cowboys who want to pay less than a reasonable wage cannot undercut them.

I should point out to the hon. Member for Angus that the vote on the national minimum wage took place on 10 March 1998—a year before we set up the Scottish Parliament. In other words, he was absent without leave and his excuse is not accepted.

Mr. Welsh: It is impossible to be in two places at once, and two of the Minister's hon. Friends—one of whom has returned to the Chamber—have indeed found that impossible. Members of Parliament have other business to deal with. I did not say that the vote took place in the time of the Scottish Parliament, and the Minister is trivialising the matter with this nonsense. At times, he has attended neither the Scottish Grand Committee nor Scottish Question Time. Does that mean that he does not care about the issues with which they deal? He should stop being childish and stick to the point that we are discussing.

Mr. Foulkes: I think I have touched a raw nerve. The debate in question took place during the night, when nothing else was happening. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was in bed fast asleep. He mentioned the national minimum wage in his speech, and in my brief intervention I merely pointed out that he and his colleagues were not present to vote, so they had better keep quiet about the matter.

We have announced that the national minimum wage will be increased to £4.10 an hour from October 2001, which is good news for 120,000 workers in Scotland. The Select Committee report noted that women are over-represented in poverty statistics. The increase in the national minimum wage especially helps women who, unfortunately, are still among the lowest paid in our society. The hon. Member for Epping Forest smiled when I made comments about the hon. Member for Angus, but she and her colleagues, scaremongering as usual, said that jobs would go because of the national minimum wage. Nothing could be further from the truth. Unemployment has gone down, and the number of people working in Scotland has risen substantially.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston mentioned financial exclusion, which is referred to in paragraph 86 of the Select Committee report. I, too, have had constituents in dire straits because they cannot deal with their large debts, and who have been threatened with legal action, or with the possibility of visits by representatives seeking to recover the money. At the same time, I have received letters from banks urging me to take out huge loans without any security whatsoever. I am sure that other hon. Members have also experienced that.

On behalf of the Government, I encourage banks and financial institutions to take a more responsible attitude to lending. Consumer credit and lending are totally acceptable in our society, but it is in nobody's interests for a company to lend individuals more than they can afford to pay back. The company cannot get its money back, the reputation of the financial industry might suffer, and the individuals can suffer real hardship and misery. The message must be to lend money responsibly. Potential borrowers should also act sensibly.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs has set up a taskforce to explore the causes and effects of over-indebtedness and to examine ways of achieving more responsible lending and borrowing. The Government have recently announced that they will provide £1 million to fund three pilot projects for a telephone-based debt advice service. The Scottish Executive have provided further funding for one of them, in Fife.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the importance of credit unions. Paragraph 102 of the report recommends that we promote their development with full vigour. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary has announced measures to help credit unions, such as allowing them to loan money over more flexible periods and increasing the savings limit for young people to £5,000. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) mentioned that the Secretary of State and Jackie Baillie have announced a £1.5 million action plan to expand the credit union movement in Scotland. We understand and are taking into account the practical and financial problems that credit unions face.

As a Minister in Scotland, I have been pleased to travel around and see that people have new jobs as a result of the Government's measures. Their record on tackling unemployment is first rate. It is below 1 million for the first time since 1975. In Scotland, employment is at its highest level since 1960, which is when I left university, so it was a long time ago. That is a real achievement for the Government.

We have enabled people to earn a decent income and, therefore, to find a way out of poverty. The new deal, which has been a great success, is a key factor. Since it began, 31,500 young people have found employment through it. I pay tribute to the professionalism of the Employment Service and its partners in delivering the new deal. We have taken steps to ensure that older

[Mr. Foulkes]

people who wish to do so can also enter the labour market through the new deal.

Hon. Members have mentioned tax credits, and suggested that the system is too complicated. We intend to reform the tax and benefits system to tackle poverty and to overcome barriers to working. Tax credits are not a gimmick, but a way of giving targeted support to those who need it. When tackling poverty, it is important to look at wide issues, not just concentrate on one or two areas. Our reforms mean that the Inland Revenue is performing new functions: administering tax credits and enforcing the national minimum wage.

I recently met the director of the Inland Revenue in Scotland. As a result of that meeting, I am arranging for Scottish Members to be invited to a briefing session in Edinburgh, which will enable them to understand the detailed operation of the working families tax credit and the new children's tax credit. They will then be able to advise their constituents about them.

Sir Robert Smith: At that briefing, will the Inland Revenue be able to deal with the other side of the problem? We do not want to put extra burdens on employers that affect job creation. Will that briefing be able to examine ways of reducing the cost to employers of administering the working families tax credit?

Mr. Foulkes: Yes, it certainly will. I am thankful that I shall not have to deal with that today, because time is running short.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston said, I used to be the director of Age Concern Scotland, and the report examined pensioner poverty. We looked hard at the inheritance that we received and we were absolutely right to decide to tackle the problems of the poorest pensioners first. Figures from the Department of Social Security show that, during the 20 years or so to 1997, the poorest pensioners did not share in the general increase in prosperity. Society became more unequal, and the Select Committee states that the Government were right to concentrate initially on the poorest pensioners. We welcome that endorsement. We introduced the minimum income guarantee to provide support for the poorest pensioners and the Select Committee commends us for doing that. From April, the minimum income guarantee will be simplified and increased to £92.15 for a single pensioner and £140.55 for a married couple. That shows our commitment to the poorest pensioners.

Thankfully, the Department of Social Security is reducing the existing claim form from 40 pages to 10. The form will be shorter, more user friendly, easier to understand and less bureaucratic. We shall examine some of the suggestions that have been made today on other aspects of take-up and pass them to the Department of Social Security for consideration.

Pensioners have free television licences if they are over 75 and they received a winter fuel payment of £200 this year. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security will announce next winter's payment later this year. Fuel poverty is a problem, and I was privileged to launch the Government's fuel poverty strategy with Jackie Baillie of the Scottish Executive. I commend what the Scottish Executive are doing in providing £350 million for installation of free central heating in all pensioners' homes. That huge step forward was never envisaged by the previous Government, but 130,000 households will benefit.

The Select Committee argued that the level of state retirement pension should be linked to national average earnings, but that would not help the poorest people so much. Next year, the Government will spend an extra £4.5 billion on pensioners, and when tax and benefit reforms are considered together, almost all pensioner households will be better off in April 2001, compared with April 1997, than they would have been with an earnings link in the basic state pension. We have done better than if there had been an earnings link. The pension credit is on its way and people who save will not be penalised for that. It is the first time that we have ever done that.

Various points were raised about rural poverty, which I appreciate as a Member of Parliament for a rural constituency, and the Government have dealt with that. It was astonishing to hear the hon. Member for Angus say that this is a non-political issue when his representative in the Scottish Parliament produced a dishonest report based on out-of-date figures. The figures for child poverty, lone parents, families and pensioners are three years old. That is typical of the Scottish National party's dishonest approach to politics. It dare not admit that Labour's policies are working and benefiting people, so it fiddles the figures. The facts are that, since spring 1997, the number of children living in households with no one in work has fallen by 300,000 in the United Kingdom and by more than 30,000 in Scotland. The Labour Government have introduced measures to lift more than 1 million children in the United Kingdom and more than 100,000 in Scotland out of poverty. In Scotland more than 100,000 more people are in work now than in 1997. With the minimum income guarantee, 200,000 of Scotland's poorest pensioners will be £800 a year better off in real terms from next month.

It is dishonest to drag up three-year-old statistics when everyone knows that it has been in the past three years, and particularly in the past few months, that the full impact of Labour's help for the poorest has been felt—even more will be achieved in the coming months. We do not need statistics to prove that fact because we have the evidence of our eyes and ears: more people are at work; those at work are paid more because of the minimum wage; and, because of the £200 winter fuel allowance, pensioners no longer need to choose between heating and eating.

It is typical that the Scottish National party should try to use the poor for party political gain. However, the people of Scotland will never forget the Scottish nationalists' common cause with Thatcher in 1979, which gave us 18 years of a Tory Government who attacked and undermined the poor of Scotland. As we have heard today, the Scottish National party is making

common cause with the Tories again to undermine Labour's achievements. Only through a partnership between a Labour Government at Westminster and the Scottish Parliament can we deliver the social justice that Scotland has sought for generations. The Scottish nationalists either will not or cannot understand the need for that partnership.

I hope that you enjoyed those remarks, Mr. Stevenson. I know that the hon. Member for Angus did not. We are a forward-looking Government and there are so many examples of that that I wish I had more time to describe them; the new pension credit, the introduction of tax credits to integrate the various support systems, the new deal. We are a thoughtful Government who are addressing the problem of poverty. We are a visionary Government: consider the commitments and targets that we have set to end child poverty. We are a caring Government who do not deny that problems exist, but who believe that only Labour in partnership with the Scottish Executive can achieve progress in areas such as fuel poverty. We are committed to radical actions and measures such as the working families tax credit, the national minimum wage and the minimum income guarantee, which will benefit Scottish pensioners. Unlike the hon. Member for Angus, I wrote these words; I noticed that he was reading from a prepared statement.

No one who knows modern Scotland and sees what is happening there can deny that we inherited an appalling legacy and have recognised the challenges that poverty brings. We have taken action to deal with those challenges: we have ensured that social and economic progress work hand in hand. There is no division between social and economic policy. We run a successful economy and that is how we are able to tackle poverty. I commend the Government's record on tackling poverty and welcome the Scottish Affairs Committee report, and I hope that hon. Members recognises what the Government have done to implement the report's recommendations and to tackle to poverty in Scotland and in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Six o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 27 March 2001

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Foot and Mouth

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I welcome the opportunity to debate the important subject of the foot and mouth outbreak's impact on the rural economy in what can only be described as an escalating crisis. When I applied for the debate a week ago, we had not seen and heard about all the events of the past four or five days. The Prime Minister has now taken personal control of the crisis. In the past 24 hours, we have received the appalling news that there are cases of foot and mouth in the Lake district. I emphasise that the foot and mouth outbreak is not just about farming. Obviously, foot and mouth has a terrible and immediate impact on farmers, their families and workers, but it also has an impact on the wider rural economy. Increasingly, we have seen much support and sympathy from the urban population.

There will no doubt be a serious debate later on the future of farming, the food industry, the rural economy and the management of the countryside. The purpose of this Adjournment debate, however, is not to consider the long term, but to concentrate on the immediate and short-term impact of foot and mouth on the rural economy. The views and questions that I shall put to the Minister are based on representations, letters, telephone calls and visits in my constituency. I suspect that other right hon. and hon. Members will do the same. Mid-Norfolk is a mixed rural constituency with small towns and villages. It still depends very much on farming, the food industry, small businesses and tourism.

The Government fatally underestimated the scale and speed of the crisis. It gives me no pleasure to say that, because the people in the eye of the storm find the party politics of the crisis largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, I have come here today to represent my constituents' views on the subject. The Minister is probably aware that an NOP poll in today's *Daily Mail* shows that an overwhelming 77 per cent. of voters think that the crisis is out of control and that only 15 per cent. believe that it is being contained. That may be only a perception, but it is a worrying perception for any Government.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): Was that not also the perception last Thursday and Friday of the Government's chief scientist, who stated unequivocally to the media and elsewhere that the crisis was out of control?

Mr. Simpson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I think that it was only last Thursday when we received reports by the various scientists involved that the Government fully realised for the first time that this was not a minor regional problem, but a major crisis. As my right hon. Friend said, it is sadly out of control.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): During the weekend, I have been discussing the issue with vets, including local veterinary inspectors employed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who are not able or willing to give their names. Clearly, they cannot criticise the Government openly. Is my hon. Friend surprised to learn that they say that this is no longer an epidemic, but a pandemic? They also say that, because of the Government's inability to act quickly—not only in taking the decision to cull animals, but in implementing the cull—the position has moved on so far that vaccination should be considered. Sadly, it seems that MAFF is taking no contingency—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is sufficiently long for one intervention.

Mr. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend makes valuable points to which I shall return shortly. Following on from what he said, farmers, vets, business men, local authorities and the rural population at large have been bewildered by what could best be described as the orders, counter-orders and disorder that have characterised the crisis over the past month.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem was that in the initial stages of the outbreak, the Government said that people should not go to the countryside? Respectable bodies, county councils and national parks also urged people not to go into those areas. That has had a devastating impact on the tourism industries, particularly in the run-up to Easter, which is usually their busiest time.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. During the past month, MAFF has moved from saying that there was a crisis, to saying that the crisis was under control, to the political direction of the crisis effectively being in the hands of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Is my hon. Friend aware that, at the Select Committee on Agriculture last Wednesday, the chief veterinary officer admitted that, apart from a shopping list exercise to buy railway sleepers and indifferent quality coal, MAFF had effectively done no desk-top, real-world scenario planning for an outbreak of this size and complexity?

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Many of us are worried that MAFF appears not to have undertaken such contingency planning. In my own area of Norfolk and Suffolk, for example, we had an outbreak of swine fever last year and had thought that lessons would be learned from that. For two and a half years, I was a special adviser for the Ministry of Defence, where contingency planning, standard operating procedures and so on were the norm for dealing with major crises. I hope that the Government will learn a lesson from that, even it is too late for this crisis.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that the real tragedy is that the

[Mr. Owen Paterson]

Government did not learn the lessons of the 1967 outbreak? At the weekend, I held a meeting of experienced vets who worked through 1967 in Wem and they made an excoriating attack on the manner in which the outbreak has been handled. The words "gross ineptitude" and "far too little, far too late" were used.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend is quite right. We have also heard that in Norfolk. There is an obvious lack of joined-up government, centrally and locally, which has led to frustration not just on the part of Members of Parliament—we are merely in the business of communicating that frustration—but of tens of thousands of our constituents. Until 10 days ago there was little co-ordination between MAFF, the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Indeed, the DETR has shifted from advising that the countryside be closed down, to the Asquithian "business as usual", to encouraging people to visit the countryside with care. Many people believe that the Government's desire to hold a general election has influenced the outcome of the crisis. That is not a view being put forward by just Conservative, Liberal Democrat or nationalist MPs; there is a widespread belief that the timing of the general election has become caught up in the handling of a major crisis, to the detriment of that crisis.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Is my hon. Friend aware of the chief veterinary officer's statement on the DETR website, which was an attempt at joined-up government? That statement, which was removed only last weekend, specifically said that it could not be assumed that any part of the country was free of the disease—which flies wholly in the face of everything that DETR Ministers and, latterly, MAFF Ministers have been saying.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes another good point. The people at the sharp end—farmers, business men, local authorities—are bewildered by the process of order, counter-order, disorder. The Prime Minister said yesterday that trying to follow the length and breadth of the disease is like trying to follow a flu germ. If hon. Members will pardon the analogy of an old military historian, it is a bit like trying to deal with the German blitzkrieg in May 1940: the Government are always building road blocks where the enemy has broken through. There is a similar lack of co-ordination.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The hon. Gentleman is referring to the need for command and control. Only now has the MOD been properly engaged. In my area of Powys, we need not only a senior Army officer to sort out the logistical problems but the burial of livestock. Does he agree that that is urgent?

Mr. Simpson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Many of us, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), have been calling for weeks for greater involvement of the Army than senior military personnel only, but it is a reflection on the Government if the Army is called in on such a scale. The public know that it is a national emergency.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): In the context of joined-up government, one of my constituents who deals with the equine and canine industry took advantage of the Government's offer and rang the Department of Trade and Industry to ask what help would be given. The official advised him to declare bankruptcy and contact the Department of Social Security. He contacted the DSS, but it did not have the remotest idea of what help or advice it could give him.

Mr. Simpson: I shall refer to that issue in relation to a constituent of mine a little later.

The DTI advice has shifted from "close down the countryside" to "business as usual" to "visit the countryside with care". The Government face a fundamental challenge to their political strategy: how will they square the need to implement drastic and wide-ranging measures to control foot and mouth with the need to prevent damage to the rural economy? Such damage will be serious in my constituency, and Cumbria, Scotland, Essex and Devon are close to total meltdown.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): A company in my constituency, Osprey Foods, imports beef and meat and dairy products from abroad but cannot obtain certificates to re-export those products. I hope that the Minister will address that issue in his winding-up speech.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. A number of my constituents are similarly affected.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): On behalf of the butcher trade, I wish to ask whether the Government acknowledge that butchers who might be tempted to close their businesses if the meat trade flattens might be able to survive the crisis with some transitional help, perhaps with business rates.

Mr. Simpson: I hope that the Minister will answer that question.

My constituents are concerned that MAFF appears to have no collective memory of or ability to learn the lessons from previous crises. It learned nothing from the inquiry into the 1967 foot and mouth outbreak, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) said, or from the swine fever outbreak last year. The Government must address that.

The Minister's problem is that the crisis is similar to the fuel protests, but on a much wider scale. The Government are unable to comprehend the scale of the crisis and downgrade it. They say that the Opposition are making party political points. They try to move up the learning curve, but, unable to deal with the situation, they blame the people at the centre; they whip the farmers.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Without trying to downgrade the real problems in many areas, does the hon. Gentleman have any idea why the disease has not affected Norfolk? In the interest of moving along the learning curve that he mentioned, is there a message there for the rest of the country?

Mr. Simpson: The hon. Gentleman is a scientist and, I understand, an expert in the subject; I await his

contribution with great interest. It might be because of luck as much as anything else that the disease has not reached Norfolk, but my constituents and his in Norwich are praying that it does not. It is not simply a question of whether they carry on with business as usual; they are terrified.

The foot and mouth crisis must be seen against the wider slump in farming. Since 1999, farmers' incomes have fallen by 27 per cent. in real terms, and the industry's income has fallen by £700 million. Rural communities carry an enormous burden of fuel price rises, red tape and the cost of raw materials. In Norfolk and Suffolk, the pig industry is slowly recovering from the swine fever outbreak. The Minister, in his statement last week, said that the pig sector is back to 85 per cent. of its normal production. That is excellent news, but there is still a 15 per cent. gap. Farmers in Norfolk remain worried about the European Union's everything but arms proposal, which could have a dramatic impact on sugar beet production.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): My hon. Friend addresses the plight of farming, but it is the farmers near outbreaks and with restrictions on the movement of their stock who are suffering most acutely. They could be forgiven for wondering even whether it would not be better for their farms to have the disease, because they would then receive compensation. Is it not essential for the Minister to address the plight of those farmers, in Essex and elsewhere, who are paralysed because of their proximity to outbreaks, even though there have not been any outbreaks on their farms?

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I was telephoned yesterday by a constituent, Robert Long, of Hillfield farm, Scarning, who desperately wanted to move hundreds of calves. He told me that he has animals stacked up like aircraft over Heathrow airport. That is an enormous source of frustration for farmers. It is also a major animal welfare problem, which seems to be overwhelming the Government.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Further to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), the problem is not only that farmers in exclusion zones are unable to move their livestock, but that MAFF is incapable of giving any answers. Farmers in my constituency, where there has been a foot and mouth outbreak, asked when their farms would be cleaned up. They did not get any answers from MAFF, so I tabled a parliamentary question, and the reply, which I received today, was simply that the Minister would reply as soon as possible. If Ministers cannot even give answers to hon. Members, what hope is there?

Mr. Simpson: I regret to have to say this to my hon. Friend, but that is what happened during the swine fever outbreak. The lesson that I learned from that outbreak was that the House was in recess when it should not have been. If we go into a long recess for a general election, our ability and our constituents' ability to press Ministers will be incredibly limited. Ministers should bear that in mind.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): On information transfer, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that farmers receive information and do not feel excluded from the decision-making loop? That would make it easier for them to act in partnership with the Government to resolve the issue. On that basis, does he agree that one lesson that we have learned already is that MAFF needs more resources for its information and communication systems?

Mr. Simpson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that, when the crisis is over, the Government—whether this one or another—must seriously examine not only the organisation of MAFF, but the entire Whitehall structure that deals with food, the food industry and the environment.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): My hon. Friend will be aware that Ministers have relied heavily on their officials' advice. Where that advice seems to have been faulty, or Ministers' judgment has been faulty in accepting it, why did neither of those bodies not simply accept the findings of the 1969 report and implement them immediately?

Mr. Simpson: I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that, if there is a Government inquiry into the outbreak, that point must be made.

Farming is not an isolated activity, but part of the integrated food chain and the rural economy. We calculate that, for each person directly employed in farming in Norfolk in 1967, four were indirectly employed; now, for each person directly employed, 14 people are indirectly employed. Any impact on farming will affect not only people who are physically involved in it, but the wider community. The irony for the rural community is that, during the past 20 years, it has been asked to diversify, it has done so, and many farms now have businesses on them. If movement is restricted, despite modern information technology those businesses are likely to have a cash flow problem.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Cash flow will be a real problem for farmers who have their cattle slaughtered and for those who are unable to move their stock; farmers whose cattle are slaughtered will not be able to restock for at least six months because of the quarantine. If the Minister, who is in charge of the taskforce, is to do anything, he should co-ordinate the work of Departments. Is it not reasonable for those suffering an extreme cash flow problem to have a VAT, income tax and council tax holiday until their cash flow returns?

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend is slightly ahead of me and has eaten one of my parliamentary sandwiches. I shall come on to that subject in a few minutes.

I shall now deal briefly with the impact on the rural economy and tourism. Many hon. Members know the figures. Total expenditure in the UK in 1999 was about £64 billion, overseas visitors spent about £12.76 billion and an estimated 1.85 million jobs are in tourism. The English Tourism Council reckons that total spending by visitors to the English countryside amounts to £12 billion supporting 380,000 jobs.

What of the impact on tourism of foot and mouth disease? At parliamentary questions yesterday, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

[Mr. Simpson]

acknowledged a potential loss of about £250 million a week now, rising to £375 million per week in April and £500 million in July. The downturn will not be short; I suspect that it will continue for some time. The Countryside Agency estimates that rural tourism losses could rise to £2 billion by the end of the Easter break.

I shall now deal specifically with the impact of foot and mouth on the economy of Norfolk. Acknowledging the argument of the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), I am aware that Norfolk is lucky in not yet experiencing a specific case of foot and mouth, but the county has been affected. Tourism expenditure in Norfolk is about £1.3 billion a year and supports 41,000 jobs. It is a major industry by any standard. The Norfolk tourism partnership concluded that long-term bookings were down slightly, but that short-term bookings were down by as much as 50 per cent. People in the rural economy and tourism are receiving a mixed message from the Government. They recognise that unless the Government is able to contain and eradicate foot and mouth, even though it is not yet in Norfolk, the problems of the rural economy and tourism are bound to continue. The top priority must be to deal with the disease.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend will know that many Americans visit Norfolk as well as other parts of the United Kingdom. Would he be surprised to learn that friends working in the consulate general in New York have told me that, despite the recent visit of the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to New York, bookings to the United Kingdom are more than 30 per cent. down during the coming months—which we hope will see the end of the foot and mouth outbreak—and that cancellations to all parts of the UK, including Norfolk, have reached a staggering 80 per cent?

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend is correct. I disagree with Ministers who say that continuing to talk up tourism, and stressing that large parts of the country remain unaffected, is all that we need to do. I agree in theory, but as long as the photographs and pictures continue to be published, people see the spread of disease and that is what makes the major impact.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): As a military historian, my hon. Friend will know that on 15 April 1986 American war planes flew from East Anglia to bomb Colonel Gadaffi. I remember it well because at that time I was in the air on my way to America to promote tourism in the United Kingdom. We arrived to face a damage control exercise with pictures of armed policemen at London airport all over American television. American tourists cancelled their holidays to the United Kingdom in droves, and that went on for months. However eccentrically charming it may be, does my hon. Friend agree that the sight of a Minister holding up a pair of green wellies on American television is unlikely to supersede the pictures of burning sheep? Should we not be dealing with foot and mouth first?

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes his point. I am trying not to make personal points here. We have a major problem relating to organisation and politics and I want to hold the Government to account on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) made the point that one of the countryside activities that has been seriously affected by foot and mouth is the equestrian sector. One of my constituents, Mr. David Sayer, of Great Witchingham horse trials, had to cancel those trials and has lost more than £40,000. He is one of a number of small businesses that have been dramatically affected with the prospect of little help in the near future.

It would be churlish of me not to acknowledge that the Government have come forward with packages during the past month. The Minister of Agriculture has introduced packages to help farmers. The Minister for the Environment is chairing the rural taskforce and he also outlined a series of measures. I want to put one measure to him, which he should take seriously. It was put to me by local councillors and business men in my constituency. He should go beyond what he has done already and possibly have a business rate holiday for affected businesses. The business rate will have a large impact on those businesses and a holiday might give them a breathing space. Secondly, we should seriously consider the proposal from my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks for a financial package of between £10,000 and £12,000 to tide over small businesses that might otherwise go to the wall.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): We welcome the partial business rates holiday that the Government have announced, but will my hon. Friend give particular consideration to one group of people who will not benefit—small village shops and post offices, such as the one in Laycock in my constituency? It is in an affected area that already has business rate relief because of the initiative that the Conservative Government introduced. The Laycock village postmaster tells me that me that his income is down by 50 per cent. and nothing that the Government have so far announced will help him.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I hope that the Minister will consider that.

I want to leave the Minister in no doubt, not about my feelings and those of other hon. Members, but about the feelings of my constituents about the Government's responsibility in this crisis. The Government underestimated the scale and the speed of the crisis. They lagged behind the outbreak and I fear that they still do. The Prime Minister failed to take a strategic grip until last Thursday or Friday. It took the report of the vets to frighten him into realising that he was standing at the edge of an abyss. I make no criticism of the Minister for the Environment, but a Minister of State is not at the right pay scale to chair the rural taskforce.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks was laughed at by the Prime Minister when he talked about having a war committee, but that is what is required. We need a committee of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer—who, like Banquo's ghost, haunts proceedings but leaves no fingerprints—and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The taskforce must be at that level to come to grips with the crisis, which is now at a national level. We have a mixed and muddled message about the need to isolate and eradicate foot and mouth while underestimating the impact on the rural economy.

Finally, many people, not all of them Conservative, Liberal or nationalist voters, are amazed that the Government appear to be more concerned about their preparations for the general election than the crisis. As one constituent put it to me yesterday afternoon, it is not just a question of what Ministers will be doing, but whether they will apply themselves to the real issues of the general election. Far from postponing the election sending a message to the world, as *The Sun* would have us believe, that Britain is not working, it would show that, unfortunately, Britain is only partly working, but that the Government are determined to get on top of it.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Most hon. Members will agree that Members of Parliament have a role to play in this crisis. When MAFF is stretched beyond the limit, all sorts of problems arise. The impact on tourism in Norfolk is a sideshow compared with what is happening in my constituency. I had to tell people at a meeting in Porlock on Friday that there was a chance that in a week's time I would no longer be able to help them, because I would cease to have any authority to act; under the rules of reply, Ministry officials will presumably not be able to deal with ex-Members of Parliament. I find that obscene.

Mr. Simpson: My right hon. Friend, for whom I worked when he was Secretary of State for Defence, has great experience of Parliament, and knows how to handle crises.

I know that the Minister is pressed for time and my hon. Friends and I have asked him many questions. The views that I have expressed are not mine alone; they are shared by a wide range of my constituents. The Government are in a hole and they had better stop digging.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I repeat that an unprecedented number of Members rightly want to contribute to the debate, and, if all are brief, the majority will be able to speak.

10.1 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I shall take careful note of what you say, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The debate comes at a particularly difficult time. In Berkeley in my constituency seven farms have already had to implement the slaughter policy and another 11—one of which has special breeds—will have to lose all their livestock. That is the result of the proactive policy. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment does not speak for MAFF, but he could help with the definition of "contiguous" because it is open to misinterpretation. We must be fair to all those affected and ensure that they know the likelihood of their being involved in such dramatic action.

I was disappointed that, unlike today's debate, last week's debate on the Government's approach to food policy was not well attended, as this is not a one-off issue. The current foot and mouth epidemic, crisis or catastrophe does not come out of the blue. It comes on the back of BSE, bovine tuberculosis, which has had a dramatic effect on the dairy herds in my constituency, and, in certain parts of the country, classical swine fever. If we do not learn how animal life is affected by one crisis after another, we do nothing in politics. We must learn the lessons very quickly.

I have said many times that the food chain has been over-centralised; that is nothing new. There is a case for re-localising, but this is not the time or the place to argue that point. However, from an agricultural perspective, there are some immediate lessons to learn about how the issue is being handled. One problem is that we keep alluding to 1967, but the current situation is on a completely different scale because of how the food chain operates and its much greater impact on the wider rural economy.

Some difficult issues need to be unpacked. I want my right hon. Friend to announce how the strategy of the taskforce is evolving and the amount of compensation that will be made available. I also hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will address those matters, if he makes a statement this afternoon.

Although I do not underestimate the impact of the crisis on the rural economy, it is strange that Opposition Members are proposing massive state intervention, not least because of the financial implications. One of the agricultural industry's problems is that it veers between believing that it is a private enterprise—which it is, at the level of the individual farm—and acknowledging that it is subject to enormous intervention from national Government and Europe. That contradiction impacts on both farming and the wider rural economy, and it is important that it is appropriately addressed. If it is not, the criticisms that I and others have of the common agricultural policy will be exacerbated.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): The crisis would not have been as great if the Army had been involved earlier.

Mr. Drew: It is easy to say that. [HON. MEMBERS: "It is true."] Hon. Members may say that, but I have liased daily with my local Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food office, and I have talked with farmers and their representatives, and it is clear that, from the outset, more specialists were needed, but the Army does not employ many vets, and neither has it customarily performed the role of slaughterer or contractor. However, it certainly has a logistical role to play, and the forthcoming investigation will examine whether it should have been called on earlier to play it. One may easily assert that with the benefit of hindsight, but the disease has spread more quickly than expected.

Mr. Paice: Last week, the Prime Minister told the House that there was not a shortage of slaughterers, and that it would not be necessary to accept offers of help from hunts and other organisations. There is no excuse for the fact that the slaughter of infected animals has not kept pace with their diagnosis. On Friday, the chief scientific officer announced that the average delay had lengthened to three days. The widespread infection has

[Mr. Paice]

been caused by that delay: the chief scientific officer said that if it were reduced to 24 hours, the disease would rapidly be brought under control.

Mr. Drew: That was not a helpful intervention, but I will try to answer the points raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Some regions have experienced problems in terms of disposal rather than slaughter. I have religiously checked with my MAFF office, and it is satisfied with the current slaughter arrangements. There is, however, a missing ingredient that must not be overlooked. It is understandable that money matters, such as valuation and settlement, should generate considerable emotion, but if individual farmers' concerns were ignored, the entire process could be accelerated. However, those concerns must be addressed, because the United Kingdom is a democracy. The Government require consensus to rule and although they might want to exercise greater power, the farmers are under enormous strain and some of them might not readily agree to compensation packages that were imposed on them. That would create greater problems.

It has been alleged—I will not use a stronger term—that there have been instances of stock being illegally transported, although that has not happened in the region that I represent. That has also created problems.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has been speaking about the taskforce, but it is also important to examine the implications of the crisis for the wider rural economy. How will the farming industry be rebuilt? How will farmers restock during the six-month quarantine, and how will they generate income in that period?

It is also important to address the implications of the crisis for the wide variety of businesses that are involved in the rural economy. My right hon. Friend may care to write to all hon. Members with a clear statement about exactly what help is available to businesses—not only those in the most affected areas, such as my constituency, but those that have suffered lost tourism business.

Mr. Jack: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Drew: Not at the moment, as other hon. Members want to speak.

The viability of some businesses is contingent on what happens in rural Britain. We are dealing with a difficult message. I accept that that message has not always been right, but we must try to keep the rural economy functioning while a large segment of it is effectively closed down because of its wildlife and these tragic circumstances.

I hope that my right hon. Friend will clearly restate exactly how we are approaching the matter. We must ensure that we give money to those who are suffering enormous cash flow problems. We must also send the message that we are trying to ensure that tourists can visit the places that they want to see. I have been rather taken aback by how the idea is bandied around that the countryside is open or closed, when some places, such as the vast majority of market towns, are accessible, and there is no reason for people not to visit them. That is the message that we should send.

We must also ensure that in the short run businesses receive help with their cash flow and taxation. We should introduce measures to help them to relaunch their business, as that is what they must do. I hope that my right hon. Friend will do that today, in liaison with MAFF and the Prime Minister, in order to send the difficult but essential message that we must rebuild the rural economy and that we cannot start a day too soon.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I appeal to hon. Members to make short speeches. Many hon. Members want to speak on behalf of their constituents. If they limit their remarks to about three minutes, a worthwhile number of them will be able to speak.

10.12 am

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I have already commented on the need for Members of Parliament to be able to continue to help their constituents during this appalling crisis. I follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). I have just received the latest issue of the foot and mouth bulletin, which is produced by the south-west National Farmers Union and is a most excellent document. It will not have made pleasant reading for him, as the last two days have seen a rash of new cases in Devon and Gloucestershire, heightening fears that those counties may be following the pattern established in Cumbria. The simple statement made by a gentleman who was standing beside the Prime Minister in Exeter on Saturday, Anthony Gibson, who has been very much involved in the communication, highlights the scale of the problem. I know that the Minister was in Taunton and Devon and will understand the scale of the problem.

I have here a copy of the 1968 inquiry. Now is not the time to discuss the issues involved, but serious questions will have to be asked, and a full public inquiry or royal commission will have to be held into how the matter was handled. It is a scandal that the matter has got out of control, but I shall not discuss that today.

On Friday evening, I visited and had a meeting in Porlock in my constituency. Porlock is on the edge of a national park—Exmoor—which, thank God, does not have foot and mouth at the moment, although it is creeping all around the area. Following the announcements that Combe Martin and Blackmoor Gate, a big cattle auction area, are now in an infected area, the disease could be drawing towards Exmoor. Exmoor is, rightly, closed. It has a fabulous herd of red deer, and, following the terrors of what is happening in the Lake district, we have the same terrible fears of what might happen on Exmoor if the disease got into the red deer. Arguments have been advanced about whether red deer are susceptible to this strain of foot and mouth, but we do not want to run such risks.

I want to discuss the role of the rural economy. At Wednesday evening's meeting there were 200 people who run various forms of business, including rural accommodation, holiday accommodation, caravan parks, pony trekking and various events and

attractions. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) is lucky. The people I met have no bookings at all. Everyone has cancelled, having been told that Exmoor is closed for riding or walking holidays. Many other Members of Parliament will share my experience. Those people say that they are four weeks from meltdown, which is about as long as they hope that the bank manager will not come to call. They do not know where to turn. I am an experienced Member of Parliament and I felt as hopeless in that meeting as I have ever felt. Those people had built up livelihoods. I could not think how to advise them on how to survive.

I can make a special case for Exmoor. It is a national park with a fabulous and important herd of red deer. Rural business people could encourage others to visit the park and say that they can walk on the roads and the lanes, but they do not want to do that because they know that their whole business is built around the attractions of Exmoor and its herd, and they do not want to put it at risk. They were terribly torn and asked me what they could do.

My hon. Friends have made various suggestions, such as that concerning the business rate and the Inland Revenue not calling for its money in a hurry, and for a sensitive and intelligent approach to be taken by banks. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) suggested in a non-partisan manner to the Prime Minister that some form of interest relief grant from the banks might see people through and the Prime Minister said that he would consider that. I am not sure how much of the tourism structure will survive. I am also conscious that, depressed though farming is given the state of farming prices, many agricultural diversifications, such as farm accommodation and bed and breakfast, will also be affected, leading to a further destruction in farming incomes. Tourism will be the most difficult problem for the Minister. We will see a significant part of its fabric collapse.

Somerset county council and others have appealed for the power to close roads. A road over the top of the Quantocks is not too heavily used. There are alternative routes. I think that the Minister knows the Quantocks well. It has a deer herd. The access roads on the southern flanks of Exmoor should be closed. There are infected areas to the south of Exmoor. There should be powers at least to restrict the use of minor roads and to establish an intensive disinfectant operation, perhaps with Army support on the southern roads. There should be access only to a limited number of roads on Exmoor.

Lord Whitty, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, helpfully said in the other place that the county council had powers to close the roads. The county solicitor told me that it did not have such powers. I tried to clarify the matter and contacted a senior lawyer in the DETR who said that he did not know who had advised Lord Whitty, but that the Department has no more powers concerning non-infected areas than a county council, and that neither of them had the power to close roads. The only way round the problem is to use emergency powers.

Mr. Jenkin: A fortnight ago, I wrote to the Minister for the Environment about road closures, because they affected outbreaks in my constituency. I have yet to receive a reply and I hope that he can deal with that matter when he responds to the debate.

Mr. King: If Exmoor becomes an infected area, we will have the power to close the roads. I admired the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he talked about the precautionary principle, but that now seems to have been lost. I telephoned the Benefits Agency about people who will be laid off and asked what plans had been made for them. As a Member of Parliament, I can get a reasonably good service, but it did not seem to be switched on to the problem or to have any idea about it. No message seemed to have come down from above saying, "Make sure you are ready to help such people."

10.19 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I shall be extremely brief. I rise to speak at a time of great and unprecedented crisis and with a heavy heart. A cull started on a farm in central Cheshire at 9 o'clock this morning, and the Cheshire show has been cancelled. During the weekend, the foot and mouth outbreak spread to my constituency. The farmer, Mr. Malcolm Evans, knew exactly where it came from—it was borne on the wind from the rendering plant at Widnes. We should have listened to the farmers early on. Farmers have long careers of 50 years or more working on the land. Many of them were working during the last crisis in 1967, and knew how to deal with animals by instant dispatch and burial on site in deep pits. Diseased, infected carcases were not transported through the open countryside.

However, this outbreak has happened and it is not under control. As the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) accurately stated, farming is not an isolated activity; it is bound up in the welfare of the entire rural economy. Businesses in my constituency are facing bankruptcy—not in the medium or long term, but next week and the week after on an escalating scale. It is time for a Marshall plan, because we are, in a sense, at war with the virus that is wreaking havoc on the lives of the people whom we represent.

This is not the time for us to be without Members of Parliament, although I share the sense of helplessness of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), a much more experienced parliamentarian than I am. I cannot believe that the Prime Minister will go to the country and will be electioneering instead of getting a hold on the crisis. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Minister for the Environment will also be electioneering. It is time to get a hold on this crisis. There is also the question of respect and dignity for those suffering in the countryside. This is a time for special measures and intervention—not for politics as usual.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that brief speech.

10.21 am

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), because that may well have been his last speech as a Member of Parliament. I sympathise with

[Mr. Eric Pickles]

him for the plight of his constituents. My constituents in Brentwood and Ongar were the first to suffer the fear of foot and mouth and they continue to do so.

In an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), I raised the plight of my constituent, Mr. Lipman, who lives in the village of Abridge. Eight years ago he started a successful equine and canine business that supplies leather goods. His entire trade is at country fairs in this country and on the continent. His business has now virtually closed down because fairs and county shows have been cancelled and he is not welcome on the continent where—he told me this morning—there have been instances of tyres being slashed and lorries being stoned. He cannot do anything.

One would have thought that the Government would want to help such a person, whose business is dependent on the countryside. However, he does not qualify because, geographically, Abridge is outside the Government's definition of the countryside. It does not matter that Abridge is entirely surrounded by fields in a rural part of Essex. Mr. Lipman thought that the Government would help, so he rang the DTI and said, "I run a successful business, but I have a liquidity problem and no money coming in. What can you do to help me?" As I told my hon. Friends a few moments ago, the advice was to go bankrupt.

I thought that the DTI was supposed to be in the business of preserving companies. Mr. Lipman's company is not inefficient; it is a good company with enormous prospects. Had the foot and mouth outbreak not happened, the company would be standing high in the esteem of the local community. The DTI then said, "If you contact the Department of Social Security, it may be able to offer help, because it has been given instructions to be flexible," but when he made that contact he found no flexibility whatever. No one knows what they are supposed to be doing and no one has received any instructions. The Government need better co-ordination.

10.24 am

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I begin by pointing out the sheer variety of industries, other than farming and tourism, that are affected by the disease. There is an outdoor clothing business in the middle of Newbury that will not receive any of the advantages that have been offered in terms of rate relief. Last week, its takings were down by 50 per cent. There is also a veterinary diagnosis and consultancy business in my constituency. It cannot get any samples in, so the business is collapsing completely. Each business may employ only a handful of people, but such people are threatened with redundancy almost immediately.

Another business, which deals with pet food and bedding, is finding that goods cannot be moved away from the area because an affected flock is too close to it—movement has been restricted in the area. My constituency also contains Sheepdrove organic farm and Elm Farm research centre, and I am pleased that the Government have taken notice of the research work on vaccination that has been done. It should be considered seriously, whether it is the right policy or not.

I wish to concentrate on the racing industry because, although it is not peculiar to my constituency, there is a great preponderance of it there, unlike in most other parts of the country. Many people think that racing is not affected and is all right—it shut down for seven weeks and then started again. However, although the weather has been so appalling that it has caused several meetings to be cancelled, meetings have been lost explicitly because of foot and mouth disease. People who rely on odd earnings—perhaps once a month—to upgrade their poor incomes have entirely lost that. Such people are programme sellers, providers of refreshments and some on-course bookmakers. They may earn only a small amount from racing, but are dependent on it to eke out an otherwise meagre standard of living.

Trainers and owners are involved in racing, although some people may think that owners will do better from a cancellation because they usually lose money from racing, rather than gaining it. However, racing is important to jockeys and, particularly, self-employed jockeys, who are paid for each race in which they ride, rather than a retainer. If races are cancelled, such jockeys may find that their income quickly drops. They are not being offered compensation.

People feel that it is unfair that farmers automatically receive compensation for loss of stock, but that no other people are given compensation, even when they may be losing as much of their livelihood as the farmers. I hope that the Government will recognise the feeling that the current compensation method is unfair to people who suffer consequential losses, rather than to farmers who suffer direct losses.

10.27 am

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): The foot and mouth outbreak has made the extent to which the country's economy depends on agriculture eye-openingly clear. The Minister will have noticed the headline in today's issue of *The Times*, which shows that the Government are blaming the outbreak on smuggled meat. I wrote to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 15 November 2000 to point out that I had heard reports of meat that had been illegally imported from France via Ireland. In February—two and a half months later—I received a reply that said that such imports could not take place because they are illegal. Hon. Members will form their own conclusions on the adequacy of that reply, and the fact that the outbreak is being blamed on that cause.

My second point, and the principal concern in my constituency—where there is not currently an outbreak—is the sheer difficulty that farmers and producers experience in obtaining clear instructions and directions from MAFF. Of course, we have already experienced such events through classical swine fever. However, one example will suffice, such as the farmer who approached me this weekend with what appeared to be the simple problem of the disposal of dirty water that results from pig production. He told me that when he asked MAFF for advice, he was told, "It is your problem." He added that it would be illegal to spread the water with his machines, and that he would be fined for doing that. However, to do what MAFF asks would also be illegal, and he would be fined by the

Environment Agency because the water would go through the drains. People at risk of losing their livelihoods do not need that kind of aggravation.

Thirdly, it is the Government's prerogative to call a general election when they choose. The public know that they do not need to do so for another year. If they do call an election, however, they must be able to give a full assurance to people affected or potentially affected by the outbreak of foot and mouth that a general election campaign will in no way affect the spread of the disease. They must also assure the public that they will be able to give their full ministerial attention to fighting the disease, which they describe as a crisis, while fighting a general election that they do not have to hold. As hon. Members have said, it is at this precise moment that we need Parliament, and Members of Parliament to question Ministers on the progress of the disease. Whichever choice the Government make, their conduct will be judged as evidence of their concern for rural Britain.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I shall use my discretion and call one more Back-Bench Member.

10.30 am

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I shall be extremely brief. I wish to make two points.

In a written answer to me last week, the Minister said that his remit was to kick-start the rural economy once foot and mouth had been eradicated. That begs two questions. What does the phrase "to kick-start" mean? It is one of those wonderful new Labour phrases that is intended to give the impression of something happening. Every indication is that the foot and mouth outbreak will not be eradicated for months. If the Minister has not heard the voices in this Chamber today, I should tell him that the countryside wants action now, not months in the future.

The countryside needs information. There was an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in my constituency, at Grange farm, Little Chesterton, some weeks ago. It is not sufficient merely to slaughter the affected animals; a MAFF-supervised clean-up of the farm is necessary. The farmer is still waiting to know when that will happen. Farmers whose farms are near to an exclusion zone want to know when they will be able to move their stock, but no one is telling them anything, and no one is telling the National Farmers Union anything.

Last week, I tabled parliamentary questions to the Minister of Agriculture, asking when he expected the post-slaughter clean-up at Grange farm to begin. I received a reply from the Minister today, saying that he would reply as soon as possible. If MAFF cannot even tell Members of Parliament when a clean-up will start on farms on which an organised foot and mouth slaughter took place weeks ago, the epidemic is totally out of the Government's control and the sooner the Government get a grip on the matter the better.

10.33 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on securing this debate on the impact of foot and mouth on the rural economy. He rightly spent 20 minutes talking about agriculture. All hon. Members who represent rural constituencies understand that the impact on agriculture is total and absolute, and that is why we underline it constantly.

I said last week that those whose farms were not infected and were outside restricted areas felt that the sword of Damocles was hanging over their head. Floods provide a better analogy—people see the water lapping around their buildings, take precautions and put out the sandbags, but they know that once the water breaches those defences, disaster will ensue. That is how people feel in the dairy lands of Somerset. The crisis affects not only farmers but everyone associated with them. Last Sunday was Mothers' day, so perhaps it is right to recognise that the families of farmers are as affected as much as the farmers themselves. There are, of course, also women farmers.

I do not want to rehearse the same arguments that we had in last week's debate on agriculture. Those arguments have been well ventilated. The halving of the number of state veterinary surgeons in the country was not helpful. Nevertheless, contingency plans were clearly not in place; adequate senior management was not focused on the infection at an early enough stage. The logistics have proved to be a shambles.

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, along with us, pointed out the potential problem at the time of the classical swine fever outbreak. Last autumn, we said clearly that if the resources available for classical swine fever had to be stretched further, disaster would ensue—and it has.

Mr. Heath: The right hon. Lady is correct. Very few of the lessons of the classical swine fever outbreak in East Anglia seem to have been learned and put into practice in dealing with this epidemic. Issues such as the welfare of animals, putting a floor to commodity prices and how we deal with this crisis continue to exist.

I introduce one note of caution. A bandwagon appears to be developing in favour of vaccination, but I would treat that with care. Vaccination may have a part to play, but no more than that, because there are clear difficulties in using it. I would not like an orthodoxy to develop that perceived vaccination as a panacea and thought that we would be free of foot and mouth if the Government introduced vaccination measures. That is nonsense.

Mr. Tredinnick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: No. I do not have time. I know that the hon. Gentleman has theories about borax, but we must continue with this debate.

This debate relates to the extent of the impact of foot and mouth on the rural economy as a whole. It is impossible to overstate that impact. I was staggered to discover, when I talked to people in the high streets of the smaller towns and villages in my constituency in Somerset one week after the start of the epidemic, that everybody's businesses already showed a downturn in turnover. It did not matter what kind of business it was—the impact was felt by not only those directly related to tourism but newsagents, butchers and gift

[Mr. Heath]

shops. Everybody felt the impact of the cancellations and the lack of money coming into the rural economy, because sociably responsible people who would usually visit rural areas such as mine at weekends no longer do so. They have read in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* or wherever that they should not visit the countryside, so they do not—and who is to say that they are wrong?

It is difficult to know how to deal with the problems. The Minister has stressed that the countryside is open. Yes, it is open—but there are heavy caveats. I would still be worried if I saw people using footpaths across dairy lands in Somerset or wandering at will around our country lanes. As the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, those lanes should be closed as a sensible precaution, because they provide access only to farm lands.

How do we deal with the lack of turnover and the cash flow problems that businesses are experiencing? Suggestions have been made, such as revaluing for business rates purposes. Will the Minister tell us how many revaluations he expects to put through the system in what period of time? How will that have an immediate effect?

A VAT holiday or another kind of tax holiday has also been suggested. That could make a difference, but any business that uses a deferred payment of VAT or another tax to maintain its current cash flow is in line for perdition and needs to treat the matter with great care.

Large estate owners must consider whether the rental on agricultural land and agricultural businesses should be revised. I made that point to the hon. gentleman representing the Church Commissioners yesterday. The rental might be reduced and made more appropriate, and that might be backdated to Lady day or before.

The definitions of rural areas used by the Minister present some difficulties. I do not accept that we are dealing only with centres of population of less than 3,000, which is the traditional yardstick, because the market towns that are suffering do not come into that category. Anyone who understands the country knows that business goes on in the towns rather than in rural areas. We need to deal with that.

We need greater clarity because we are getting mixed messages. We still do not know what activities can and cannot appropriately be continued. There is the question, for example, of whether to cancel the Royal Bath and West agricultural show, which is enormously important to many small businesses as a showpiece and shop window. I was with representatives of the show on Friday and they do not know whether they should go ahead without animals. There is difficulty with instructions to Departments—whether the Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise or the Department of Social Security—which are simply not receiving clear guidance. They do not know what they are supposed to be doing, and at this stage in a crisis, they should know.

There is also the issue of resources. We still have been given no clear view on consequential loss or compensation. We are constantly told that agrimonetary compensation was the payment to the farmers. It was not; that was for a totally different purpose. It certainly helps in the current crisis but we need proper compensation. Will we get it? The Minister has a taskforce but it has no financial backing. Surely it is time that contingency funds were made available so that it can do the job with which it is entrusted.

Finally, the crisis has made it clear that MAFF is not a rural affairs department. The more that MAFF has concentrated on its narrow viewpoint, the worse a job it has done for the wider rural economy. Surely it is time that we had better co-ordination in Government affairs to ensure that rural areas are properly represented, as they should be.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his discipline.

10.41 am

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): This has been a sombre debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) deserves to be congratulated on utilising this Chamber, probably as well as it ever has been, to address the most serious issue facing the country at the moment. The position of the Opposition has been clear throughout the crisis; we will support the Government when we can and criticise it when we must. That is the role of a responsible Opposition and we will continue to carry it out.

We have heard this morning about the many inadequacies of MAFF in dealing with the outbreak, particularly its lack of clear, speedy information to farmers. I know that from my own constituency experience; I get daily phone calls from desperate farmers who simply want advice and clear guidance. Five or six weeks into the crisis they are still not getting it. That is one of the most urgent issues that the Government need to address.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Government will shortly have to deal with the serious issue of advice to farmers on whether to turn their stock out. Many will not have enough fodder to keep the animals in sheds and once they go into the fields the disease is likely to spread much more quickly and over a much bigger geographical area. We need clear advice on that matter.

Mr. Green: My hon. Friend is of course right. There will be other times and opportunities to discuss many of the purely agricultural issues surrounding the tragedy, but today I want to concentrate mainly on non-farming matters, particularly the activities of the taskforce, which the Minister is in charge of—I use the word "activities" loosely. The first outbreak of the disease was notified to MAFF as far back as 18 February. On 11 March, the Minister for Agriculture said that the outbreak was under control—a catastrophically wrong analysis, as events have proved—and it was during that week that the Minister's taskforce was set up. On 20 March, he made a statement to the House about its preliminary findings, including several announcements on business rates, holidays, the attitudes of banks and other ways of helping business through the immediate cash flow problems, which, if they are put into practice, will be welcome. Hon. Members have referred to several of those announcements this morning. The rest of the statement largely consisted of aspirations to reopen tourist attractions—aspirations that may or may not come to mean anything, depending on the spread of the disease.

Since then, the taskforce for which the Minister is responsible has largely disappeared from sight and he must answer the charge that it was set up too late, has been half-hearted in its actions and has simply been overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis. The effect of the Minister's taskforce has been like that of opening an umbrella in a hurricane. In confronting a rapidly growing and spreading national crisis, it has proceeded like a normal Whitehall committee, thinking that it has all the time in the world.

I am afraid that the Government have not got to grips with the root of the problem, which is dual control. The Minister sees it as his job to repeat as a mantra, "The countryside is open for business." He says that things are fairly normal across the countryside, while, on the other side of the street, MAFF is, rightly, trying to close down large parts of the countryside to avoid the spread of this terrible disease. Sending out not only mixed messages, but flatly contradictory messages has left all those at the sharp end of the crisis feeling confused and increasingly angry. People's livelihoods are disappearing by the day. That is not remotely a political point. The least that they can expect from any Government is clear leadership and clear messages, but they have been failed miserably during this crisis.

Also lacking is a proper attitude by the taskforce to the scale of the crisis. To take one example, the tourist-industry is clearly suffering greatly. The Government said that British tourism would get a £10 million cash injection to counter misinformation about foot and mouth, but the Cumbria tourist board estimates that the county is losing £8 million to £10 million a week. That illustrates the inadequacy of the scale of the Government's response.

Many hon. Friends have mentioned specific companies and industries that are badly affected. I should like the Minister to address another—the angling industry. The National Angling Alliance says that it

"represents six major angling organisations...There are 3.3 million anglers in the UK and the industry had a turnover of £3.3 billion in 1994."

It says that the foot and mouth epidemic is having "a huge impact" on their businesses. The secretariat writes that

"the Government does not appear to recognise either the importance of angling or our contribution to the rural economy. The NAA estimates that angling and fishery businesses are losing some £7 million each week".

That is just one example of a sector that is being almost totally destroyed by the outbreak, which feels that the scale of the Government's response is not adequate.

Simply repeating that the countryside is open for business is not good enough. We all wish that it were open for business, but increasingly it cannot be. During the past 24 hours, we have heard the Minister say that we should not get over-excited about the problems in the Lake district and that, so far, there has been only one outbreak in the national park. In this morning's newspapers, however, people involved in selling and managing the Lake district as a tourist destination use phrases such as "a doomsday scenario". In all conscience, I must tell the Minister that, if the people whose job is to keep tourist destinations alive are using such phrases, Ministers who say that we should not worry and things are reasonably normal sound increasingly like Corporal Jones in "Dad's Army". They say, "Don't panic", but are in fact increasing the level of panic. They do not measure up to the scale of the crisis.

I have some sympathy for the Minister, because he is at the sharp end of a Government who are trying to face both ways. If they take determined measures to save our remaining livestock, they could damage the tourism industry. If they try to save the tourism industry over the next few months, they may put at risk thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, more animals. I agree that that is a dilemma, but to do neither effectively and end up doing unnecessary and permanent damage to the livestock industry and rural tourism would be unforgivable by both the agriculture and tourism industries, and I am afraid that that is what is happening at the moment. The Minister is aware of the dilemma. Many people, particularly those whose livelihoods are at stake, have some sympathy for him, but it will disappear in a second if it seems that the Government's eyes are focused elsewhere.

This morning we heard the Prime Minister say that he would strain every sinew to solve the crisis. If he is straining every sinew this Tuesday, I hope that he is still straining to solve the crisis next Monday when he might be calling a general election. If he does, it will be starkly clear to people in the countryside whose livelihoods are at stake that he did not mean it when he said that he was straining every sinew, but that that was just today's soundbite. Soundbites are not enough to solve the crisis. People will feel betrayed by the Government. I hope that the Minister will take with him the clear message that, so far, the Government have not measured up to the scale and extent of a crisis that is devastating large areas of our countryside.

10.50 am

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on securing the debate. It is recognised on all sides that it is a matter of extreme gravity. I pay tribute to the largely sober manner in which the hon. Gentleman debated the issues. It is extremely serious and should not be a party political matter. Everyone wants to overcome the crisis.

Many of the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) were directed at my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I shall attempt to reply to as many points as possible, including questions about agriculture.

First, let me make it clear that neither the Government, not the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, nor the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food ever said that people should simply keep out of the countryside. What they said right from the beginning was that people should be careful about where they went in the countryside. We have consistently argued that susceptible livestock must be avoided and that people should keep away from farmland, particularly in infected areas. Above all, we encouraged people to obey the "Keep out" signs. All that is obvious, but there remains a large part of the countryside that people can safely visit.

[Mr. Michael Meacher]

I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) that the Government face a difficult dilemma. Our paramount concern is to do everything possible to contain and eradicate the disease. The whole nation shares that view and is co-operating with the Government. At the same time, however, because of the size and importance of the tourism industry—our fifth largest and worth £65 billion—we must also take account of the needs of small businesses, tourist attractions and the ancillary and related retail sector, which has been severely damaged as a result of the crisis. We are trying to walk a difficult tightrope between the two. Our message is that it is possible to enter large swathes of the countryside perfectly safely as long as the basic rules are obeyed. I do not know of any alternative sensible policy that we could adopt.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) asked about contingency planning. Obviously, there will be an inquiry later into the handling of the crisis. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) said, the present outbreak is unprecedented. It is on a wholly different scale from that in 1967, to which I shall return later.

Mr. Tredinnick: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I have only seven minutes and cannot give way.

On joined-up government, we shall have to investigate with a fine toothcomb later, but I suspect that the DETR and MAFF have liaised from the start. The rural taskforce includes Ministers from the DETR, MAFF, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the DTI, representatives from No. 10 and all stakeholder interests. The Prime Minister is now presiding over the multi-departmental committee under the COBRA procedure—named after Cabinet Office briefing room A. I insist that close co-operation has been evident throughout.

I know that hon. Gentlemen strongly believe that the Army should have been brought in earlier. We have never had any objection to bringing the Army in, the question was whether the Army was most suitable for the tasks that we faced, including dealing with the lack of vets. There are still insufficient vets—

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: No, I am sorry. There are myriad questions, but I have many points to answer.

We have significantly increased the number of vets but there is still a shortage. However, the problem with slaughtermen and JCBs has largely been overcome. There is also the logistical problem of handling a crisis of this scale. The Army has great skills in that, which is why we brought it in.

I turn to the measures that we have sought to take. Several hon. Members have acknowledged the financial package in the first statement that I made last week. First, there will be business rates relief. For many small businesses that will pay perhaps £1,250 over six months. The size of the package will be a complete rates holiday. We have increased the amount that the Government will fund from 75 per cent. to 95 per cent. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) said that some businesses, such as outdoor clothing and pet food, are outside the area. But there is still the 75:25 break-down between Government and local authorities that local authorities can invoke to help those outside the immediate area, such as those in rural areas and in the hardest hit areas and businesses with a rateable value of less than £12,000. That is the prime concern.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Meacher: I cannot give way even to my hon. Friend. I have refused to give way to others and I must refuse to give way to him too.

There will be a rescheduling and deferment of VAT and PAYE, so far as there is discretion within the legislation. I have spoken to the banks about extending lines of credit and easing interest payments and the whole question of holidays for capital repayments. Many hon. Members argue that there is a case for further interest relief, and we are considering that. I made it clear that the original statement was a preliminary package. I intend to come forward at an early point with further measures. I can assure the hon. Member for Ashford, who suggested that the rural taskforce has disappeared, that it is exceedingly active. I am devoting 18 hours a day to its activities, and it is meeting tomorrow. We will consider the matter and a number of other measures and will come forward with further action.

We are extremely conscious that damage has been done. Utterly inaccurate and hysterical stories have been produced about the state of the country, such as that it is not safe to eat here or that people need to be disinfected when they return to the United States. We are funding the British Tourist Authority to try to correct that image. We are telling our embassies and posts abroad to do all that they can to monitor the newspapers and broadcasts to try to correct immediately any of those absurd travesties.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) made a point about putting the blame on smuggled meat. We are not apportioning blame; we are trying to find out the cause. If that was the cause, we certainly need to deal with it. She said that clear directions from MAFF were needed, and several right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned that. We realise that. As the right hon. Member for Bridgwater fairly stated, because of his track record and his knowledge of ministerial life, the pressures on MAFF at the moment are nearly intolerable. The people at MAFF are doing their best and coping extremely well with an enormous crisis that in some ways is almost unprecedented.

We appreciate that there is a need for clear directions for all sorts of people, and we are trying to deal with that. When we say that we will reply to letters as soon as possible, that is exactly so.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) asked what I meant by kick-starting the economy. Our first concern is to overcome the crisis and to provide rates relief and assistance with deferment of other statutory payments that have to be made to tide people over the crisis. That is our first concern, but there must be a rural regeneration package. We will implement the rural White Paper proposals as soon as we can when we begin to reduce the number of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is an important debate, but I regret that time is up.

Scottish Economy

11 am

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): Thank you, Mr. Winterton—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I remind the hon. Gentleman that fortunately, because of a motion of the House, I can now be addressed as Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Joyce: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and congratulations.

The last full financial year showed Scotland's manufacturing sector output growing 2 per cent. faster than the rest of the United Kingdom. Scotland's share of United Kingdom-manufactured exports is considerably higher than its share of manufacturing employment. That can be explained partly by Scotland's success in attracting export-oriented inward investments; it is also attributable to the excellent productivity of Scotland's workers.

The Scottish National party argues that the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee takes decisions that favour the service sector in the south-east at the expense of the Scottish manufacturing sector, yet the fact that Scottish-based manufacturing industries are out-performing their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom is core evidence that the SNP's premise does not stand up.

Scotland's economy is integral to that of the United Kingdom and its success is due in large part to our competitiveness in the global market. Non-United Kingdom companies now produce more than 70 per cent. of all Scottish manufactured exports and 10 Scottish exporters account for roughly 50 per cent. of the total of Scottish manufactured export sales. The electronics sector is particularly important, accounting for about 53 per cent. of all exports.

Employer survey data suggests that manufacturing employment is still falling, which is worrying to those in that sector. There is no doubt that the difficult conditions in the global economy put pressures on all industrialised countries, as well as Scottish manufacturers. However, Scottish firms are performing well, all things considered, and are well placed to benefit from recent improvements in the global outlook.

That said, Scotland, in line with most developed economies, has seen a significant decline in employment in manufacturing in the past 20 years. During that period the number employed has fallen by a third to about 300,000. That represents 30 per cent. of total employment in Scotland. Much of the decline can be explained by the long-term trend of job losses in the large, labour-intensive industries such as shipbuilding, textiles and steel. However, during the same period, the total number of jobs in Scotland has increased as the growth of the service sector and new high-tech industries, particularly electronics, has more than compensated for the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs.

Manufacturing still accounts for about one fifth of Scottish gross domestic product, however, and it remains the case that there are significant links between

[Mr. Joyce]

manufacturing and the rest of the economy. For example, it is estimated that Scottish manufacturers spend more than £6 billion per annum on services from companies in Scotland. Manufacturing, therefore, remains a significant contributor to Scottish GDP when direct and indirect contributions are taken into account.

My constituency, Falkirk West, serves as a microcosm of the Scottish economy. Historically, the iron industry employed a high number of men in the area. In the past quarter of a century, conforming to wider economic trends, most of the foundries have closed. For many, that has been a painful process, and unemployment was high during the Conservative years. In the past four years, however, under the Labour Government, while there remains much to do, employment levels in Falkirk have grown well, and 74 per cent. of working-age people are now in work—the Scottish average is 72 per cent.—and unemployment is down by more than a third on 1997. Much of that is because local people have embraced the need to change with the times. New industries have moved in to replace older ones, taking advantage of central Scotland's excellent communications links and the productivity and enthusiasm of local workers. Jobs may be lost from time to time—for example, in the metals industries, and in the former Wrangler factory, at Camelon—others take their place, with substantial recent investment by companies such as Thomas Cook and Telecom service centres in Larbert, and Scottish Power.

There is no single response to the globalisation of services and products, however, and modernisation cuts across the whole of society and the economy. Our success or failure in the years to come will be based largely on our ability to adapt quickly to the changing nature of the world's economy.

It is therefore vital that we recognise the criticality of diversification. Exports are currently dominated by the electronics, drinks and chemical industries, so we must ensure innovation in new growth areas. That means continuing to address the business birth rate by creating an entrepreneurial culture where business success is recognised and rewarded and business start-ups are nurtured and supported. It also means ever-increasing—

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that in 1997, when the Conservative Government left office, there were 6,600 business start-ups per annum in Scotland, and in the second quarter of 2000 the figure was 4,500 per annum? How does that square with the hon. Gentleman's eulogy of Government economic policy in Scotland?

Mr. Joyce: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the development of local enterprise companies; my constituency is covered by Forth Valley Enterprise. There is a tight relationship between LECs and the Government. There have been several recent policy statements which would make good reading and encourage the hon. Gentleman in his projection of how well the Labour Government will perform in the coming years.

For 18 years, the Tories pretty much prevented meaningful economic development happening in tandem with social advance because of their economic policies that led inexorably to boom and bust. It is important therefore, to highlight features of the Government's economic management, which has changed the pre-1997 economic environment of Scotland almost beyond recognition.

At the 1997 general election, the Labour party pledged not to increase the rate of income tax and it has not done so. It also introduced a new, higher starting rate of tax. We have always been committed to fairness in the workplace and to striking a balance between the interests of the employee and the interests of the employer. The Tories, on the other hand, have never recognised that protecting the interests of the employee is directly in the interests of the employer. Partnership with trades unions remains fundamental to the Labour Government's approach. In my constituency, that contrasts with the recent example of the SNP-Tory council in taking a major decision, which, in due course, could affect all its employees' conditions of service, without a single mention in advance to Unison, the relevant trade union.

Labour has introduced the individual savings account; far from attacking savings, the new arrangement will encourage many more people to get into the habit of saving regularly. That is a positive measure that will benefit Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Labour is committed to reforming welfare in a way that stresses the importance of individual productivity through work. The new deal has been a remarkable success. Labour is also committed to ensuring that works pays. That was clearly demonstrated by the introduction of the national minimum wage and its recent upgrade by the Chancellor. It is worthy of note that the Scottish National party was unable to send a representative on a day trip to attend either the original vote on the matter or the Secretary of State's statement on the upgrade of the national minimum wage to £4.10—

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Or to this debate.

Mr. Joyce: Indeed, or to last week's debate on a similar topic. They talk the talk but they do not walk the walk. There is no meaning or sense in having representatives who do not come down to Westminster.

As my hon. Friends know, low pay and low skills go together and are the hallmark of the Tory approach to job creation. Scotland has suffered for too long from both unemployment and skills shortages before 1997. There is no future for Scotland as a low-wage economy. We will never be able to compete on wages with countries—particularly in the southern hemisphere—that pay wages that are a tenth or a hundredth of British wages. National boundaries mean very little in a world where capital can be instantly transferred from one continent to another at the touch of a button. In the modern world of work, both businesses and consumers increasingly interact on-line and across continents.

Labour is committed to driving up the knowledge base throughout Scotland. Our 1997 manifesto stated:

"The UK must be positively committed to the global pursuit of new knowledge, with a strong science base in our universities and centres of excellence leading the world. We support a collaborative

approach between researchers and business, spreading the use of new technology and good design, and exploiting our own inventions to boost business."

The foundations of the knowledge economy are: high levels of education, technical skills, and technological knowledge; widespread collaboration and partnership between universities and enterprise, leading to greater commercial exploitation of useful knowledge; and the creation of an entrepreneurial culture that encourages the growth of new businesses and encourages changed attitudes to wealth creation and risk taking.

Scotland is well placed under the Labour Government to develop the education, skills and technological know-how that are central to the knowledge economy. Our universities produce 21 per cent. of Britain's computer science postgraduates and 11 per cent. of all British engineering and technology graduates.

Through the combined effort of the Labour Government, the Labour-led Scottish Executive and many other agencies including the local enterprise companies, Scotland is experiencing a learning revolution in which skills are continuously upgraded and lifelong learning is a reality. Of course, that must happen in a manner that enables people to balance the responsibilities of work and family life while learning. That is happening, and it is reflected in the wide participation in tertiary education. Almost 50 per cent. of Scottish young people attend higher education, and more people than ever are attending vocational courses later in life at institutions such as mine, the Falkirk college of further education. That ever-deepening pool of talent is a tribute to the quality of Scotland's tertiary education system, and it is a fundamental part of the excellent economic prognosis for the next years under a Labour Government.

Only by the practical application of the knowledge generated by our outstanding universities can we hope to generate a successful high-technology economy. By building on the model provided by Cadence and other emerging centres of excellence, such as the research centres for aerospace technology at Prestwick and for semiconductors at Livingston, we will continue to encourage partnership working. Those centres represent best practice in partnership between companies, educational institutions and the public sector.

The Scottish Executive, the DTI and the Office of Science and Technology operate a number of programmes and initiatives to support technology, technology transfer, business innovation and lifelong learning. To build the knowledge base, there are programmes such as the joint infrastructure fund, foresight, the foresight link awards and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council research development grant. The main grant programme for business innovation is SMART, the small firms merit award for research and technology. The new tax incentive for small and medium-sized companies to undertake more research and development is of major potential importance to this part of the corporate sector.

Several Government initiatives aim to help companies learn from each other. Scottish Enterprise's cluster development action plans are of particular importance to firms in the manufacturing and services sectors. A great deal is being done to promote education and skills, including the Scottish university for industry, the national grid for learning and the doubling of the number of modern apprenticeships.

The backdrop for Scotland's economy has not looked so positive for decades. Labour's economic policy has shifted the UK from a boom-and-bust economic cycle to one of stability with a high employment rate, low inflation and low long-term interest rates. The success of the UK and Scottish economies has not happened by accident but most definitely by design. However, even with its inherently positive environment, Scotland still has much to do to maximise its economic potential. Our greatest challenge is, perhaps, the productivity gap. Scotland and the rest of the UK lags behind the productivity of our competitors. The growth of the United States economy over the past decade has been driven mainly by productivity. Scotland has some way to go to catch up.

Increasing productivity is consistent with Labour's idea of sustainable development. It is sound to use natural resources efficiently, while simultaneously increasing business competitiveness. We should note that Scotland's birth rate is persistently low, which means that we must maximise the entrepreneurship of the people that we have. Entrepreneurship does not come naturally to us, and more must be done to create a cultural shift in our attitudes to self-employment and risk taking.

The greatest challenge facing Scotland's labour market is the skills gap, which occurs when the skills of the labour force do not match job vacancies. The Government and the Scottish Executive are rightly attaching importance to stimulating demand for learning, and finding new ways of reaching out to workers who have not traditionally participated in formal education and training. Brains matter much more than brawn in today's labour market, and even low-skilled vacancies now require levels of skill that were not previously needed in equivalent jobs in the mid-20th century.

Labour stands for a higher skill, higher wage economy. The Tories were always happy to have a section of the economy that competed on the basis of cheap labour. We believe that lifting the level of employment for all will lead to higher standards of living and, ultimately, a more fulfilled society. The role of Government in that is to facilitate a strong and vibrant business economy, which can generate growth and promote social well-being. That has meant modernising the relationship between the state and the economy, although not along the lines of the Conservative free market economy or the Scottish National party's economics of independence. Such policies do not benefit the wider economy or society.

Labour has worked towards creating an economy that achieves the correct balance of supporting business and enterprise, while promoting social development. Economic development not only generates higher incomes and a better quality of employment, but helps us to achieve our goals of social justice and sustainability.

Business growth promotes lifelong learning, and that raises the value of human capital in our economy. However, ultimately, the purpose of a Labour Government is not only to facilitate growth, but to

[Mr. Joyce]

spread widely the benefits of such growth. That means ensuring that public services are well funded and are of a high standard. In my constituency, that includes matters such as the provision of the best health care that a dynamic economy can provide, through the excellent Falkirk and District Royal infirmary.

I close by referring to the Scottish microcosm of Falkirk, West. We must ensure that people who are affected by changes in the economy around them are well served by an imaginative and visionary approach by relevant regional development agencies. Next month, in Larbert, one of the last iron foundries in the Falkirk area will close with the loss of about 45 jobs. In numerical terms, those jobs will be replaced—and more—by jobs of a different type, as I previously described. However, for the individuals and families involved, it will be a painful experience. I believe that the company and the relevant unions have gone to some lengths to ensure that the workers get the best possible deal to help them through the difficult times ahead. However, I wonder why the workers' skills could not be employed on a project such as the Falkirk millennium wheel, which is a huge engineering project in my area. That would have utilised the skills of workers who come from a metalwork background. Forth Valley Enterprise may have been able to facilitate that and, although it is doing what it can to alleviate the plight of the relevant workers, I think that a small chance may have been missed. However, that must be set against the context of success that is reflected in the economic landscapes of Falkirk, central Scotland, Scotland and the whole of the UK. The success of the Labour Government to date has been a consequence of choice and planning—definitely not of chance. I believe that the Scottish public recognise that, and will act accordingly upon that knowledge at the appropriate time.

11.19 am

Mr. Eric Clarke (Midlothian): I am sorry for being late, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I was watching the debate on the monitor. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) on securing it. I do not know why there are not many people here, because there is great interest in the subject.

My speech will be brief. Scotland is a leader in the cluster system, which the Government support. I am referring to the electronics industry around Livingston—Cadence Design Systems and so on. An inquiry was held on the subject and feedback from Ireland and America suggested that people were envious of us and complimentary about what is happening in Livingston. The electronics industry involves not only manufacturing, but research and development, and in that we are ahead of the rest of the world.

We are part of what is called the Celtic corner, because we have a turn of phrase that is second to none. The Welsh, Scottish and Irish are seen not as competitors but as partners in the go-ahead situation of education. When the Livingston plant was established, Cadence told us that 60 per cent. of the graduates there were home-grown although many of them had returned from studying abroad. The development in the electronics industry augurs well for Scotland, and the potential spin-off is mind-boggling.

I want to discuss a parochial situation in Midlothian, my own constituency. The research and development departments of all the institutions involved in biochemistry have clustered together, and universities and industry are co-operating. The institutions on the Pentland and Bush industrial estates are clustered together and feeding off the universities of Edinburgh, Herriot-Watt and the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies.

We also have the Roslin institute, which was the creator of the famous Dolly. That is the one that got the headlines, but there are other projects that are just as important. We are lucky that other developments have come from the Dolly project, in manufacturing the enzymes contained in the beasts that have been created, which are beneficial to human beings in treating skin diseases and other things. Those developments are in their infancy, and the mind boggles once more at the thought of their potential. The Moredun and Lasswade institutes are involved in animal husbandry and agriculture; further scientific study of those subjects is clearly necessary, given the way things are at the moment.

I must declare an interest in the coal industry in Scotland. We always said that the British coal industry was the finest in the world technically and in terms of safety, and yet it has been partially closed down. However, I am happy that the Government subsidy allows the Scottish coal industry to continue. The Government are to be congratulated on that. I shall conclude my remarks now because I am running out of steam.

11.24 am

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on successfully overcoming the hurdles of late-night debates in the House to arrive on the Order Paper with your proper title. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke). Given all the present uncertainties, we face the danger of never quite knowing whether it is the last time that we shall speak in this Chamber. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) on introducing the debate. I join him in expressing a slight worry about the lack of hon. Members present, but that again could be due to outside uncertainties, which could be focusing their minds on other matters.

When it comes to debating the economy, there is consensus about how the free market operates, although there is still worry about free trade and how that operates. In a sense, political debate can have a less direct effect on the economy and while Governments like to take a lot of credit for helping the economy, in many ways it is helped by their restraint rather than by their actions. The success of our economy is down to the ability, entrepreneurial spirit and the innovative ideas of the individuals behind the businesses that operate in the economy. We must not lose sight of the fact that our success lies on their shoulders.

Yesterday, I attended Shell livewire business start-up regional awards for the north-east of Scotland. One of my constituents, Julie Rendall, of the Roselodge Nursery in Aboyne successfully went forward to the Scottish final. Scotland often tends to dominate the

United Kingdom final. We have the talent; 40 per cent. of the judgment of those who decide the awards depends on the quality of the businesses, but 60 per cent. of their judgment is based on the people who drive them. They look for livewires who will take businesses further.

Some of the issues to which the hon. Member for Falkirk, West referred are now matters for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive. Many surround the problem of business start-ups. Lessons can be learned from different parts of Scotland about how to maximise potential and not throw away good practices. We are lucky in the north-east of Scotland, in the way in which we nurture business start-ups. We ensure that there is a good interchange of experience from different enterprise trusts and companies, to maximise support.

As for the reserved matters, the key worry concentrates on the roles of the Chancellor and the Department of Trade and Industry, our relationship with Europe, the wider infrastructure in terms of linking Scotland to the rest of Europe through our rail system, or what is left of it, improving the freight link through the channel tunnel and the direct link between Scottish business and the rest of Europe. There is a range of successful business in the Scottish economy and challenges must be faced. A big driver in the economy is the oil and gas industry and we shall discuss that industry and its future tomorrow in the Grand Committee. It plays a crucial role in manufacturing investment in the United Kingdom. Those of us who live in the north-east of Scotland see it on our doorsteps, but there is a great danger that for the rest of the country, industries that are out of sight are out of mind. It is important for all of us in politics not to lose sight of how much investment has come from the North sea and how much more there is still to come.

Any talk of a windfall tax on the oil industry must be considered carefully. It is tempting for those removed from the industry and its importance to see it as an easy hit for another tax. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Scotland for her previous role as spokesman for energy. It is recognised in the industry that her understanding played a crucial part in bringing together Government and industry in a dynamic and constructive way. At yesterday's awards, she was praised by a spokesman from Shell who said that in his experience she was unique in being the catalyst in bringing together different sectors of the industry—contractors and operators—to home in on how best to maximise the take for the state and for the industry. Although contractors and operators are in competition with each other, recognising the many ways in which they help each other may help them in areas in which they are competing.

In tomorrow's Grand Committee, we shall no doubt deal in more depth with issues relating to our gas industry.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, West raised the role of our high-tech industry. That is clearly an industry of the future. *Business a.m.* has issued a warning with its technology index. At the start of the Scottish Parliament the index was up in the thousands, but it is now down to 660. Clearly, there are challenges in getting wealth out of the technology industry and the Minister must tell us where he sees the problems facing that industry. As with all these things, we must recognise that the role of Government should be not to step in with both feet and disturb things.

The financial services sector is another key industry in the Scottish economy that has not yet run away to other parts of the United Kingdom because of the creation of the Scottish Parliament, despite the pronouncements of the prophets of doom. As with the oil industry, we cannot see or touch the financial services sector, so we may underestimate its importance in underpinning our economy.

The drinks industry was touched on by the spokesman for the Scottish Affairs Committee and I do not want to prejudge the outcome of its inquiry, which has been affected by events beyond its control in terms of the timing of the report's publication. I was impressed by the witnesses who appeared before the Select Committee—by their entrepreneurial spirit and enthusiasm for driving forward their industry and their products. Now that Scotland produces 75 per cent. of the United Kingdom's spirit production, the drinks industry is part of the key cluster, to use the jargon.

The hon. Member for Midlothian rightly raised the importance of linking research, turning it into economic activity and recognising its value. Although many such matters are now devolved, there is a warning sign that when it comes to fundamental investment into pure research, it is crucial that short-term headlines are not the goal. Much of what is now exploited in Midlothian came from research that was funded with no particular idea of its benefits. Lord Rutherford did much to further our understanding of nuclear physics, but when he was challenged as to his motivation, he replied that it was pure research, purely for academic interest. A huge industry that has made an enormous impact on our country was established on the back of that work. He had no interest in the economic application of his research, but had he not received funding and been able to enjoy his pure research, we would not have the understanding and technological advances that resulted from it.

The biggest challenge currently facing the Scottish economy is the foot and mouth outbreak. Although it is based in our rural economy, its tentacles spread throughout the country. It has a direct effect on farming and a wider effect on the tourist industry. I am already getting feedback from tourist centres about people from abroad cancelling holiday bookings. Our key message must be the normality of life outside the direct impact of the crisis, but that is a hard one to get across. I am interested to hear about the Minister's role in the task force, and, while we have the Scotland Office, his role in providing the link to ensure that the challenges facing Scotland are not lost in the United Kingdom response. I was rather disappointed to read an advert in the *Evening Standard* last week that was designed to encourage people back to the countryside. In the traditional manner of unjoined-up government, towards the bottom a short line stated that the Scottish Executive would issue a separate advert on the issues affecting Scotland. I feel that—

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): That is fair enough in the *Evening Standard*, which circulates only in London.

Sir Robert Smith: That shows a classic lack of joined-up thinking. In considering the tourism industry and

[Sir Robert Smith]

encouraging people to come on walking holidays in their Easter break, we want to encourage not only people in Scotland to come; we hope that many people in London who enjoyed the excellent—*[Interruption.]* If the Conservative party ever want to represent Scotland, they will have to venture from outwith Scotland.

Mr. Grieve: I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that my principal recreation is walking in Scotland, but at the moment I cannot deduce from current information whether I am welcome.

Sir Robert Smith: That is the crucial message to send to the Government. Where people are welcome, information should be available to welcome them, and it should be clear when people are still advised to stay away from livestock. People need certainty. Scotland offers many other attractions, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that if the key aspect that originally attracted someone to an area does not appear to be available, that person will not look further. It is important to have a joined-up strategy to market and reinforce the fact that we are still open for business and welcome careful tourist visitors.

On Friday, at a meeting of the Kincardine and Deeside enterprise trust with businesses from my constituency, I met an archaeologist, all of whose contracts have been cancelled as much of the land that he investigates is closed to him because it contains livestock. The need to get on top of the foot and mouth outbreak and eradicate its spread is extremely pressing for the Scottish economy.

The wider background affects the climate in which business operates. The organiser of the enterprise trust event pointed out that many businesses moan to him about developments that are in the realm of politics and Government. He suggests taking them forward, which is why he organised a meeting for Members of the Scottish Parliament and the local Member of Parliament to meet busi~sses. We need to increase that dialogue. Frustration is often felt at the coal face of a business, as those involved are so focused on running the business that they forget to go back to the political process and say that they have a problem as a result of regulation not having been thought through, and allow the political process to deal with their anxieties. It needs to be a two-way dialogue. The day before the Budget, I met a spokesman—I shall not name him, as that would be unfair—for a business that would be affected by the Budget. I said, "I hope we hear good news for you tomorrow", and he said, "Why, what's happening tomorrow?" The following day's Budget had completely slipped his mind. Business should engage in the political process in order to influence it. Although it must serve not only business, but the wider society, if our businesses and economy are not flourishing, we shall not have the investment required to underpin the benefits for the wider society.

I welcomed the proposal to create an independent central bank that appeared in the Liberal Democrat manifesto at the previous election, and which the Chancellor implemented almost as soon as the election was over. It helps to create more of a long-term culture for the underlying monetary policy and challenges of inflation in a country that has often faced inflation. Inflation corrodes investment attitudes and results in extra cost in investment and extra risk to business activity. We often joke in the Chamber when the Prime Minister refers to ending boom and bust and smoothing out—it would be a brave politician who claimed to have ended boom and bust in the economic cycle—but it is helpful to try to dampen down some of the swings that can result if interest rates are at the mercy of political decision-making and election timing.

That does not absolve the Chancellor of his responsibility in producing a Budget to be aware that he is setting criteria and rules by which the Bank of England will have to operate. For instance, the Bank sets interest rates in accordance with its interpretation of the Chancellor's fiscal policy. Therefore, if he proposes irresponsible policies, he cannot be absolved of influence over the Bank's subsequent decisions and their consequences.

Much of the Scottish economy would also benefit from currency stability. Exchange rate stability would be especially welcomed by exporters, the tourism industry, and farming and the broader rural economy. There is widespread disappointment in such sectors of the economy that the euro has not been more vigorously debated, and that the Government have failed to display greater leadership, although they are beginning to be more resolute about expressing their opinions.

However, the United Kingdom's currency belongs to the British people, and they will take the final decision on the euro in a referendum. I welcome that. My party advocated a referendum in the previous general election. It forces those of us who are involved in the political process to engage with the general public. We should not walk blindly into new political arrangements without taking the public with us because that could lead to an immense backlash.

Last week, the Confederation of British Industry emphasised that the Government's relations with Europe must be constructive and progressive to underpin much of our economy and trade. That is especially the case with regard to Scotland: farming and fishing constitute a large proportion of its exports and therefore the UK's relations with Europe are crucial to significant sectors of its economy.

Fishing is a particularly significant sector of the Scottish economy. With regard to that industry, will the Conservative spokesman explain why his party tells a different story in the Scottish Parliament about how it would tackle Europe than it does at Westminster? The Conservative party believes in the Union, but the United Kingdom has only a single voice in Europe and cannot therefore hold divergent opinions on the matter. That circle will have to be squared before the fishermen know where the Conservatives stand on the issue.

I have mentioned that, in terms of grand gestures, the political process has a less dramatic effect on the economy than it had 100 years ago. The Chancellor has therefore taken to tinkering with his Budgets. If the political process were more robust and confident, one might expect the Chancellor to tell the House that the economy is thriving and nothing further needs to be done. However, because grand gestures can no longer be made, there is a dangerous tendency to tinker by introducing a series of little pots of money, several tiny

tax initiatives, or a few small tweaks to the tax system. That creates a complex tax system that can damage businesses. They might face extra costs and burdens, without reaping any compensating productive benefits, if they are confused about which pot they can benefit from, or which new innovative tax credit they can apply for, or if they are uncertain whether they or the Benefits Agency must operate the working families tax credit on behalf of the Government. The current tax system is complex and the Chancellor should begin to try to simplify it because people waste time trying to come to terms with it. I welcome the fact that he has started to try to do that with regard to value added tax.

The transport infrastructure is important because it links the Scottish economy with Europe. Freight links are especially important, but the UK's railway system is fragmented and in a depressingly poor condition. I am not claiming that everything was rosy before the previous Government intervened, but they did not leave as their legacy a railway structure that responded to the subsequent challenges. Individual freight companies have experienced some benefits, but it is necessary to secure the underlying investment so that proper height clearances on railway lines can be introduced and a uniform size of freight wagon can run from central Scotland to the heart of Europe. The opportunity for such a freight link is one of the most significant contributions of the channel tunnel.

The Government must be careful not to take too much credit. They must be keen to have an election because what is happening in the American economy will affect our stock exchange too. When economies turn around, Governments may not necessarily be at fault but, if they take all the credit in the boom years, they inevitably take more of the flak in the bust years.

One fundamental lesson about boom and bust is seen in the fact that, although the Government have smoothed out the economic cycle, they have certainly not smoothed out the public investment cycle in respect of investment in education. As was said earlier, it is important to underpin that. The Government spent the first two years imposing Conservative spending cuts that even the outgoing Conservative Chancellor said that he would not have stuck to, so as to present a nice smooth injection of cash into public services in the run-up to the election. However, that policy has meant that, as the Government reach the end of their term of office, they are spending less, as a percentage of the nation's wealth, than was spent under the policy that they inherited from the previous Government. One may compare this Government's capital spending and under-investment with the achievements of the previous Government.

Many challenges continue to face the Government in terms of underpinning the economy, but the greatest is to be cautious about interfering in and playing around with the tax system unnecessarily, to tackle red tape and to show more leadership in respect of our currency and exchange rate. Finally, they must recognise and pay tribute to the fact that the positive state of the economy is due the spirit and hard work of the individual people working in businesses.

11.46 am

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It is a pleasure to have an opportunity to participate in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) on his speech and on securing the debate. His speech was fascinating because we heard in it the authentic voice of Scottish Blairism. It included a variety of propositions, with a mixture of emphases—on education and the "need for the cultural shift in the attitude to risk taking", to use his words. That is a very Blairite concept from the bosom of the Labour party; even 10 or 15 years ago one would have been unlikely to hear that from a Member of Parliament who supported the Labour interest.

The hon. Gentleman made a variety of other points based largely on his own experience in his constituency, which, I am sure, were valid and reflected in part the fact that his constituency has been historically very dependent on the old manufacturing industry base, as one can see when one drives through or past it. His speech was important, and I am sorry that such an important debate has attracted so little interest from his fellow Labour Members from Scotland and, perhaps unsurprisingly, zero interest from the Scottish National party. One has only to consider that party's basic proposals to realise that they are living on planet Tharg. It is not at all surprising that no SNP Members are present, because they do not want to engage in dialogue, as debate is a means by which one may be brought down to size and have to face up to one's shortcomings.

I hope that the hon. Member for Falkirk, West will bear with me if I am a little iconoclastic this morning, although that iconoclasm will be directed at my own party, too. It is my last opportunity to do that before the general election, and this forum may be appropriate, as we are having an informal and good-humoured discussion.

In 1997, the Conservative party experienced meltdown in Scotland for a variety of reasons, but mainly because the electorate were sick of us and wanted to get rid of us owing to our inability to grapple with the challenge of devolution and the extent to which we adhered on a philosophical basis to maintaining the Union in its old form. They also wanted to get rid of us because of the problems experienced in the economy during the period of recession that preceded that election.

It is noteworthy, however, that the available statistics reveal that in 1997 the Conservative party left Scotland with a series of economic indicators that were effectively unrivalled. I leave unemployment to one side and will return to it later.

Let us examine some of those indicators. In the four years after 1991, Scotland had a faster rate of economic growth than the rest of the United Kingdom. It weathered substantial parts of that recessionary period far better than elsewhere. In 1997, average earnings in Scotland were the fourth highest of the 10 UK regions, although I am the first to accept that some constituencies, such as the one represented by the hon. Member for Falkirk, West and others in Glasgow, had serious indices of social deprivation and poverty. We have such problems in the south-east of England, even in constituencies close to mine, which is the wealthiest in the UK in its heartland of south Buckinghamshire.

On top of that, from 1979 to 1996 earnings in Scotland had increased in real terms by 33 per cent. for men and a staggering 60 per cent. for women, although the latter increase was undoubtedly due in part to the

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

changes in working practices for women and the great growth of parity in pay. Nevertheless, those are major transformations. One had only to visit Glasgow in the early 1990s to see the extent to which that city—which had previously been hugely underachieving and looked dilapidated—was in the process of transformation. It is also noteworthy that, in 1995, exports peaked at £17.32 billion. That was a measure of the underlying strength that was developing in the Scottish economy.

Although the decline in unemployment has undoubtedly been one of the most significant and important features of the past three years, it was already declining in the years immediately before the Conservatives left office, as the inevitable consequence of the growth of productivity, and of the economy in general, in the period preceding that. My experience is that unemployment starts to decrease after the economic indicators of growth rise. They do not work precisely in tandem; we know that, in many matters concerning the economy, one trend follows another.

With that in mind, we must examine, with a degree of caution, the situation today. Several factors demonstrate that the Scottish economy is not doing as well as it should, and they are inherently linked to the Government's economic policies. We start with the basic fact that, despite the faster growth in Scotland under the Conservatives, there is no sign that that has led to the parity in gross domestic product for Scotland that one might have expected. In fact, it has fallen back: Scotland is now at 97 per cent. of UK GDP. Much more worrying is the fall in productivity, which was increasing nationally at 2.2 per cent. per annum in 1997. The rate of increase has now fallen to 0.7 per cent. That is reflected in Scotland, and it is a much lower growth rate than that enjoyed either in Europe or, much more tellingly, in America. Either the hon. Member for Falkirk, West or the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) made a point about the American economy. Until recently, it was surging forward, but that surge was not matched in Britain.

Most worrying is evidence of the past year, which shows a growth in business failure. The hon. Member for Falkirk, West spoke about risk taking, which we need to encourage, although of course one of the consequences of taking risks is that one may come a cropper. Nevertheless, if one takes risks, one should do so in a financial climate in which there is at least some hope that they will succeed. The Grant Thornton report shows that last year the number of businesses in Scotland that went into receivership rose by 67 per cent. I should be interested to hear from the Minister to what he attributes that and whether he concludes that it may be partly a reflection of the Government's policies.

The number of new businesses being set up has fallen by a third since the second quarter of 1997; as I said earlier, we had 6,600 new business start-ups in 1997 and 4,500 in the second quarter of 2000. I am not sure whether further statistics have become available since then; if they have, I have not seen them. That is not the sign of an economy cruising into a higher gear; it is the sign of a faltering economy. Unless the problems are addressed, the trends that have been apparent over the past five or six years will be reversed, including an eventual growth in unemployment. If business start-ups are declining and receiverships are increasing, problems will start to multiply.

The Minister needs to explain why he thinks that those factors come into play but I shall highlight a number of points. First, Scotland is dependent on a number of key sectors, one of which is drink. There is no doubt that the whisky industry is a great money-spinner, not just for Scotland but, in terms of export, for the United Kingdom. Just before the Budget, I was involved in a delegation to the Financial Secretary for the Treasury on behalf of the whisky industry to raise with him that industry's concerns that they were being continuously handicapped—[*Interruption.*] Does the Minister wish me to give way? I thought that we were going on until 12.30 pm, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Indeed, the debate is going on until 12.30 pm. There is no reason for the hon. Gentleman to hurry if he does not wish to do so.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister's gesture made me think for a moment that I was lacking in courtesy by allowing him insufficient time to reply. A horrible sinking feeling came over me that we were going to finish at noon.

Mr. Foulkes: I abjectly apologise. That was not in any way my intention. I was just trying to indicate that it was the hon. Gentleman's Government that kept the duty on whisky up and our Government that have reduced it in real terms.

Mr. Grieve: Now that the Minister has interrupted me more coherently, I can say that I am prepared to accept that the level of duty, from which the Government derive a great deal of income, is difficult to fix. The fact remains that the key issue is the differential, which has been institutionalised at a European level, between the levels of duty on wine and on spirits. The Government have not taken full advantage of the opportunity that they now have to change that. I await with interest what the Minister has to say on the matter.

The whisky industry was deeply disappointed because it was hoping for a reduction in duty. The duty has been pegged, but when one considers the amount of income that can be generated, the Government seem in danger of killing the goose that lays the golden egg—or at least of not encouraging the goose to lay the golden egg. That is an example of poor fiscal management.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us in which years the whisky industry thanked the previous Conservative Government for changing whisky duty in the way that he suggests?

Mr. Grieve: My research does not go back over the whole history of the whisky industry, but extends to my involvement over the past 12 months. I am trying to deal with the issues that the industry raised with me. Together with the Minister of State, Scotland Office, the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), we went to discuss the issue with the industry prior to the Budget. There was disappointment that the level of duty

was not reduced. The industry sought a reduction to achieve parity, in terms of alcohol content, with the wine and spirits industry. It did not succeed, so will the Minister provide a clearer justification and explain why not?

Mr. Savidge: It is my impression that the whisky industry and the people of Scotland are in much better spirits now than during the 18 years of Conservative Government.

Mr. Grieve: I am afraid that I cannot agree with that, certainly not on the basis of the information supplied to me by the whisky industry. I leave the hon. Gentleman with that thought. Unfortunately, he was not present earlier and will not have time to make a proper contribution on that point.

Other issues go to the heart of taxation. Taxes have risen more heavily in Scotland than they have here. There is a new higher business rate, new parking taxes, new tolls on trunk roads and further projected tolls on urban roads, a new bed tax, a new sightseeing tax, a new compulsory training levy, and the Government's tax on pesticides. Nationally, the Government have raised taxes by £25 billion, of which £2 billion is being spent on Whitehall bureaucracy.

The whole picture adds up to one of increasing burdens on business, particularly small businesses. The current burden amounts to 31 hours per month of extra paperwork for a business with between 10 and 14 employees. That extra work is necessary to carry out the functions and responsibilities that the Government have placed on such businesses.

I was struck when Mr. Jackson, secretary of the AEU, was quoted as saying, in the context of the Government's fiscal policies:

> "We are not against taxation, but do you really hit businesses with new taxes when industry is already under pressure from the strong pound. Business should be treated more fairly."

I am not sure whether that is the voice of old Labour talking to Blairite Labour across the swamp, but people in industry and business know that all is not well. It is a consistent pattern that affects Scotland along with the rest of the United Kingdom, but with the added problem that Scotland has had to face extra burdens as a result of devolution. A huge amount of extra core expenditure is spent on administration, which was an inevitable consequence of devolution. I do not complain, but an extra chunk is being taken out of the Scottish economy to provide for its administrative framework.

In assessing the present position of the Scottish economy, current trends give serious cause for concern. Conservative policies will be put forward at the next general election, and I shall not provide a rehash of the Conservative election manifesto. However, one important and consistent theme is to target some of the projected increase in the Government's revenues, which are colossal while the economy continues to boom, at people who require encouragement. We should help small businesses to be self-sufficient, encourage savers in order to become less of a burden on the welfare state and stimulate business. That will be one of the key issues at the next election. The Government cannot get away from the fact that, most worryingly, the savings ratio has fallen consistently. In 1997 it stood at 10.6 per cent. It is now under 3 per cent. Indeed, the latest figures show it to be under 2 per cent., the lowest figure for the last 40 years.

Does the Minister think we should worry about that or can we simply disregard it? Unlike in France, which some of my forebears came from, where they put gold coins in socks and hid them under the bed, people in this country have traditionally used their savings to invest. Investment is one of the key ways in which risk takers are benefited and encouraged to take risks. The savings ratio has collapsed. How does that bode for the performance of the economy over a five or 10-year period? It is a direct result of punitive and confiscatory taxation on pension funds, and the way in which the general financial and economic climate discourages people from saving. Those are key issues that the Government have failed to address.

Sir Robert Smith: The hon. Gentleman has again highlighted the problem of the exchange rate. It would be helpful if he could explain how he would tackle the exchange rate issue and the concerns that business has about it.

Mr. Grieve: I accept that the exchange rate presents challenges for business. All exchange rates always have done. I find with businesses in my constituency, and I have no reason to think that the position is different in Scotland, that if the general financial and fiscal climate encourages them to be competitive, the exchange rate is a problem that can be dealt with perfectly satisfactorily. It has to be balanced out against the problems of joining a single currency, which on current showing would have led by now to considerable inflation, as is being experienced in Ireland because we have no common economic cycle. It is all very well arguing that we should join the single currency.

Mr. Savidge *rose*—

Mr. Grieve: Would the hon. Gentleman bear with me a moment?

I am not even sure what the Government's policy on the single currency is. It has become so murky and unclear. One thing is certain: if we surrender control over our interest rates to a European central bank, it may be an irritant in years of plenty, but if there is a downturn in the economy it will create serious problems if we are not in a common economic cycle with our European partners. What is happening to the euro at the moment suggests that there are serious problems. Business men in my constituency—and I see no reason why their problems should be different from those in Scotland—are virtually unanimous in their hostility to the single currency. A large number of them trade in dollars anyway, including with other European countries. They much prefer to be within a competitive environment with a Government who address their concerns.

Mr. Savidge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way once again. He has been very generous. He talks about the importance of the general fiscal climate. How far does he think it important that in 1997 under his Government, 42p in every £1 of tax was spent on the cost

[Mr. Savidge]

of unemployment or debt, which has been brought down to 16p in every £1? Is that not a more favourable fiscal climate?

Mr. Grieve: I welcome that. First, it is a reflection of a booming economy and secondly, it is a reflection of the way in which those areas of expenditure have been reduced. That is why I find it so extraordinary that the overall take by the Government has risen from 35 per cent. to more than 37 per cent. of GDP. When the economy is doing well, the Government should look to cut taxes as much as possible, but there has been a complete failure to achieve that.

Mr. Savidge *rose—*

Mr. George Stevenson (in the Chair): Order. We cannot have two hon. Members on their feet at the same time.

Mr. Grieve: This is a high-tax Government. I shall again give way to the hon. Gentleman briefly, but I want to give the Minister time to respond.

Mr. Savidge: Is it not the case that one reason why the tax take has increased is that more people are in work and have higher earnings? The increase is therefore a reflection of a buoyant economy.

Mr. Grieve: It may be a reflection of those factors, but if the taxman is taking an increasing percentage of GDP when the economy is booming, that is a serious matter. It highlights a failure of the Government, which will translate into an inability to provide the right financial climate for business. I have spoken for far longer than I expected. I am grateful for that opportunity and I await the Minister's response. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk, West on raising those matters. The Scottish economy would be far better served by a Conservative Government at Westminster.

12.10 pm

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): As you know only too well, Mr. Stevenson, this is the third Adjournment debate in about a week to which I have replied. Nevertheless, I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) not only on obtaining his second Adjournment debate since he was elected, but on his interesting, positive and insightful introduction to this debate on the Scottish economy.

Hon. Members have mentioned the poor attendance. To be fair to the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, they have attended all three Adjournment debates. Their spokesmen have participated well, although I do not agree with all that they have said. Given that the Tories have no MPs in Scotland, that is not a bad record. Labour Members have contributed extensively to the previous two debates and substantially to this one. I have a half-back line supporting me that is worthy of Heart of Midlothian football club. As hon. Members have pointed out, yet again the Scottish National party is not present. That is a real disgrace, and I shall return to it in a moment.

We have had a historic Budget, for which Opposition Members have not given my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer full credit. We must recognise that it represented the Government's policy of achieving economy stability, on which we can create opportunity and prosperity for all and improve public services. As I said in last week's debate on poverty, the best way of taking people out of poverty is to provide them with job opportunities, which is what we have been doing. At a time when the Scottish and British economies are creating jobs in record numbers, we have been focusing on help for more disadvantaged people, so that they can share in the prosperity of our stable economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West is one of the most appropriate Members to secure a debate on this topic. As he said, his constituency is a microcosm of the Scottish economy, and he has had good news on that, even since his election. Walter Alexander, the coach builder, won a £23 million contract from National Express. Since May 1997, as my hon. Friend rightly said, jobs have been created by the Telecom service centre in Larbert, Thomas Cook in Larbert and Scottish Power in Falkirk. That shows how the Scottish economy has boomed under Labour. Falkirk is a good example. Indeed, I saw another example in the Borders yesterday with a colleague of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith). Mainetti is increasing its employment from 100 to 200. Heriot-Watt university is doing well, and Hawick Cashmere is prospering thanks to support and guidance from the Labour Government. Clearly, there has been a sea change in Scotland in the past four years compared with the previous 18 years.

We cannot talk about the Scottish economy without mentioning our partnership with the Scottish Executive, which is key. Nowhere is it more important than in respect of our economic strategy. Although we are getting the economy right and dealing with macro-economic policy at UK level, we acknowledge that the Executive are responsible for many of the micro-economic levers affecting the Scottish economy. That interdependence is recognised in their document, "A Framework for Economic Development in Scotland", which was published in June last year. The foundation must be a coherent, effective economic policy from the United Kingdom Government.

Whatever the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) says, we inherited an economy in the United Kingdom and in Scotland in a bad state of repair, with high unemployment, high inflation and high interest rates—the most volatile in the G7 countries. The hon. Gentleman spoke about wage increases, which must be set in the context of the high level of inflation at the time.

Mr. Grieve: The economic statistics show that underlying inflation in the April quarter of 1997 was 2.5 per cent. In the October quarter of 2000 it was 2.2 per cent. That does not suggest the galloping inflation that the Minister talks about.

Mr. Foulkes: No. I am talking about what we inherited from the Tories. Under the Tory Administration, high inflation undercut wage increases and resulted in some of the wage increases that the

hon. Gentleman' described. We also inherited poor skills and derisory levels of investment in the public and private sectors. I remember sitting in relative impotence on the Opposition Benches watching what the Tories were doing to destroy the British and the Scottish economy; that is why I am proud to serve in a Government that are putting it right and building a prosperous, successful, dynamic, competitive and, above all, inclusive economy.

In the past four years we have pursued a comprehensive and co-ordinated strategy and I shall set out its key elements, the first of which is to deliver macro-economic stability and to replace the boom and bust of our predecessors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West rightly said, it is a matter of fundamental choice, not chance, to steer a course of stability, prudence and responsibility. We have laid the foundations for a Britain where there is opportunity and security for all. We gave independence to the Bank of England, freeing interest rate decisions from political interference, which delivered the lowest inflation for 30 years, for which the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine gave us credit, averaging 2.4 per cent. since 1997, the lowest in the European Union.

We have the lowest long-term interest rate for 35 years; mortgage rates that averaged 11 per cent. between 1979 and 1997 are now down to 6.75 per cent. or less. Economic growth is at 2.7 per cent. since the election and GDP in Scotland is now at its highest ever level. Employment has risen by more than 1 million in the United Kingdom and by more than 100,000 in Scotland; more people are at work than at any time in the past 40 years, but we have done even more: the Government's tough new fiscal framework has allowed us to make a record net debt repayment, as my hon. Friend rightly said, of £35 billion this year. We have cut the national debt from 44 per cent. of GDP to an estimated 31.8 per cent. That is prudence with a purpose at work, enabling the Government to release more funds for key spending priorities and public services. In Scotland, spending will be £3.4 billion higher by 2004, with an additional £200 million announced in this year's Budget.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, who mentioned world economic development, to which we are not immune, knows that there has again been an upturn in the stock market, but the Government's new macro-economic framework should help to continue to deliver stability, low inflation and sound public finances, which means that our policy is well placed to respond to global economic developments. While significant risks remain, especially from the United States, we have ensured that our budget forecasts take full account of the effect of slowdown in United States growth and its impact on world activity.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield was talking Scotland down yet again, as seems to be his habit when he comes to these debates. Business investment has grown to 14 per cent. of GDP compared with 10 per cent. in 1994. Whole economy productivity grew by 2.6 per cent. in the third quarter of 2000, compared with 1997. The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked the United Kingdom first for its policies towards private enterprise competition. That is an entirely different picture from that painted by the hon. Gentleman when he was talking Scotland and the UK down.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foulkes: No.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine asked whether the Scotland Office was involved in dealing with the foot and mouth outbreak. I am a member of the task force chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment. I also attend MAFF meetings chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Government's top priority is to control and eradicate the disease. I share his concern about the tourism scares. We should make it clear that people can quite safely visit substantial areas of the United Kingdom. Local authorities are making it clear which are the no-go areas.

Information about our help for businesses with income tax and custom and excise duties has been circulated in Scotland to local authorities, MPs and MSPs. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield should know that we recognise that there is a problem for small and new businesses. The Scottish Executive are tackling that. However, the evidence of the substantial new jobs created shows that effective action is being taken. The recent data from the Scottish Council for Development and Industry show that Scottish exports are £27.8 billion, a 9.1 per cent. increase on 1998 and current prices. That is much more than the hon. Gentleman described. He also spoke about whisky and had to admit that the Conservative Government did little about that. Spirit duty has been frozen in the last four Budgets. Steps have been taken not just to help the whisky and other spirit industries, but to deal with the duty on spirits vis-à-vis the duty on wine and beer.

I turn now to absent friends.

Mr. Eric Clarke: My hon. Friend has not mentioned how the minimum wage has benefited individuals in Scotland. In Dumfries and Galloway, for example, which was a Conservative stronghold for many years, wages were well below the minimum wage.

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is right. Good employers were paying the minimum wage. The legislation ensured that the cowboys also paid it so there was no unfair competition. I did not mention it today because I mentioned it last week. I shall mention it again next week.

I hope that my hon. Friend does not mind me turning to absent friends. He will remember the events of 28 March 1979. The anniversary is just about to come up. We will never forget how nationalist Members trooped through the Lobby with Mrs. Thatcher to get rid of the Labour Government, heralding 18 years of Toryism. We remember Linwood, Corpach, Ravenscraig, Caterpillar and Invergordon. We remember the record of the Tory Government brought in by the SNP. One of my colleagues described them as Maggie's midwives. Now they are aiming to be Hague's little helpers, to ensure the return of a Tory Government.

[Mr. Foulkes]

The SNP has proposed a 45p rate of tax. That is to cover the uncosted pledges of £3 billion that the party made in the first five months of the Scottish Parliament. The setting up of separate embassies, Army, Navy and the Air Force establishments in Scotland, a separate social security system are costed at £4 billion, yet now, because of the belated recognition of the uncosted pledges and the cost of separation, the first of the SNP tax chickens is coming home to roost. It is the thin end of the wedge. If the SNP were ever to gain power, the hard-working people of Scotland would have to pay more taxes.

The SNP will go into the election saying that it will stand up for Scotland. How can it stand up for Scotland, when its Members of Parliament do not even turn up for their work here? What is happening is astonishing. Not even one of the six Scottish National party Members is here today to speak up for Scotland. Labour Benches are doing that and we shall continue to do so. The SNP deals in fantasy economics. It has been naive in its overestimation of the Scottish income tax contribution. It has ignored the share of United Kingdom national debt, which would be attributable to Scotland, and it is basing its financial plans on oil revenues that have fluctuated wildly from £12 billion in 1984-85 to £1 billion in 1991-92, then up again to £2.3 billion in 1995-96. That is putting the economy at the mercy of the world oil price and of OPEC. That is something that the Scottish people would embrace at their peril.

I hope that this message will get through to the people of Scotland. We depend on the United Kingdom single market. The importance of that to the Scottish economy is clear. More than half of all exports from Scotland go to the rest of the United Kingdom. More than two thirds of imports into Scotland come from the rest of the United Kingdom. Business organisations and employee representatives recognise that the Scottish economy draws its strength from being part of the United Kingdom. Scotland's economy under Labour is being transformed into a modern, flexible economy, which is capable of supporting diverse industries. As well as strengthening the competitive edge of our traditional industries, we are looking increasingly at the areas of growth for the future, such as the creative and service industries and the financial sector. Manufacturing is still important to the Scottish economy. It accounts for 289,000 jobs, 14 per cent. of employment.

We must not forget that the finance and business sector now accounts for more jobs than manufacturing. Since 1991, the number of jobs lost in the manufacturing and construction sectors of the Scottish economy has been more than made up by the number of new jobs that have been created in the service sector alone. Through prudent, economic management and new measures to improve the climate of business, we have put in place in partnership with the Scottish Executive the economic conditions that encourage growth and employment. Devolution means partnership between us, and we are focusing on encouraging jobs in all sectors that add value to our economy, fostering a dynamic environment for the economy to grow and prosper.

If we are to have a successful economy, even more people need to be in work. I referred earlier to our employment record and low unemployment level. Much has been done, and we recognise that much more needs to be done. The Labour Government are committed to full employment. That is not a pipe dream; it is a realistic and achievable aim. We are determined to deliver such a goal. We have achieved the economic stability that is creating a record number of jobs. We now need to tackle the poverty of aspiration, the skills gap, discrimination and inequality of opportunity that hinder our drive towards full employment and a more fair and equal society. I am proud that the Government have made a significant start. I urge people outside the House not to put that in jeopardy. Voting nationalist or for any other party will at least allow for the possibility of returning to boom and bust and the high unemployment that existed during 18 years of Tory Governments. That would not just be bad for Scotland; it would be bad for the whole United Kingdom.

Wythenshawe Heart Transplant Centre

12.30 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am grateful to have the opportunity to take part in this debate. I am especially grateful to speak up for the Wythenshawe hospital transplant unit, which is a centre of excellence not only in the north-west and the United Kingdom but in western Europe. I am pleased to be able to put on record the appreciation of people across the north-west for the work done by Wythenshawe, and the Opposition's determination to ensure that that work continues.

The background to the debate is the Government's decision to reduce the number of heart transplant centres from seven to four, and then to three, with the closure of Harefield hospital in 2006. The Government have said that it is right on clinical grounds to have fewer units carrying out more transplant operations. They have said that the poor availability of donor organs and the development of alternatives to transplantation mean that it is desirable to have fewer centres. I do not intend to question those views, or to denigrate the Northern General hospital in Sheffield or the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham. The transplant centres at both of those hospitals do excellent work. The purpose of the debate is to demonstrate that if only one of those three centres is to survive, it must be Wythenshawe.

Wythenshawe is the obvious choice on the basis of the Government's criteria. The Government want centres with high volumes of transplant surgery. Wythenshawe performs heart, lung and heart-lung transplants. The unit has performed 44 double lung transplants, 92 single lung transplants, 326 heart transplants, and 38 heart-lung transplants—a total of more than 500 transplant operations. It has had much greater experience than the other centres under consideration. Ministers want experienced surgeons. At Wythenshawe, three of the six transplant surgeons who have been in place for some time have each performed more than 100 transplant operations. The transplant team at Wythenshawe has considerable experience and expertise. In her reply to a debate on a related subject on 31 January, the Minister's departmental colleague, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), said that the successful centre should have an on-call rota of no more than one to four. That implies a minimum team of five surgeons. Wythenshawe has had six surgeons and has recruited a seventh, so it can meet that criterion comfortably.

The Government have said that they are worried about the decreasing availability of donor organs. Wythenshawe has an outstanding recovery system, with people on standby to ensure that no suitable organ would ever be missed because of recovery problems. The Government have said that they want efficiency in the operation of the transplant system. Wythenshawe transplant unit has the benefit of guaranteed intensive care bed provision when an organ is found. No transplant will be missed, and no organ wasted, because of a shortage of intensive care beds. The Government want to develop centres of excellence. Wythenshawe is already one. It is one of the finest centres in the United Kingdom for cardiac work, and it has the north-west lung centre and an adult cystic fibrosis unit on the same site. Many of the patients who go for lung transplantation are cystic fibrosis sufferers. With the opening of the new, dedicated transplant ward in a few weeks' time, Wythenshawe will be the only fully comprehensive transplant centre in the United Kingdom, and possibly in western Europe. The Wythenshawe transplant unit is a magnificent achievement that has inspired great loyalty and commitment from people throughout the north-west.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): The Wythenshawe transplant unit is indeed a centre of excellence, as is confirmed by the experience of my own constituents, who, if it were closed, would have to go to Sheffield or Birmingham, which are considerably further away. I wonder whether my hon. Friend has heard of the experience of my constituent, Sylvia Hinde, of 23 Hockenhull crescent in Tarvin, near Chester, who states:

"I have heard the government has plans to close the Heart Transplant Dept. of Wythenshawe Hospital. Please would you protest strongly against this decision.

It means a lot to my family as six years ago my nephew then"—

Mr. George Stevenson (in the Chair): Order. I believe that the hon. Gentleman has got the message.

Mr. Brady: I had got the gist of the point, as my hon. Friend expressed it so eloquently that he could convey the meaning in just a few words. The letter that he received from his constituent contains a message that I am sure is reflected in letters that hon. Members from all parties who represent the north-west have received. There has been an enormously positive response to the work that Wythenshawe has done. The furthest afield place from which I have received a letter is Dorset, which shows the extent to which the work of Wythenshawe has impacted on the lives of people throughout the country. Retaining it is vital.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) mentioned the fact that people from the local area, including my constituency, which is just to the east of Wythenshawe, would have to travel to Birmingham or Sheffield. Sheffield presents a great difficulty because of the physical presence of the Pennines, which in winter are impenetrable. Travelling to Sheffield is often virtually impossible. Equally, travelling to Birmingham from Manchester is, because of traffic on the congested M6, virtually impossible. Is my hon. Friend aware of the serious anxiety in my area, and that he speaks for the entire north-west, not only his constituency?

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am pleased that some people manage to travel across the Pennines. He is a case in point, and we are pleased to have him on the right side of the Pennines. He makes an important point about the serious difficulties that would face many of our constituents in the north-west, who would have a difficult journey not only to travel for transplant surgery but, perhaps more importantly, in the post-operative period, for continuing care and assessment.

The unit has inspired tremendous loyalty and commitment from people throughout the north-west, as has been shown by the fantastic fundraising effort of the

[Mr. Brady]

New Heart, New Start charity, which has so far raised more than £6 million to support the transplant unit. That includes the entire £1.9 million cost of the new transplant ward. Until his death last year, New Heart, New Start benefited from the energetic chairmanship of my constituent Jim Quick, who himself benefited from 13 years of productive life post-transplant and whose name will be borne by the new transplant ward at Wythenshawe.

Like the centres at Sheffield and Birmingham, Wythenshawe has been in limbo for several months. When I expressed anxieties in this Chamber on 31 January, the Minister said that it was a close race and that no decision had been taken. Still no decision has been taken. Professor Harnden, chairman of the trust, has written:

"The uncertainty which has been caused by this long, protracted process has severely damaged the morale of our staff and is now affecting staff recruitment and retention. We really do need an answer quickly."

The *Manchester Evening News* has picked up the matter with its own campaign, "Keep the Heart Beating". In an open letter to the Prime Minister, the editor said:

"Dear Prime Minister, Lives are in your hands—and it is time to end the indecision."

All hon. Members can understand why the Government may wish to put off an unpopular decision until after a general election. However, any further delay is untenable, when real damage is being done to morale, to the recruitment and retention of staff, and to the unrivalled voluntary fundraising effort of New Heart, New Start, donations to which have fallen. Ministers must set out clearly their criteria for the choice of which unit will survive. They must say which unit is to be chosen, and say it now.

12.40 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): I thank the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Wythenshawe transplant unit is in my constituency but, as he said, its future has aroused concern among hon. Members throughout the north-west, and across all parties.

I underline the impressive clinical record of the Wythenshawe transplant unit. More than 500 transplants have taken place, including double lung and heart-lung transplants. The unit is embedded in a hospital that provides first-class cardiology and thoracic services. The hon. Gentleman acknowledged the importance of the New Heart, New Start charity. It has contributed £6 million to the unit and is providing funding of £1.9 million for the new dedicated transplant ward. The charity has raised impressive amounts of cash, and just as importantly, it has won the affection and support of people throughout the north-west.

I hope that the Minister will reassure us that when a judgment is made in the review of transplant services, it will be based not merely on the record to date—which in Wythenshawe's case is very impressive—but on the physical and clinical capacity that the chosen unit has to absorb the work of the two units that will inevitably close. I strongly believe that Wythenshawe has that capacity and I want to place on record the assurances that I have received from the chairman and chief executive of the South Manchester University Hospitals trust. They see the unit as an important part of the future of Wythenshawe hospital.

My hon. Friend the Minister will know that the £110 million redevelopment of the hospital will be completed by September. It is vital that the Wythenshawe transplant unit remains part of what will be a world-class hospital in my constituency.

12.43 pm

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) on securing the debate. The future of our organ transplant services is important, and a matter of concern for many people. The Department has received many representations, not only about the future of the transplant centre in Wythenshawe hospital but about the future of the centres in Sheffield and Birmingham. As hon. Members will know, there was an earlier debate on the future of the Sheffield centre. It was right for my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) and the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West and others to raise the concerns of their constituents and make the case for the Manchester centre.

I shall explain why the Government need to find four specialist centres for heart transplants. Clearly, it is a vital health care service. In cases of liver, cardiothoracic, heart and lung transplants, the procedure is literally life saving. In the case of kidney failure, renal dialysis can sustain people while they wait for a suitable organ to become available. Ultimately, however, we need to ensure a secure future for organ transplant services in this country. We perform approximately 3,000 transplants a year with organs from 900 donors, but more than 6,000 people remain on the transplant waiting list.

The Government's commitment to modernising organ transplant services was set out a year ago in another place by the Under-Secretary, my noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, in response to a report from the Royal College of Surgeons on the future of the then United Kingdom Transplant Support Service Authority and an inquiry by the permanent secretary into conditional organ donation. Much progress has been made, but critical issues remain in relation to the future of organ transplant centres.

The need for change and reorganisation in cardiothoracic transplant services is determined by two key factors. The first is the number of operations that take place. Improvements in road safety and the prevention of strokes in younger people are important health gains and are very much to be welcomed, but the fact that fewer young people are admitted to hospital and subsequently die has had an inevitable effect on the supply of organs for transplant. In the past five years, the number of organ donors under 60 has fallen by 15 per cent. The fall could have been greater had it not been for the dedication of staff in intensive care units and the efforts of transplant co-ordinators and teams in identifying donors.

The Government are committed to doing everything possible to maximise organ and tissue donation and maintain the very high standards of our organ transplant services. That commitment was demonstrated at an organ and tissue donation summit on 27 February, at which the Secretary of State for Health announced an NHS action plan intended to double the number of people on the organ donor register by no later than 2010. The problem is that the fall in organ donations has meant a year on year reduction in the number of cardiothoracic transplants being performed—from 423 in 1995 to 290 last year, which is a reduction of more than 30 per cent. Over the same period, heart transplants performed in the seven centres in England fell from 262 in 1995 to 172 last year.

Although there is much that we can do to boost the supply of kidney donors, the number of younger donors for heart and lung transplants is expected to continue to decline. We will have to work very hard to reach our target of a 10 per cent. increase in donors by optimising organ donation and retrieval arrangements. Even if we achieve our target, however, the current programme will be increased by only 30 transplants a year.

Hon. Members will be aware that it is vital that surgeons have sufficient expertise and experience to perform the complex operations under discussion. They must carry out sufficient operations to maintain the skills and expertise of the team, to avoid standards being jeopardised or falling. Clearly, it would be unacceptable if the standard of treatment received by patients in need of cardiothoracic transplants declined as the numbers of transplants declined.

The second important factor affecting the organisation of services is the need for proper staffing cover. In considering how best to modernise transplant services, the Government have accepted recommendations from the Royal College of Surgeons on minimum staffing levels for transplant units. As the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West mentioned, it recommends that surgeons should work no more than a one in four rota for being on call out of normal working hours. That is because so much of organ transplantation takes place at night or over the weekend. Surgeons' working hours must now comply with the European Union working time directive, which means that we need teams of a minimum of five surgeons. At the time of the report, only two of the seven adult cardiothoracic transplant centres had at least five transplant surgeons.

Cardiothoracic transplantation has been a national service since 1986. A national designation prevented the proliferation of a large number of transplant centres, which happened in other countries. Nevertheless, a major expansion of the service was agreed in the late 1980s in the belief that the number of organs would continue to increase. Four new adult cardiothoracic transplant centres were designated, and by 1991 there were seven adult centres in England. The intention was to ensure that each centre performed at least 50 transplants a year.

Wythenshawe Hospital in Manchester is one of those new centres, and last year it carried out 36 of the 290 heart, heart-lung or lung transplants performed in English centres. Another of the new centres, St. George's hospital in London, performed only 10 transplants before its programme was suspended following a run of poor results. That programme is currently the subject of an investigation by the Commission for Health Improvement. The other two new centres were Queen Elizabeth hospital, Birmingham and Northern General hospital in Sheffield. Last year, Birmingham performed 21 cardiothoracic transplants and Sheffield 23. The three original centres are Papworth hospital in Cambridge, which carried out 78 transplants, Freeman hospital in Newcastle, which performed 56, and perhaps the best known of all, Harefield hospital in Middlesex, which undertook 65 transplants.

Hon. Members will be aware of the need to ensure that those carrying out the transplants have sufficient expertise to perform complex operations, and the relevant skill to keep standards up. We are concerned that too few operations are being performed throughout the country. In some units, the number of transplants performed is insufficient to maintain the skills and expertise of a team of five surgeons. If that continues, transplant team members could begin to lose their skills and standards could fall. For the sake of current and future patients, we must ensure that each transplant team is well staffed and supported, and performs sufficient operations for all its members to maintain high skill levels.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: The Minister helpfully read out statistics in which Wythenshawe ranked highly among transplant centres in terms of the total number of operations and the success rate. Given that record, would it not be an appalling shame to lose that excellence? My constituent made that point in the letter that I was unable to finish quoting earlier. The Government talk a lot about partnership, but it would be an unfortunate example if the Wythenshawe unit closed as a result of the Government's decision—yet to be confirmed—when voluntary groups have undertaken such a fantastic fundraising effort. At a time when the Government are trumpeting partnership, surely such a closure would be a kick in the teeth for those volunteers?

Yvette Cooper: I understand the points made by the hon. Gentleman, and I know of the strong feeling in the Manchester area about the importance of the organ transplant service.

The national specialist commissioning advisory group is responsible for advising on which services should be provided nationally. Last year, it recommended that the national programme should be delivered from only four centres in England. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West said that there would be only three, but I can assure him that that is not the case. Each unit would have the optimum infrastructure to support a programme of approximately 50 heart transplants.

Mr. Brady: Perhaps I am a little confused, but I understood that Harefield is due to close in 2006, leaving only three centres.

Yvette Cooper: No. Notwithstanding discussions taking place about the location of services in London, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there will continue to be a London centre and that the Harefield transplant team will continue. In addition to the centre yet to be

[Yvette Cooper]

decided, there will be a London centre, one at Papworth hospital in Cambridge and one at Freeman hospital in Newcastle. To minimise disruption to existing services, the advisory group advised that two units with sufficient surgical staff should continue—at Papworth and Freeman hospitals. It also recommended that the transplant services based in London should be consolidated into a single centre. We have accepted that recommendation. It further recommended that a fourth national centre be created by merging the three smaller transplant programmes that are currently provided by the Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield centres.

Those recommendations are supported fully by many organisations, including the Royal College of Surgeons, the cardiothoracic transplant advisory group of UK Transplant and Dr. Roger Boyle, the heart services director. The Government agreed that such principles are right and that the reconfiguration is necessary if we are to maintain the high quality of one of the best cardiothoracic transplant services in the world. Agreement has already been reached on the reorganisation of the London-based service and the new arrangements will start from 1 April.

To remove uncertainty, we recognise the need to make as early a decision as possible about the siting of the fourth centre. However, it is important that we make the right decision. It is also important to ensure that the decision is based on all the available evidence, with a full assessment of the options and the capacity of the different centres. We do not want to be tempted into making a rush decision, which could be the wrong decision, which would be bad for those areas affected and for cardiothoracic patients throughout the country.

Mr. Brady: Of course, it is important that a thorough assessment is made. The Minister must accept, however, that damage is being done by the delay. When will a decision be made and when will it be announced?

Yvette Cooper: I can say a little more about the timetable for further consideration. The Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester centres have all made persuasive cases. Understandably, and rightly, the Members of Parliament for those areas have made strong representations on their behalf. We must take into account the impact of the enlarged transplant team on other priority areas for cardiac operations as set out in the national service framework. Clearly, it would not benefit the local population if their access to essential coronary artery bypass surgery was reduced to allow people from other areas to have a heart or lung transplant.

We must consider future capacity as well as track record. That is why the Government have asked for a more detailed study of the three sites, to enable us to assess the impact of an enlarged team on the capacity at the centres, as well as other important factors such as access for patients. We recognise the importance of access and travel for patients. I assure the Chamber that, whatever decisions are made, all centres have adequate accommodation for those patients who have to travel and for their families. We shall also be looking further to improve shared care arrangements, so that travelling to distant centres is minimised.

When that further work is concluded and Ministers have all the facts, we shall issue a document setting out the proposals, to inform the public. We shall also seek comments because it is important that such a decision takes place in as transparent a manner as possible. The public and those in the areas that will be affected will be given the opportunity to comment before the final decision is made. That means that we are unlikely to reach a final decision before the summer, to give proper time for public comment on the proposals and for the facts to be assessed fully.

However, when the decision is taken we will work hard to complete the necessary changes by 1 April 2002. I understand the enthusiasm for speedy decision making and I accept that all the areas and the Members of Parliament who represent them will want to make the strongest possible representations. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East and the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West that we shall take into account the points that they raised on behalf of the Manchester centre.

I am sure that hon. Members understand that we need to recognise our responsibility to make the right decision, which means making a proper assessment of all the competing claims of the different centres to ensure that the decision is made on the basis of the facts, and to offer time for public comment and debate once those facts are known. The issue is extremely important, not simply for those areas that are affected, but for cardiothoracic patients throughout the country. It is too important for a hasty or wrong decision to be made on it; we must make the right decision in the interests of people not only in the Manchester area, but in Sheffield, Birmingham and throughout the country.

Home Care

1 pm

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the Department of Health's draft guidance, "Fairer Charging Policies for Home Care and other non-residential Social Services", which was issued with a consultation paper in January 2001. I am also pleased to have secured the debate just before the consultation period ends on 30 March. The guidance is for local authorities on non-residential community care charges, such as those for home care and day services. It is due to be finalised in May and fully implemented by April 2002.

I pay tribute to the Coalition on Charging, the Leonard Cheshire Foundation and the Carers National Association, which are working with me on the issue, and to the excellent work that they carry out for people with disabilities and their carers. I have been pleased to support the Leonard Cheshire Foundation since my year as mayor of Redbridge in 1994-95, and have had the privilege of working with its head of policy, John Knight, since my election to the House.

Members of my local carers group, the Redbridge Carers Support Service, raised concerns about charges for home care when I spoke at their annual general meeting on 9 November—the same day that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced the £191 million package of extra help for carers, which was warmly welcomed. They raised the issue again during a visit to their headquarters in Ilford on 1 March by the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), on 1 March. Charging for services is a matter of great concern to carers, and the Carers National Association believes that the draft guidance does not pay enough attention to the impact of charging on them. That is a particularly sensitive subject because, from April, the Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000 will for the first time allow local authorities to provide services to carers, while giving them the power to charge for those services.

The Government's intention to provide a fairer means of charging for non-residential services should be welcomed. It includes the commitment to reduce the worst hardship caused by charging to the least well-off people, by proposing a minimum level below which service users' incomes cannot fall; the creation of a buffer zone of 25 per cent. to protect that minimum income; the reminder that councils retain the discretion not to charge; the view that charging without taking into account a service user's means is unacceptable; the requirement that local authorities must take into account the ability to pay; and the principle that the value of a person's home may not be taken into account when assessing ability to pay.

Although the guidance will bring some real improvements, there remain areas of concern. People on income support will not automatically be exempt from charging. The draft guidance states that nobody should fall below the level of income support, which means that the most vulnerable in our society will still be hit. Income support is a breadline benefit, payable to people who would otherwise fall below the poverty line, which remains the case even where a person receives other income or benefits. Someone who is on income support and being charged for care cannot wait a year before the charges stop. They must be stopped now. Those who are currently facing hardship because of personal care charges cannot wait until April 2002 for charges to be abolished.

Exempting people in receipt of income support is also consistent with charging systems for other comparable health and social services such as prescriptions, dental treatment and eye tests. In any case, it will be inefficient to charge those on income support, as the amount that councils have to spend in assessing that group of people, compared with the meagre sum raised, will mean little or no overall income. In the final guidance, the Government should ensure that no one on income support is charged.

Many organisations are calling for personal care services as defined by the royal commission to be available free of charge. That now looks set to happen in Scotland and is a major concern of the Coalition on Charging, a consortium of 200 national and local organisations representing disabled and older people.

The Health and Social Care Bill clearly states that those receiving care from a registered nurse will not have to pay personal care charges in any setting. That is welcome, but many older or disabled people receive a similar service from a social care worker but would have to pay charges. There is real anxiety that what is laid out in the guidance could act as a disincentive to work. The draft guidance states:

"The Government's policy is to encourage and enable those who wish to take up employment, including disabled people to do so. Charging policy should avoid creating disincentives to work."

It continues:

"Those in work should retain the majority of any benefit from entering work or from increased earnings...no more than a maximum of 55 per cent. of net earnings should be included within any calculation of total income."

It is clear that the majority of earnings will not be retained if the majority, 55 per cent., of a person's earned income is deemed available to pay for charges. Many disabled people already face barriers in their everyday lives. Those in work also contribute to the cost of non-residential social services, as well as other services essential to society, via income tax, council tax and national insurance. On top of that, up to 55 per cent. of earned income being taken away to pay charges is unacceptable to service users who work. They are being taxed four times, which is clearly unjust. If a maximum figure of earnings is to be contemplated, it needs to be much lower to tackle the issue successfully and to ensure that charging does not discourage disabled people from finding work.

The guidance suggests that partners' income can be taken into account, but that could compromise a disabled person's independence and cause tensions within a household or relationship. Section 17 of the Health and Social Services and Social Security Adjudications Act 1983 states that a service user can be charged, but not other parties. There is anxiety that the guidance does not make things clearer, and it could be a problem for local authorities and service users.

Many partners of disabled people already make many financial commitments to support their partner. They also save the local authority money by the informal support that they give. It is unfair that they are then caught in a double whammy of having to pay their partner's formal care costs.

[Ms Linda Perham]

Organisations representing disabled and older people and carers believe that, if charging continues, partners should not have to pay charges, and I seek an assurance that that will be the case. Although it is good that the value of a person's home is not taken into account when assessing the ability to pay charges, the current savings level is too low. Levels have been set at the same limit as for people living in residential accommodation. That is causing great concern to service users, as people living in their own home need extra savings to pay for the maintenance that home ownership necessitates, and they also use extra support and equipment.

The draft guidance shows that savings over £10,000 could be taken into account when charging. Service users with savings of over £18,500 could be expected to pay the full charge for a service—a limit that would leave little money to cover the costs involved if someone had a progressive condition, for example, and had to find money for a chair lift, or if a home needed repairs after flooding.

Disability-related benefits such as disability living allowance are intended to pay for the extra daily costs faced by disabled people. Those costs are well documented and are frequently substantial, ranging from paying for extra heating to paying for communication aids or adjustments to a car. When the benefits were introduced, they were not intended to pay for services provided by local authorities and the amounts involved clearly reflect that. They are not sufficient to fund or subsidise care or extra living costs.

There is a contradiction between the Government's strong record on improving civil rights for disabled people since they were elected in 1997, through such measures as the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission, and the effect that charging has on the everyday lives of disabled people. The Government's recent proposal to scrap the small employer threshold so that no small employer can discriminate against disabled people is welcome, but that positive development has less meaning if, because of the extra charges that a disabled person needs to pay to get to work in the first place, he or she is better off staying on benefits and not working.

The guidance could lead to improvements in local authorities' charging policies but I urge the Minister to consider seriously my concerns, which may be summarised as the continuation of charging for personal care if administered by a social worker but not a nurse; the disincentive to work created by the plan to take up 55 per cent. of a service user's income to pay for personal care charges; and the unfairness of charging partners for an elderly or disabled person's care. As a matter of urgency, a commitment to ensure that charging for people in receipt of income support stops immediately, rather than in April of next year, would also be warmly welcomed.

The main reason for the guidance appears to be the current variation in charging between different councils—problems that, as the consultation paper states, were identified in the "Modernising Social Services" White Paper, the report of the royal commission on long-term care, and "Charging with Care", which was published by the Audit Commission in May 2000. However, I fear that too many charging variations will continue under the guidance.

Together with the Coalition on Charging, I believe that councils will be left with too much discretion in several key areas, such as in taking into account disability-related benefits, partners' income or capital, savings, and setting a maximum charge. Local authorities should be obliged to undertake effective consultation on charges and to take the views of service users and carers fully into account. Carers would like assurances that the Government intend to ensure that a more detailed appreciation of charging issues for carers is represented in the guidance.

I hope that the final guidance will realise the Government's genuine intention of introducing fairer charges for home care and other non-residential services. I welcome the consultation that has taken place with interested parties on the draft guidance. I am sure that the Minister welcomes the opportunity of addressing my concerns and those of the individuals and organisations who took part in the consultation.

1.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) on securing the opportunity to consider the Department's consultation paper and draft guidance on charging policies for non-residential social services.

In July last year, we took new powers to issue statutory guidance under section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, in relation to discretionary charges for home care. Until that time, we had no powers in that area. We identified the extent of variations in charging policies between councils as an issue needing to be tackled in our "Modernising Social Services" White Paper in December 1998. The full extent of the variations—and I must acknowledge that in some cases the charging policies are hard to defend—has been exposed in the Audit Commission's recent report, "Charging with Care", published in May last year.

My hon. Friend mentioned the royal commission's report on the funding of long-term care, published in January 1999, which recommended that personal care should be provided free wherever it was undertaken. As she knows, we had to decide how best to improve long-term care. We thought it right to spend most money on improving the general quality and range of services provided for older people. That will help individuals to regain as much independence as possible. It will support them in their own homes and enable services to be tailored to their needs, not those of the organisations providing them.

To make personal care free to everyone in every setting would cost about £1 billion a year, but that huge investment would do nothing to improve front-line services. Not one extra person would be offered help to remain independent in his or her own home. It was a hard choice, but we chose to invest most resources in changing fundamentally how our care system supports older people.

We chose to invest in the development of a new range of services to promote the independence and improve the quality of care of older people. An important part of

the investment will be used to provide a new range of intermediate care services to prevent hospital admission and to offer effective rehabilitation, both enabling prompt discharge from hospital and preventing premature admission to long-term care.

Under the NHS plan of July 2000, by 2004 there will be 5,000 extra intermediate care and 1,700 supported intermediate care places, benefiting 150,000 more older people each year; more rapid response teams and other avoidable admission prevention schemes, benefiting about 70,000 more people each year; 50,000 more people will be enabled to live at home through additional home care and other support; and further carers' respite services will be extended to benefit a further 75,000 carers and those for whom they care.

That investment will allow us to employ more nurses, doctors and therapists, but we clearly cannot spend the same money twice, as my hon. Friend would acknowledge. It is a hard choice, but we have made the right one for our country. It is vital to achieve our ambition of having joined-up services that promote independence, choice and quality, and other non-residential services such as day care.

The extent of variations in local charging policies, which we and the Audit Commission have identified, risks inhibiting our ambitions for developing the care of people at home. Too often, local charging policies have not been related to the need to promote independence and have been exclusively budget driven, crudely designed, and insensitive to individuals' circumstances. If home care is to play its full part in helping people to live independent lives in the future—which the Government want to encourage—charging policies that are manifestly unfair and deter people from accessing care need to be tackled.

The design of charging policies is important. It would have been an important matter, even if the royal commission's recommendation to make all personal care free of charge had been implemented in full. Non-residential social services include services such as home help and community equipment, which can be vital to maintaining independence, and the royal commission recommended that such services, where they do not involve personal care, should still be subject to an assessment of ability to pay charges. We would still need to address the fairness of charging for services.

I must emphasise that the draft guidance is precisely that. It was issued with a consultation paper, seeking responses to several questions. While we have done our best to overcome the difficulties of designing good charging policies, we may not have all the answers and we welcome all responses to the consultation, including those of well-informed service users, voluntary groups and, indeed, my hon. Friend's contribution today.

Local councils will rightly retain real responsibilities and some discretion in charging policies in future. For example, it will still be open to councils not to charge and they must decide what proportion of costs to recover through charging arrangements. The draft guidance sets out essential requirements to ensure fairness in assessing ability to pay charges, and consistency with the Government's overall social care and economic objectives. The draft guidance will be issued as statutory guidance to which councils must have regard in setting their charging policies. As councils retain substantial responsibilities, it is vital that they give proper priority to the key processes, which include consultation, communication with users and reviews of their policies. The draft guidance includes advice on all those issues, which in my view obliges councils to undertake effective consultation. I am certainly at one with my hon. Friend on the importance of that.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend welcomed a number of the main principles in the draft guidance, which include the requirement that charges should not reduce a user's net income below basic levels of income support; the view that charging all users at a flat rate, without taking account of their resources, is unacceptable; and the requirement that councils must take into account the ability to pay. I should add that it is already a legal requirement for charges to be reasonable, so that is not new.

My hon. Friend accepts that the draft guidance will mean real improvements, but she has, quite legitimately, raised concerns, to which I want to respond positively. We have proposed that councils should bring the final guidance into force during the financial year 2001-02 and no later than 1 April next year. She says that people on income support will continue to experience hardship if councils charge users on basic levels of income support and take no action until April 2002. I have some sympathy with that point, which we shall need to consider carefully. Others have made the same point in response to the consultation exercise. If I inject a note of caution, I do so only because achieving the objectives that we both want to achieve is a complex matter. We need to take into account the ability of local councils to deliver changes to their charging policies within a reasonable time.

My hon. Friend says that other charging systems such as those for prescriptions and dentistry exempt recipients of income support. That is not all that those systems do; they also protect, at income support levels, the incomes of people who are disqualified from receiving income support, such as low earners and students. To do that, they require a specific and quite complex means test under the NHS low-income scheme. We have set out our intention to provide similar protection for people liable to pay home care charges, but it will not be a simple matter for councils to achieve that quickly.

There is also an important interaction for people receiving both income support and disability benefits such as disability living allowance or attendance allowance with the way in which home care charging systems treat disability benefits. If councils take disability benefits into account as income without assessing the reasonableness of doing so, that may reduce a user's net income below income support levels. That means that it is not a straightforward matter to divorce the treatment of people receiving income support from other issues. As I have said, however, we will consider the issue carefully as we respond to the consultation.

My hon. Friend made an important point about incentives to work. I want to make it clear that our policy is to encourage those who want to take up employment, including disabled people, to do so. Charging policies should avoid creating disincentives to work. That remains our fundamental objective. Our

[Mr. John Hutton]

intention in the draft guidance was to propose that councils treat earnings more generously than other income to ensure that there are incentives for disabled people to work. We have made it clear in the draft guidance that councils already treating earnings more generously than the maximum proposed in the consultation may continue to do so. There is no reason why disabled people now in employment should lose out as a result of the draft guidance. It discusses ways in which the overall approach will help to minimise work disincentives. It proposes as a guiding principle that those in work should retain the majority of any benefit from entering work or from their increased earnings.

As my hon. Friend said, the draft guidance proposes that no more than a maximum of 55 per cent. of earnings should be included in any calculation of total income. That is not the same as saying that 55 per cent. of income is available to pay charges. That percentage will be offset against premiums at income support levels, including disability premiums, with the addition of housing costs and disability-related expenditure incurred by the service user. Much less than 55 per cent. of earnings will therefore be assessed as a maximum charge, other than for very high earners.

We have had many representations about that element of the draft guidance. I hope that my hon. Friend will be encouraged by our willingness to reconsider whether it achieves the removal of disincentives to work. If there are convincing arguments that it does not, it will be reconsidered. I can assure her that we shall not issue any final guidance that makes it harder for disabled people to enter work. That would be entirely counter to our wider objectives and will not happen. We have already proposed that earnings should be treated more generously than other income, and we will re-examine that to ensure that the maximum proposed achieves the objective that we desire.

The draft guidance reiterates the current legal position, which has previously been set out in advice from the Department, on the treatment of partners' income and savings. That is a complex issue, and I want to assess whether we can clarify the guidance further as a result of the consultation. I fully accept my hon. Friend's points about the sacrifices that many carers already make to care for their partners. The draft guidance will help such carers to some extent: for example, we know that some councils currently take account of the user's income only, but assume that it is all available for charging, even though it supports both the user and the partner. We have made it clear that that is not acceptable. In some situations, it might be fairer to the user and partner to assess their income and expenditure as a couple: for example, where a benefit is assessed and paid at the flat rate for a couple. It can be invidious to assess that as income for the user only. That can happen now, and we are clear that it is not acceptable. On the other hand, it is arguable that a couple with joint savings, or one of whom has large savings, may fairly be assessed as a couple. We will carefully review the comments that we receive about that and try to achieve greater clarity.

The proposed savings levels are similar to those that are in force in approximately three quarters of councils. The other quarter have less generous limits, sometimes as low as £3,000, with full charges applying above that level. We will take account of the point that people living at home might need greater savings than those in residential care. That is absolutely right. However, I should mention that the draft guidance does not require users with savings above the upper limit to pay the full charge—the full cost—for a service. Councils may choose to subsidise charge payers at that level as an incentive to independent living in the community. Councils may also apply higher savings limits and set an overriding maximum charge to be paid by any service user. The draft guidance would require councils to consider setting such an overriding maximum. That would be a significant step forward.

My hon. Friend suggested that the draft guidance would leave too much discretion to councils in a number of key areas, including the treatment of disability benefits. The draft guidance proposes that disability benefits may be taken into account as income only if councils also specifically assess a user's disability-related expenditure. That, too, would be an important step forward. While I understand her point, I believe that that is a clear requirement. A number of local councils have criticised the guidance not for leaving them too much discretion but for being too prescriptive. It requires a more sensitive test of ability to pay a charge, when a council wants to take benefits such as disability living allowance and attendance allowance into account. That approach would ensure that charges do not reduce a user's net income below basic levels of income support, and would allow disability-related expenditure at levels higher than the benefit concerned to be taken into account. Many users with high care needs would not pay a charge, or would pay a much lower charge.

We do not believe, as a matter of principle, that disability benefits should be entirely excluded from consideration as income. That would be wrong, for example, where a council provides a care package that meets all or most of a disabled person's care needs. The approach that we have proposed would achieve greater fairness and more sensitive assessment of a user's financial circumstances, and would increasingly be combined with better advice to ensure that unclaimed benefits, such as attendance allowance, are claimed, thus increasing the user's income and quality of life. I am sure that we will receive many comments about the treatment of disability benefits, but I have tried to set out the aims behind our proposal.

My hon. Friend cogently made the point that the draft guidance should take more specific account of the needs of carers. That is precisely the kind of comment that we want to hear during the consultation. We are willing to consider more specific guidance on the cumulative impact of charging a disabled person and a carer in the same family. I understand that following a recent meeting with the Department, the Carers National Association will make such points in a written response to the consultation, and I look forward to receiving them.

My hon. Friend has done her constituents a substantial service in raising these matters. We have an open mind on the subject and will seriously consider the many representations that we have received, not least hers.

Hillingdon

1.29 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I start by registering an interest as a council tax payer in the London borough of Hillingdon. I am also a director of my family business, which pays substantial business rates in the borough.

Hillingdon is, by and large, a pleasant place to live, and I value the quality of life there. It is a diverse borough, ranging from Ruislip and Northwood in the north to West Drayton, Yiewsley and Hayes and Harlington. It encompasses many different communities, and I sometimes think that the powers in government do not understand the nature of the borough.

I apologise to the Minister. Her officials asked my office for details of what I planned to discuss today, and I did not get back to them, not because I was being awkward, although that might be a good reason sometimes, but because pressure of work in the usual channels kept me too busy.

The Minister will be pleased to know that some of the matters that I raise will not be within the competence of her office, so she will be able to bat them away relatively easily. I hope, however, that she will pass my comments to the appropriate Departments.

Despite the smell of an election in the air, there is an all-party approach in Hillingdon to the matters that I want to raise. All three Members of Parliament for the borough—my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) and I—are at one on these matters. The apparent inability of Governments to fund local authorities correctly is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Similar issues arose under Conservative Governments, certainly in respect of the standard spending assessment. However, other factors affect us and I shall touch on four subjects: the problem of insufficient Government funding for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Hillingdon; education in the borough; major repairs allowance; and the contentious matter of the ceiling on our SSA.

On the matter of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, hon. Members will be aware that Heathrow is in the borough of Hillingdon, which gives it more problems in that respect than many other areas. A recent assessment by the director of social services showed that Hillingdon council was providing a social service for the 11th largest population of looked-after children, yet received the 10th lowest SSA and the 11th lowest quality protection grant to enable it to meet its statutory duties in that work. The mechanism used to calculate SSA takes no account of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and the quality protection grant is based on the same SSA formula. That compromises the local authority's ability to deliver an effective service and places an unnecessarily great financial burden on the council.

Hillingdon has a relatively high number of looked after children: it is in the top 50 per cent. of boroughs if unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are included. If those children are not included, however, it falls within the lowest 50 per cent. of boroughs. Hillingdon has the worst ratio of SSA per looked after child if unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are included, and the second worst ratio if they are not. If the grant for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is included, Hillingdon still has the worst ratio in London.

I will give the Minister some figures for comparison. Hounslow, for example, which is a neighbouring borough, has 257 looked-after children, including five unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. It receives an SSA of £12.3 million and a quality protection grant of £2 million. Hillingdon, on the other hand, has 384 looked-after children, including 145 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—that is 140 more than in Hounslow—and receives an SSA of £9.5 million and a quality protection grant of £1.6 million. The quality protection grant is applied to all looked-after children equally by law, but Hillingdon receives a lower grant in spite of having more looked-after children.

We have not been inactive within the borough or in Parliament. We have been in touch with the Department of Health, which has not been completely unhelpful. It has tried to solve some of the problems, recognising that some extra costs around care leaving were not met by last year's grant. Unfortunately, that is about as far as the Department's help goes. Although a seminar on the subject was announced, I was disappointed that no one from the Department was able to meet a delegation from the London borough of Hillingdon. The letter stated:

"Given that the grant allocation for 2000-01 has been settled and the forthcoming seminar in March, I do not think a meeting would be beneficial at this stage."

That is a disappointing response. The grant was increased from £500 to £575 per child, but no allowance was made for the displacement costs that arise from providing a high-volume service. The shortfall for Hillingdon in relation to that subject is estimated at £1 million.

With regard to Hillingdon's education budget, we have been disadvantaged by the £2 million shortfall that resulted from the ceiling. A letter from the chair of education to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment emphasises the borough's disappointment that, despite pursuing the Government's objectives in putting education at the forefront, out of a budget of £52 million, our LEA would receive only £100,000, which is the lowest level of grant awarded. That happened despite the issues raised by the chair of education and the Labour lead member for education.

The letter goes on to say that the funding gap between Hillingdon's SSA increase and the actual rise in pupil numbers means that the borough might be unable to accept all of its SSA and that, even if it could, it would

"not reach the Government's target of an in crease of 5 per cent. per pupil in the total delegated and devolved funding for schools. The new grant will make a very small difference to this, raising our increase by £2.50 per pupil or 0.1 per cent...the grave, and growing, seriousness of the recruitment and retention problems of Hillingdon Schools which are exacerbated by the additional funding and greater priority for recruitment and retention initiatives awarded to neighbouring LEAs included in Excellence in Cities."

The borough is still regarded as not having the same problems as neighbouring boroughs although, in actual fact, our vacancy rates are higher and our potential

[Mr. John Randall]

recruits—not to mention existing teachers—are being pulled away. We are not being treated fairly in comparison with neighbouring boroughs. In the words of the director of education,

"The combined effect of these two issues is to put the maintenance, let alone the raising of standards in Hillingdon at real and imminent risk."

Having been a headmaster, Mr. Philip O'Hear is a capable professional. He has been doing great things in Hillingdon, but says that the decisions of the Department for Education and Employment are likely to undermine the progress of raising standards in Hillingdon schools. A pattern is beginning to emerge. He said:

"we have not been granted a meeting and yesterday's announcement not only shows a failure to accept or understand Hillingdon's difficulties—

that is, the announcement of the grant—

but is actually going to compound them.

Mr. O'Hear said that the assessment has not met with urgent Government action and the recent effective work in Hillingdon to raise achievement is at real and imminent risk.

I have written to the Minister about the major repairs allowance in the hope that we would receive increased resources, but I have not yet received a response to my letter. As for the introduction of a ceiling on the London borough of Hillingdon's SSA, it lost £2 million of its cash settlement. That came like a bolt from the blue, and has caused great problems for people not only in my constituency, but within the borough. We are about £3 million short of Government funding. That estimate is not based on a wish list. That money is due to us. Furthermore, each person in Hillingdon will have to pay 23 per cent. more than last year, and that is just to fund the Greater London Authority. I cannot blame the Minister for the Mayor's decision, although it was her Department that set it up in the first place.

My constituents find it ironic that we are paying more, yet seeing fewer police and fire engines. An interesting comment was made at a recent council meeting. A senior Labour councillor, an ex-leader of the authority, said:

"What does it take to persuade the Government we are not a leafy suburb? We have social, economic and transportation problems that equate closely to those of an inner city borough."

It seems that the Government have it in for our borough. We have a teacher recruitment and retention problem, which is aggravated by the Government's inability to recognise it. Hillingdon ratepayers pay disproportionately more for having Heathrow in the borough. That problem is not helping community relations as people realise that part of the increase in council tax is due to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and that is something that worries all of us.

The Government have managed by stealth to increase taxes on my fellow residents and have tried to put the blame on local councillors. That forces local councillors of all parties to take unpopular measures. In Hillingdon, we are not quite as gullible as that. We realise that a lack of central Government funding is causing us many problems.

1.44 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): The speech of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) was interesting. I wonder what he might have said had he been a Member during the previous Administration, when Hillingdon received substantially less Government support than it receives now.

None of us pretends that the distribution of local government finance is an exact science. We recognise the issues in Hillingdon, which is why it received maximum funding this year. I suspect that were the hon. Gentleman to visit my authority, or indeed yours, Mr. Stevenson, he would find a different position, with equally strong arguments about need.

The manner of distribution is not perfect, as we have admitted, and that is why we are reviewing local government finance. We have published a local government finance Green Paper and later this year we will publish a White Paper which will begin to reconsider the distribution of money.

Mr. Randall: I recognise that everyone fights their own corner, and I hope that I would fight mine regardless of which Government were in power, because that is what I was sent here to do. The right hon. Lady says that we were fully funded, but I understand that the £2 million that was taken away as part of the ceiling means that we were not.

Ms Armstrong: What I said was that Hillingdon received the maximum funding available this year, which is true. I shall explain the rationale behind the ceiling. The ceiling is rejected only if the local government distribution system is considered perfect. As we do not believe that it is, we made adjustments around it. I am aware, however, that the authority has experienced some highs and some lows in the past year, and I am sure that those involved will have been delighted to learn yesterday that the Government have withdrawn the special measures that were introduced following a poor social services inspectorate report. I congratulate the authority on its efforts to improve the service. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we want to ensure that councils have the funding necessary to enable them to improve their services in that way.

Since taking office we have provided authorities with significant increases in grant, which has meant an increase during the past four years of 14 per cent. in real terms. That compares starkly with the 7 per cent. real terms cut in the previous four years to 1997-98.

We have given priority to education and social services. Next year, provision for education spending will increase by £1.9 billion. Social services spending will increase by 8.1 per cent, which will mean an extra £576 million. We will therefore have provided an extra £6.4 billion for education and £2 billion for social services since we took office.

Hillingdon has benefited more than most from that extra money. As the hon. Gentleman said, Government grant is distributed to local authorities through the system of standard spending assessments. In the four years since we took office, Hillingdon's SSA has increased each year by 4.8 per cent. on average. Most other authorities have received much lower increases.

Compared with the previous four years, the council's average yearly increase under the Government makes it 1.6 per cent. a year better off. That is not because the council fared worse than other authorities in that time; indeed, it did relatively well. Its average yearly increase was 3.2 per cent., when for comparable outer-London boroughs it was only 1.3 per cent.

I must put the hon. Gentleman's comments in context. This year, the council received a grant increase of more than £10.1 million, an increase of 6.5 per cent., and the council is one of the main gainers from next year's settlement. The authority has received an increase in provision for spending on education and social services of £9 million and £2.5 million respectively. Although priority has been given to such provisions, funding for spending on other services has increased by more than £2 million.

In addition to that money, the Government are significantly increasing the money that they are providing to local government by way of grants for special purposes. The main ring-fenced education and social services grants that Hillingdon will receive next year have increased by about £2 million. That is an increase of almost 20 per cent. and that figure does not include grants for asylum seekers, which are yet to be announced.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The authority was eligible for higher weekly grant rates during 2000-01, although I understand that it was late in submitting the application for the money. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), none the less expedited the application and the authority was able to claim over £7.2 million. It does not have a shortfall between eligible costs and the grant claimed and, according to the grant claim, Hillingdon supported an average of 387 children during the year, of whom about three quarters were 16 and 17-year-olds.

With regard to the asylum-seeking adults and families grant, Hillingdon has been paid almost £4.9 million for the first six months of the year, and a payment on account of the same sum for the second six months of the year. I appreciate the work that is being done, especially in London boroughs with asylum seekers and unaccompanied children, and I recognise the pressures on Hillingdon. However, we have consistently increased the money that is available. The average grant for the first six months allowed Hillingdon to claim £140 per week for each single adult and £300 for each family. However, it will now be able to claim £350 for each family per week. The Government are doing what they can to assist, in difficult circumstances. During our Administration, the amount given for such purposes has significantly increased.

The hon. Gentleman referred to education, and I understand that every authority wishes to do what it can to raise standards. I am confident that, with good management, Hillingdon will continue to do that. He specifically referred to teacher recruitment and retention, and I understand his concerns. We are aware of the problem, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is examining issues specific to Hillingdon. However, we have already taken action to tackle the problems of teacher recruitment and retention in London. Next year's proposals for the teachers' pay award include a pay increase of twice the rate of inflation for newly qualified teachers, and an increase of 30 per cent. for each of the London weighting allowances.

Mr. Randall: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: I am more than happy to give way, but I am not confident that I shall be able to finish my speech.

Mr. Randall: The point about the teachers' pay settlement is that there are insufficient funds for it. It is easy for the Government to say what they will pay the teachers, but they have not provided the funds for the education authority to do so. Therefore, the settlement takes money from its budget.

Ms Armstrong: That is a matter for debate. No Government have ever fully funded a pay settlement on their own. We did give a generous education settlement, and Hillingdon benefited from that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State allocated more money to the settlement to address authorities' concerns about teachers' pay, and Hillingdon received an additional £100,000, after its funding was assessed in relation to its needs. We have introduced a new recruitment and retention allowance of £5,000, and we have proposed to remove all restrictions on the right to offer it. We also plan to allow employers to offer incentives in kind, such as subsidised housing.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the major repairs allowance. He wrote to my Department about the matter, and I understand that he received a reply from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South, (Mr. Mullin), who was then an Under-Secretary at my Department but is now at the Department for International Development. I am not aware of the hon. Gentleman's subsequent letter. I apologise for that, and I will ensure that my colleagues respond to it rapidly.

It is understandable that hon. Members of all political persuasions want more money to be allocated to their local authorities, but they should recognise that we are investing much more each year in housing. In 1997, local authorities received £926 million in housing capital resource allocation, whereas the budget for 2003-04 will be £2.634 billion, and some of that money is MRA, which must be used to repair social housing.

The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways by asserting that taxes should not be raised but that there should be additional public investment. We are determined to maintain the right balance between those priorities. In the past, there was significant underinvestment in housing, which is now presenting us with enormous problems. That is why we are seeking annually to increase investment.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about floors and ceilings, and he mentioned that we imposed a ceiling on Hillingdon. In the current year, there were significant changes in data. They are difficult to pin down, but one of their consequences is that some areas of great need whose population has fallen are experiencing difficulties in meeting their commitments. Those areas will lose significant sums if there are a couple fewer pupils in some classes, but no schools will be closed. That is why

[Ms Armstrong]

we believed that it was necessary to have a floor, but we also considered that it was justifiable to introduce a ceiling. Hillingdon was identified as one of the councils that would not receive a grant increase of more than 6.5 per cent. because of the ceiling, so Ministers agreed to meet its representatives.

We heard a range of views during our consultations. There was broad agreement about the concept of a floor, but not about that of a ceiling, particularly from those authorities that missed out because of it. However, we believe that a 6.5 per cent. increase in general grant should be sufficient for the authorities that were affected by the ceiling, even after allowing for the fact that they must cater for growing populations. In each case, the increases will be topped by substantial increases in ring-fenced grant, and I have stated that Hillingdon will therefore receive an increase of 20 per cent.

There are always difficult decisions to take, but I believe that any organisation that is guaranteed a 6.5 per cent increase ought to be able to manage its budget in the following year. I believe that Hillingdon will be able to do that, and I hope that it will employ the money that it receives in the most effective ways. If—

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 28 March 2001

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Steel Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Thank you, and good morning. It is fortuitous that we are meeting this morning to discuss the steel industry. I shall not give the speech that I had in mind last week, given the serious change of attitude by Corus and the dialogue between Corus and the unions, the Government and politicians in the past 24 hours. To put it mildly, the atmosphere during that dialogue was poisonous. Yesterday, a package was put to Corus and discussion took place about which we can express at least a bat squeak of hope.

The last thing we should do is to raise false hopes among those who work in the steel industry, who are anxious about the future. That would be unreasonable. We should be making a case for manufacturing industry and for steel, not talking about a crisis in the steel industry. Steel is a vital part of Welsh industry, as it represents 6 per cent. of Welsh gross domestic product. Manufacturing industry in Wales is the biggest component of Welsh GDP at 27 per cent. Steel is an industry of the future. It is constantly seen as part of the past—it is often described as a smoke-stack industry, and many other pejorative terms are used—but it is nothing of the sort. The modern steel industry is high-tech, and has received huge investment. It is a sustainable industry, with 40 per cent. of steel being recycled, which is good for the environment as it reduces the energy take enormously.

If my hon. Friends will forgive me, I shall concentrate on the Welsh steel industry and what I know of it in my constituency. I am delighted to be joined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth) in whose constituency the Llanwern steelworks is situated. Unfortunately, because of his duties as a Minister and the conventions of the House, he is not able to make a speech, which we would have liked to hear, but he makes an effective contribution elsewhere in his tireless fight to save jobs at Llanwern.

Many of my constituents work at Llanwern. The Whitehead steel company in my constituency, in association with another company, has threatened the loss of 35 jobs. We all want to ensure that the case is made for the steel manufacturing industry in Wales, and that it is heard loud and clear.

Yesterday, this Room was full of people rightly seeking solutions to the nightmare crisis in agriculture. Many suggested that public funds should be made available not only to the agricultural industry but to tourism, which has never happened before. Even fly fishing was mentioned—I shall try to catch the eye of the hon Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd)—as an activity that is in financial trouble and worthy of public support. We are breaking new ground in suggesting that public money should be used to support the tourism industry. I am not making a case for or against it, but it has not happened before. We had crises in the 1980s when there were bombs in London and policemen with guns at Heathrow airport. Those pictures went around the world, and the tourism industry suffered a great slump, especially in London, but no call was made then for public subsidy, public support or compensation.

The attitude towards Government intervention in such circumstances is changing. Governments have traditionally intervened to help the farming industry—public subsidies have been paid for the past 50 years. However, if we are—as we seem to be—entering a new world of compensation, and if the worst happens in the steel industry, there is a strong case for paying compensation to steelworkers. If they ultimately suffer the loss of their jobs, and if their skills are thrown away and they become useless, they should be at the head of the queue for any compensation that is on offer.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): My hon. Friend fights hard for his steelworkers, as does my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth). If any steelworkers, such as those at Shotton, were to lose their jobs, they would lose a salary of around £20,000 a year, and their incomes would suddenly plummet from a fair wage to virtually nothing. The steelworkers who would lose their jobs are young, with young families and big mortgages. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in any proposed scheme, the Government should help to bridge the gap? Something must be done in that sphere.

Mr. Flynn: My right hon. Friend makes a strong point. We know that the British steelworker is in an unfair position compared with many of his counterparts on the continent. Dutch steel companies send e-mails explaining workers' likely benefits, which are up to five times greater than those that a British steelworker could expect if the worst should happen.

I take my right hon. Friend's point. I have had many conversations, phone calls and meetings with friends old and new. I started working in the Llanwern steelworks in 1963, before any steel or iron was made there. The people I was working with then were fresh-faced apprentices, but they are now candidates for early retirement. It is extraordinarily moving knowing what those people, who were friends and neighbours of mine for so long, now faced and what they have been through.

There has been an almost permanent crisis in the steel industry, because it is cyclical. About every five years there has been a threat of closure. Things go from feast to famine very rapidly. That is the nature of the industry—it has always been like that. The sacrifices made by steelworkers throughout the land have been extraordinary. Plants have been slimmed down—they have been anorexic—as staffing has been reduced. Steelworkers have increased their skills, and have been very innovative in their approach to changing methods of production.

It was a great pleasure to go back to the steelworks, which I had not visited for some years, and to see how extraordinarily efficient it is. The galvanising plant now

[Mr. Flynn]

has wonderful kit, and it would be impossible to find a more energy efficient or productive set-up. The industry is a marvellous success story in every possible way.

What is the position in the rest of Europe? We know that the steel industry is doing very well throughout Europe, even in the smaller European Union countries such as Austria, Luxembourg, Sweden and outside the EU in countries such as Ukraine, Argentina and Brazil. There is overcapacity throughout the world, but that does not prevent other countries in the EU from improving their productivity and their sales. The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation suggested that in 2000, for the first time ever, Spain would produce more steel than the UK. It is quite shocking, considering the embryonic state of its industry over many years, that it has now overtaken our own.

However, productivity in Britain is very high—the highest in the world at Llanwern. That is freely admitted by Corus. It is acknowledged that the British steel industry is the most efficient in the world, so why on earth is this threat being made?

This debate has been informed by two splendid Select Committee reports. The first came from the Science and Technology Committee, which reported on Corus plc research and development, and the second was the report on steel by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which was published earlier this month. We should pay tribute to the Select Committees for their work in compiling those reports. They are splendid examples of the work of Select Committees in probing the often self-serving claims made by the industry. They expose its weaknesses and suggest practical ways in which to strengthen the steel industry in Britain, and identify the means to restore and strengthen our manufacturing base.

It is an extraordinary statistic that the amount contributed by the steel industry to the Welsh economy is 60 times that contributed by farming. We know that farming is in crisis, with all kinds of troubles, and that other elements are involved in that statistic, but that is the raw figure. The manufacturing industry contributes 270 times the amount contributed by the agricultural industry. So wherever we are—Wales, Newport or the United Kingdom—if we want a firm economic base for our children and grandchildren, we cannot discount the enormous contribution that manufacturing industry is making and will make in the future, if we protect it.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The hon. Gentleman's analysis is correct. However, does he agree that farming and the steel industry are in the same situation because of the currency fluctuations with which we have to contend? Neither can now sell a product at a profit. Does he agree that had the Government been more fleet of foot in their attitude to the euro, we would not be having this debate, and nor would there have been a debate on farming yesterday?

Mr. Flynn: I am grateful for that intervention. All those who wear pound badges should visit steelworkers and explain to them that the choice in many industries in this country, including farming, is often "euro or your job". The main crisis that has hit the steel industry is not a crisis of productivity or efficiency, but of the value of the product. The effect of the weakness of the euro and the strength of the pound is that the steelworkers' product is artificially expensive when exported to Europe, while that produced in euroland is artificially cheap when sucked in here. That is the reason for the crisis.

Corus has, understandably, taken a line on this. It is an international company with roots in several countries, mainly the UK and Holland, but all its decisions are informed by the need to survive, to be prosperous and to pay handsome dividends to shareholders, and are not influenced by the national interest. We have all experienced that in the bruising meetings that we have had with the head of the steel company, who is difficult to contact and to relate to. We found those meetings—unlike the one yesterday, which I shall come to—anything but productive.

The Trade and Industry Committee urged Corus and all companies to consider the long-term damage that would result from the loss of experienced staff and their ability to carry out effective research and development. The cuts in Corus involved restructuring research and development, which meant that the research and development staff and resources that would go to the Netherlands would be disproportionate, to the great loss of this country. The Committee also made a point about the difficulties that the euro has caused.

I happened to be present when the Select Committee on Trade and Industry interviewed Sir Brian Moffat and his comrades. In its report, the Committee described in graphic detail how it saw Corus and its role, and it asked the company to reconsider its decision. Great damage is likely to occur if Corus goes ahead with its proposals. We know about the heartbreaking loss of jobs, the families involved and the damage to people who face the insult of redundancy, knowing that their skills are no longer required. Many of them will never work again due to their age. However, the damage to our economy will result in a loss of capacity. If things go ahead as planned, a blast furnace may be lying on its back come the summer. That loss of capacity is irreplaceable and cannot be rebuilt. It will do enormous damage to the future prosperity of Wales and the rest of the country. The Trade and Industry Committee laid heavy emphasis on that in its report.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I shall quote from the report. On Sir Brian Moffat and Corus, the Committee concluded:

> "Nothing we heard from Sir Brian Moffat has led us to believe that the cuts announced on 1 February are part of a long-term strategy for the company's survival".

The company has no long-term strategy, so how can anyone have faith in the future of the industry? As my hon. Friend mentioned, we are living with feast and famine. That is the crux of the matter.

Mr. Flynn: My hon. Friend is quoting from the recommendations of the report. Some of us have been familiar with the ups and downs of the steel industry for a long time. My work in the industry began before Llanwern was open, and I can remember at least four or five crises in my 31 years in the industry. Armageddon was regularly on the horizon due to problems with

Brazil, Asia or some other country. Nightmare scenarios always came up, but shortly afterwards we found that handsome profits had been made, like the £1 billion a year made by Corus.

The Committee also said:

"We regret that Corus felt unable to take Ministers more fully into their confidence. . .while they were preparing the proposals announced".

That has been another great difficulty, as Corus has behaved differently from other industries. The Minister has told us, and may tell us again this morning, that when there is openness—when the books are open and companies take the Government into their confidence—good will can be generated and solutions can be sought, if not always found. Instead of co-operating, Corus created a great wall of secrecy and was not open with politicians.

Some of my hon. Friends want to speak at length, and I am aware that I am taking up time, so I shall make a final point. I am optimistic about what happened yesterday in the meetings between all the principal trade unions and Corus. A bold plan was presented, which I believe is groundbreaking, as I have never heard of one like it before. It is a £90 million plan that would involve payments to Corus. The package would pay half the wages of the steelworkers for a year. During that period, there would be an intensive training programme to allow the workers to prepare for the worst—although they would hope that it would not happen. They could at least benefit from active preparation in re-skilling and re-training for high-tech industries. That is a practical way to fill lives instead of waiting for the blow to fall.

The other part of the package is of great benefit, as it would protect the capacity. There would be no change in the configuration of Llanwern and the other sites. They would not be destroyed, so could be rebuilt. The package would involve money from the trade unions, Europe and the Government. It has been informed by a distinguished and well-connected barrister, and seems an entirely new way to build a bridge between the hell of closure and redundancy and a practical way of getting out of the present position.

Without wanting to raise false hopes, we can say that the atmosphere on both sides seems different. A working party will meet in the next few weeks and report in a month's time in an attempt to rescue jobs. Both sides are clear about the reality. There is overcapacity in the industry and losses are sadly inevitable. However, there is hope of them working together not with antagonism but in a spirit of co-operation. We can at least hope that there has been a change since the period of trench war.

The unions and the work force are grateful, even to us, the politicians—or perhaps I should say, especially to us and why not? I pay tribute to my right hon. and hon. Friends, from the Prime Minister upwards to the Back Benchers. We have all been distressed about what has been in prospect. There is now the energy that is needed to take matters forward. Gratitude is due to the Dutch trade unions that have refused to take work from Llanwern. They said that if asset stripping from Llanwern and other steel plants was under way, they would not do the work.

New international solutions must be found to meet the challenges from multinational companies. It does no good for lone trade unions to argue with companies that can play them off against the trade unions of other countries. Trade unions must work together internationally. It does no good for one Government to try to deal alone with such a company. Governments will have to combine in pursuit of shared interests. To do that, we need new structures.

A bold, innovative plan has been produced. It deserves to work and breaks new ground. Perhaps what has happened will not after all result in the dreaded amputation of part of a steelworks. Perhaps that approach will be replaced by delicate surgery—the rescue of the hopes and jobs of many people who have given their all to the steel industry for years, and who deserve better than redundancy and the raw deal that Corus had prepared for them.

9.52 am

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on securing this important debate. All of us across the political spectrum agree that there is a crisis in the steel industry in Wales, and we support any measure that will alleviate the problem.

When Corus announced the prospective job losses in February it was a shock. After it made losses of £1 billion last year, for whatever reason, the alarm bells should have rung. Manufacturing is probably in a worse state in Wales than in other parts of the United Kingdom, as 20,000 jobs have been lost. The hon. Gentleman spoke about worldwide overcapacity, but as he pointed out the industry is cyclical. The package that was reported in the *Western Mail* today seems encouraging. I hope to be optimistic, but I do not want to be complacent.

Sir Brian Moffat said in evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee that the Ebbw Vale and Llanwern workers were too productive. That is not a criticism that one hears too often from bosses. His comment fills me with dismay.

The strength of the pound has had an effect: it has had an undue impact on agriculture and manufacturing, and probably on tourism. Wales is highly dependent on exporting to the so-called euro zone. According to a report in the *Financial Times* a couple of weeks ago, 72 per cent. of Wales's exports go there. The figure is approximately 58 per cent. for England and about 50 per cent. for London. Wales, and particularly manufacturing in Wales, is more sensitive to the strength of the pound. The *Financial Times* article concluded:

"Labour's heartland areas are the biggest exporters to the EU and consequently the most exposed to substantial currency swings, which would be eradicated by membership of the Euro."

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Corus cannot agree on its position and on what the effect of the euro has been, and possibly will be, on its ability to export. A couple of months ago, it was blaming the euro for all the problems of the steel industry. A little later, one of its Dutch chief executives said that the problems had nothing to do with the euro. The day before the most recent announcement, Corus again said that the problems related to the euro, but 24 hours after that announcement, the *Financial Times* reported that the

[Mr. Llew Smith]

problems had nothing to do with the euro. I suspect that they have little to do with the euro and much to do with asset stripping.

Mr. Llwyd: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and he obviously knows the story as well as anyone. I also refer to what the hon. Member for Newport, West said earlier about the chairman of Corus being a rather difficult gentleman to deal with. However, I do not want to scupper any negotiations, so I only make that point in passing. I know that the euro has been mentioned many times, and then put lower down the list of perceived problems.

There is a need for a regional economic policy—in other words, for a different view of the manufacturing industry in Wales and our over-dependence on the euro zone. I hope, as we all do, that Corus will play its part in keeping jobs, whether or not that is through the package reported today in the *Western Mail*. We do not know what the future holds. As has already been mentioned, the Select Committee concluded that there has not been much forward planning. That fills me with dread.

Dr. Kumar: When the redundancies were first announced, the chairman of Corus told us that he had not come to a conclusion about the figure until the night before. That shows what a shambolic approach has been taken towards the industry.

Mr. Llwyd: When he gave evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee, the chairman did not know whether one plant to which we referred was making a profit or a loss, which did not give us the impression that he was in control.

I want to ask the Minister one specific question. I am not being defeatist, but in case it turns out that today's reports are over-optimistic and Corus goes ahead with the cuts, I refer the Minister to Council directive 98/59 EC of 28 July on collective redundancies and the way forward. Will the Government consider putting judicial and administrative procedures in place for the enforcement of that regulation, if it is necessary? I am reluctant to spring that on the Minister today, but it may be important as a back stop, and it may encourage Corus to be even more co-operative than today's newspaper article suggests.

Various steps can be taken to secure jobs. I hope that a regional policy will be developed. Some parts of the UK are doing extremely well while others are not doing at all well. It behoves the Government to be creative with their regional policies, by cutting corporation tax in some areas or by cutting employers' national insurance contributions. In a recent speech, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry suggested that we need to take a different approach to various parts of manufacturing industry in the UK. Therefore, operating aids could legitimately be used, and I hope that they will be.

The impression that I received from Sir Brian Moffat was not helpful. Various reasons have been given—some of them conflicting—about what is going on. Some relate to the cost of labour, others, somewhat illogically, relate to over-production. However, let us not scupper any possible negotiations. When representatives of the unions gave evidence, they were forthright and on the ball. They had taken proper advice and the package that they presented was not fanciful. Corus now realises that they mean business; the package is surely worthy of proper and mature consideration.

We know that the Chancellor is sitting on a healthy surplus. He could, if necessary, introduce a rescue package for the area. I hope that the report will bear fruit and that something will happen. Having looked at the figures, I do not think that more than about £200 million would be necessary to ensure the future of those communities, which have been devastated by the announcements. If Ebbw Vale and Bryngwyn were closed, the land would have to be prepared and decontaminated at a cost of about £100,000 per hectare at 2001 prices. That would total about £10 million. I also urge the Government urgently to consider new technologies such as broadband communication, at a cost of about £5 million, the restoration of a passenger rail service from Blaenau Gwent to Newport and Cardiff, at a cost of about £35 million and, of course, direct compensation—I fully agree with the hon. Member for Newport, West about that. Why should not those people be properly compensated?

Even at the 11th hour, we hope that common sense will prevail? I suspect that, 12 months hence, steel will be needed, and if the plants have been decommissioned, the decision will be seen to have been shambolic and made with no view to the future or acknowledgement of what everyone knows, which is that steel is a cyclical industry.

I urge Ministers to engage with Corus in any way that they can, to assist the unions in their discussions and to prepare aid packages as necessary—including assisting the package reported today. The amount of money required is not large, and could make all the difference. I hope that, even at the 11th hour, Corus will think again about how it has acted. If not, I hope that the Government will act urgently and will properly fund any rescue package and/or retraining package as necessary. I thank the hon. Member for Newport, West for the opportunity to make those points.

10.2 am

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on obtaining this debate, and on the extraordinary persistence with which he has dealt with the problems of the steel industry on behalf not just of his constituency but of the wider steel community and the public. As always in a debate such as this, I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests.

This is also a British and a wider European and international problem. There was a whiff of Welshness, if I may say so, about the contribution of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). If the Welsh steel industry is to export around the world and to the rest of Britain, we must consider the matter from a United Kingdom perspective, not from the more parochial south Wales position of the Welsh nationalists, who have so little to contribute to the debate.

That also applies to the Conservative party, because the fundamental problem for steel remains the triple whammy of, first, the decline in steel consumption in the

1990s and before, which was unmatched in any other country and was the direct responsibility of the anti-manufacturing politics of the Conservative party. That is why no steel community, no steelworker and, I suspect, not even Sir Brian Moffat, will ever contemplate voting Conservative again. [*Interruption.*] I do not want to go into the details of his political affiliation. Those of us who have met him hope that even a sinner at the last moment of his job may repent.

The second problem handed to the steel industry by that wretched Government concerned Europe—"euro or your job." In 1996, the pound was trading at DM2.15 and steel was making money. In May 1997, the pound had risen to DM2.70 and steel was losing money, and has been losing money on exports ever since.

The third problem was the decadent privatisation of the electricity industry, which resulted in excessively higher prices for our steel companies than those in the rest of Europe. We are the only European nation that has seen a decline in electric arc furnace steel manufacturing: all other European countries have seen an increase. That was another wicked inheritance from that wretched Tory party. I should be surprised if a Tory spokesman even dared to speak in the debate.

Dr. Kumar: Has my hon. Friend observed that the steel industry is obviously not an important issue for Conservative Back Benchers, given that so few of them are present for this debate?

Mr. MacShane: The "City Slicker" column in *The Daily Telegraph* today depressed me, because it said that Llanwern should be closed and asked who cares about a fading industry such as steel. Newspapers such as *The Daily Telegraph*, and the Conservative party, should pay the same attention to the thousands of families who are facing misery and ruin as is being paid to the farmers, who also face a terrible plight.

There is a difficult world problem. Recently, I was in America where 11 companies are either in chapter 11 or facing bankruptcy. In the past six months, 16,000 American steelworkers have lost their jobs. The response to the United Steelworkers Union—a good friend of mine—was to favour a complete import moratorium. As I said to the union in Pittsburg, that was not the right approach. We need a managed approach to the world economy in steel. Mergers in Europe will also lead to job losses. It is not wholly accurate to claim that the European picture is rosy.

What can we do? I could do a lot of name calling, but I am not in that mode today. I want to be reasonably polite about the managers of our steel industry, because we shall have to deal with them in the future. I also want to be reasonably polite about my hon. Friend the Minister who is to reply to the debate, because I hope that we shall deal with him in the future. However, Corus has taken a deplorable approach to the problem. It showed great discourtesy—I shall put it no more strongly than that. The chairman of Corus was not willing to tell the democratically elected Prime Minister of our nation which plants were to be closed and how many men would lose their jobs, even though everyone in the industry had known since the beginning of December, after the dismissal of the joint chief executives, that the death sentence had already been pronounced.

Mr. Llew Smith: I accept my hon. Friend's point about the lack of consultation and the fact that not even the Prime Minister was informed of plant closures. However, even worse than that was the fact that the workers were not told what was to happen, when they had devoted their lives to the industry and had built it up to be the most efficient in the world. They and their families are most important, and they should have been consulted first.

Mr. MacShane: The lack of effective partnership in the steel industry, despite the best efforts of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and the other steel unions, undoubtedly contributed to the problems that we are facing. I have on file letters to Sir Brian Moffat dating back six years, when I was elected to the House, pleading with him to join the steel community MPs, trade unions and others to debate the future of the industry. Steel is not like Primark or Matalan: it is not a tee-shirt factory or a virtual industry. Steel requires constant interface with the Government, whether on currency, trade, investment, public infrastructure, energy costs, anti-dumping or its relationship with Europe. Government decisions in all nations profoundly affect steel. That is why the US Treasury Secretary, Mr. Paul O'Neill, is one of the great steelmaker leaders of America.

In Sir Brian Moffat, we have an accountant who worked in the nationalised British steel industry when it was run like a municipal outfit for many years. He was lucky to keep his job when the industry was privatised. He has an accountant's mentality—when in doubt, shut it down; when there are problems, axe workers; when unions say consult, tell them to get lost; and when the City says jump, say, "How high?" Over the past four or five years, we have seen the City's blind worship of financial markets, not steel engineering. Let us have no more of those ad hominem remarks. The deplorable Corus press briefings constantly chip away at and attack the Government. That is not worthy of a great international company. Let us move forward.

As a constituency Member, I directly represent steelworkers in Rotherham who are deeply concerned. This is a British issue that affects many different parts of the United Kingdom. I welcome yesterday's agreement to establish a joint working party—we have been asking for that for months. Regrettably, the announcement comes late in the day. As Members of Parliament, we must be honest and admit that a joint working party will not alter the disastrous world problem of overcapacity that steel faces—a tonne of basic steel costs as much on the world markets as a tonne of raspberry jam. However, we should look forward and consider what can be done to save the threatened jobs. As hon. Members have said, it is important to maintain capacity, because if public investment in infrastructure comes through and companies such as Nissan and others invest in the car manufacturing sector in the United Kingdom, we will be able to supply British steel.

The Government must also lend their direct support. I have taken delegation after delegation to the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss anti-dumping and regional aid policies, and have come away

[Mr. MacShane]

empty-handed. I hope that the Prime Minister's new commitment will be conveyed down the Whitehall feeding chain and will persuade officials in the DTI—not my hon. Friend the Minister, who is a great spokesman for the working class and industrial manufacturing—to approach matters with new vigour and vision. Germany, France and Spain have no problem backing their steel industries in compliance with European Union rules.

We have new investment in Rotherham. Boeing is coming in next week, and I have the pleasure of accompanying the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to open a new factory, Toyada Gosei, which is a major Japanese manufacturing investment in Rotherham. Corus is investing, along with Boeing, in a new technology centre in Rotherham.

The Government must take the issu forward. We need a new approach after the election to back a thing-making economy. Britain cannot be a nation of call centres, Starbucks cafes and financial analysts. We consume more goods than ever, and many of them contain steel. That steel can and must be made in our nation. I invite the Minister to be positive in his reply, to build on the partnership programme approach agreed yesterday, to support the steel industry and to give it a positive future.

10.13 am

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on securing a timely debate on an important subject. I agree with other hon. Members that his contribution in fighting on behalf of steelworkers is exemplary. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said that the debate was parochial and about only Wales, but I have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West championing steel on behalf of the whole country, not just Wales, although I would understand it if he were parochial.

As a Teesside man, our Deputy Speaker—my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook)—will surely concur with what I am about to say. Although you are not able to take part in the debate because of your duties, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have shared many meetings with steel managers and directors of companies regarding the future of the steel industry.

Before I came to the House, I was a steelworker. Like my hon. Friend, I worked in research and development on Teesside, at the Teesside technology centre, which, unfortunately, will soon be closed down, thanks to the vision of Sir Brian Moffat and the board of Corus. My views are supported by friends and colleagues who work in the steel industry, for the time being, many of whom have given a lifetime of service. They have done everything that was asked of them—total quality performance, quality management and other changes to the steel industry.

Managers and middle managers, who were asked to introduce changes in the 1980s, now find that they will be made redundant. I see them on Teesside, I meet them in shopping centres, and they come to see me at my surgery. My comments are echoed in the communities that I represent, which cannot understand why Sir Brian Moffat is taking such action.

One of the mills to be closed down on Teesside is the Coil Plate mill, which is one of the best and most advanced in the world. It is profitable and successful, but it is going to be closed. The argument advanced is that it is because of over-capacity. Beyond that, however, we do not know the reasons. I have been told that preparations are being made to close the mill in mid May. Yesterday, Corus created the impression that it is in negotiation with the DETR, its joint working task force and the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. If so—and I believe that Sir Brian Moffat and the board are honourable—why are they preparing for closures? The secret is leaked out in today's edition of *The Guardian*. A spokesperson for Corus is quoted as saying:

"We have agreed to keep the door open to any schemes but that has always been there. We have heard nothing that changes our mind about the size of the cutbacks nor the timescale".

That is the real truth. They are window dressing. If I am wrong, and I hope that I am, I shall be happy to apologise, but that is the secret. If those involved were genuinely discussing the matter, they would not have made such statements.

Mr. Flynn: Corus always said that there was no alternative and no way to help the steel industry that would abide by European Union competition rules. The unions, the Government and others have put together a package, which, we are advised, is practical and would abide by the competition rules. That is the great change. Corus always said that that was not possible. It did not test whether it was possible, and it had to agree yesterday that the proposals could be achieved.

Dr. Kumar: I thank my hon. Friend for those observations. I am happy that we are at least making some progress. I could see none before. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham. I remain pessimistic, but I hope that I am wrong. I can only become more optimistic as time goes on. I know the approach of Sir Brian Moffat and Corus. I know from the time when he was British Steel chairman that once he makes up his mind, there is no return. He does not make up his mind lightly. I say that in all honesty. If he were to change his mind, it would do him great credit, but I cannot see that happening. I hope that I am wrong.

I welcome the union initiative. A great deal of work has been done on the proposals. I also want to give great credit to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and his Department. Every time that there are difficulties in relation to steel, I and other hon. Members representing Teesside go to see him. Last year, he set up a task force, which is a great credit to him. I know that the Minister recognises the contribution of the Teesside steel industry.

We should examine the steel industry in general, but we should give particular attention to its research and development aspects. A recent report by the Select Committee on Science and Technology, of which I am a member, expressed concern about the imbalance of redundancies between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and about the apparent downgrading of Corus's commitment to research and development in our country.

The Government believe in research and development, and in innovation, but closure of the laboratory will leave a huge vacuum in research and

development on Teesside. The Minister supports the chemical industry's efforts to create clusters of employment, but the area that I represent faces huge job losses. Young people are being encouraged to study science and to pursue careers as physicists and chemists, so that they can contribute to research and development, yet one of the biggest employers in my area is closing one of its research institutions. That sends the wrong signal to the youngsters who will become graduates and go on to make a great contribution to research and development.

I am passionate about this matter, and I want the Minister's full support. There will be 1,000 redundancies, but that will cause 6,000 to 7,000 job losses in my community and others. Unemployment is falling in our constituencies, but it is rising in some parts of them. That trend must be reversed. Representations should be made to Sir Brian Moffat to impress on him the concerns that I have expressed, and to remind him of his responsibilities and obligations to the communities that have given his company such great service.

10.21 am

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) has shown that he is an authority not only on the steel industry, but on matters as diverse as raspberry jam and toffee. It is difficult to follow such speakers. However, although my contribution will be modest and brief, the points raised will be important, because the Ebbw Vale plant is in my constituency, and it faces closure unless it receives a last-minute reprieve.

I have occasionally disagreed with the Government, and voted against them. However, it would be wrong to criticise them now, and it would do a disservice to the work force. I have consistently criticised Corus's actions and decisions. In the past few months, the company has not acknowledged that the Government might have a role—except, perhaps, in clearing up the mess, in terms of the environment and job losses, after it leaves town. I am critical of the previous Government, who privatised the steel industry. Subsequent events have informed us about the negative effects of privatisation.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) that there was a lack of consultation. It is bad management not to involve the work force. The people in my constituency who are employed in the steel industry have devoted their lives to their work. They know the industry inside out. They might not have long lists of letters after their names, but they are the true experts, and they should have been involved in the consultation process. If those experts are ignored and treated with disdain, the wrong decisions are often made. I hope that the plan to set up a joint working party is not window dressing, but a serious attempt to involve the experts who have devoted their lives to the steel industry. If that is done, the industry will be far better off. If those experts had been involved in years gone by, they would not have been involved in the asset stripping that has taken place.

As I have said before, on the day that Corus was formed, it handed over approximately £700 million to the shareholders. It appropriated £900 million from the workers' pension fund. It wasted £135 million buying up companies abroad. It spent millions compensating former chief executives whom it obviously regarded as incompetent, and it handed out massive pay increases to the former Dutch management. All that money amounts almost exactly to the debt that Corus seems to be facing—in the region of £1.75 billion. If the asset stripping had not taken place and the money had instead been invested in the industry, Corus would not face the sort of debts that it now faces.

On the Ebbw Vale plant, no matter what happens with the joint working party, we shall still have to deal with 300 redundancies resulting from a previous decision. The work force have formulated their plans, and within the restrictions within which they have been operating, they have calculated that, following those 300 redundancies, the Ebbw Vale plant will be in profit. Under the plans that they have proposed, which I hope will be considered, the plant will be very much in profit. It is daft to consider closing a plant that is not only one of the most efficient in the world but will make substantial profits.

We welcome yesterday's decision to set up a joint working party. Much is at stake, especially for communities in Blaenau Gwent, as no other jobs are available. I am not trying to be emotional or to whip up emotion. I am describing the reality of the circumstances, as the Government's statistics show. The jobs available are for security officer on a few pounds an hour. The Government's statistics on wage rates show that Blaenau Gwent has some of the lowest wage levels not only in Wales—I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham said about it being a UK problem—but in the UK.

I remember the day that Corus was formed. As I have said before in Parliament, at approximately 8 to 8.30 in the morning, the managing director, Mr. Tony Vickers, rang me at home and said, "Mr. Smith, there is no threat to jobs; there is no threat to the steel industry; and there is no threat to the plant in Ebbw Vale as a result of the amalgamation or the takeover." That was not true, because since Mr. Vickers made that statement and since Corus was formed, we have lost in the region of 300 jobs in Ebbw Vale. If the plans proceed, we shall lose the plant. That cannot be right. We are losing not the 700, 800 or 900 jobs that the press has suggested but in the region of 1,250 jobs, because in the past year or so jobs have been outsourced.

No one doubts the problems that farming and tourism face, and no one doubts that those industries should receive all the support possible. However, what is aggravating is that my community is in danger of being wiped out, but we are not the No. 1 item on the news night in, night out. We are not the subject of special reports. We do not receive the attention that others receive. If the plans proceed, 7,000 steelworkers will lose their jobs, and 7,000 families will lose their wage earner. They deserve as much attention and support as those who are receiving those things from the media because of their involvement in tourism and farming.

10.30 am

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith). As an agriculturist, I agree entirely with his

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

comments. His community will be absolutely devastated unless the closure programme can be stopped in its tracks. Ebbw Vale is on the boundary of my constituency, and my family has in the past included ironworkers in south Wales, so I know a bit about the matter. However, he is in the thick of it, and his community encounters people on the street in despair every day. We must work together to try to crack the problems. There is no doubt that there must be a crash programme in places such as Ebbw Vale, which must receive compensation and be given special status for aid. Vision is required to rescue the steel communities. If necessary, the activities of multi national companies must be forensically examined on a worldwide scale, and international agreements should be made to control the exploitation of the labour force across the world.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent was right that Corus's losses of £1.75 billion and the payout of funds—from plundering the steelworkers' pension funds to pay off people such as executives—amount to almost the same. The crisis is large. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on securing the debate, and I hope that he was correct in his analysis that the rescue package is meaningful. As we know, the steel industry is cyclical, and 12 months is a long time in steelmaking and the steel industry. The package gives breathing space, and I am glad to see that it has been won.

I am familiar with many places in Yorkshire and Teesside, which are in just as bad a state because of the closure of parts of plants and people who have been made redundant. It is a complete and utter carve-up. It is interesting to note that although the plant at Ijmuiden in Holland is not as productive as UK plants, particularly the Welsh plants, it will remain open. Corus exports more than half its production to Europe, and owns substantial German and Dutch steel operations. Commodity steel prices are at a 20-year low.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): Does the hon. Gentleman share my feeling that part of the reason why the Dutch plant remains open is that it would be difficult to close it in comparison with the ease with which British plants can be closed?

Mr. Livsey: I agree, and, if I have time, I shall address that point.

Corus, like every British quoted company is, even now, exposed to a takeover because of the organisation of our stock market and the way in which ownership responsibilities are discharged. That makes the company vulnerable, and it is trying to put a gloss on its results—or non-results as they may be at the moment—to try to make it appear more attractive. The skilled steelworkers, who have achieved record production outputs, are the victims of that. We live in a crazy world, in which less productive plants in Holland recruit more steelworkers, while more productive UK workers are being sacked. That is the law of the jungle.

British workers need help from the law. UK employment law protects British workers inadequately in comparison with continental laws. The Government must introduce legislation to give British workers the same protection as their European counterparts. They would not be as vulnerable if that were the case. An error of judgment was made when the Department of Trade and Industry allowed the amalgamation with British Steel, which was not done with a great deal of thought. We must reverse the anti-manufacturing policy embedded in our policy-making structure, which was left by the previous Government. We have not sufficiently put that policy aside.

Until the Government make clear the time frame for entry into the euro, the long-term stability of manufacturing that investors require will not be certain. Many aspects of the Corus cutback and the redundancies in the steel industry mean that little, if any, investment is being made and job numbers are declining. We should be asking how much money Corus will invest in the United Kingdom, in line with the rescue package. In Sir Brian Moffat's previous statements, the answer to that question was "nothing". We must extract promises from Corus.

Given the scale of redundancies, the Government should reverse their blocking of the European directive that aims to introduce information and consultation rights to most of the United Kingdom work force. Several things can be done to improve the situation in the steel industry. I agree with the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). We should give special status to certain areas and special regional economic assistance, as was done in the 1930s and 1940s by Governments who invested in specific parts of the United Kingdom. We might vary corporation tax and give assistance through a reduction in national insurance, or perhaps even abolish it in areas where the state of affairs is as bad as it is in Ebbw Vale. Operating aids could also be introduced, and special assisted area status for some of the crisis areas where the work force can be retrained.

Industry can be made more profitable through Government intervention. Those policies should be combined with a clear programme for when we join the euro. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) was right to say that it is a case of "the euro or your job." In many parts of the United Kingdom, that is the situation. Imaginative investment should be made into steel-using manufacturing. Why not put a state of the art car production plant alongside the steelworks? That would be easy in some parts of the United Kingdom, especially on the south Wales coast—

Mr. MacShane: And Rotherham!

Mr. Livsey: And in Rotherham—we must not forget that. It is all about competition. The steel industry is not competitive because of the euro and neither are car plants, if they are not efficient enough. Great investment must be made into manufacturing and steel-using manufacturing to stimulate demand in the industry, but that steel must be competitive on world markets or there will be imports and we will be undercut in the marketplace.

I am irritated by some of Sir Brian Moffat's statements. He is anti-competition; when asked whether he would sell his plant to the work force or to a management-work force buy-out, he said that he would

not, because the buyers would compete against him, which would put an end to his nice cosy monopoly. That situation must be bust open—we must get it by the scruff of the neck. If Sir Brian Moffat is not committed to providing work for British steelworkers, whether on Teesside, in Yorkshire or in south Wales, he should leave it to the management and work force to show him the way to producing profitable steel that is competitive on world markets and provides work for the areas that he is trying to do down.

10.39 am

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I, too, would like to thank the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) for bringing this matter before us; it should be kept constantly in the public eye. I say that because other areas of manufacturing, such as the textile industry, are steadily disappearing from the scene, but they do not appear to be areas of worry and concern for the Government. The textile industry is a prime example. Although I, too, am concerned about the loss of jobs in the steel industry, more jobs have been lost every year for the past four years in the textile industry and, sadly, I believe that the situation is getting worse. John Edmonds of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union said that some 96,000 manufacturing jobs were lost last year, and he shares my concerns. In 2001, some 10,000 manufacturing jobs will be lost every month. That is not my view, but that of John Monks, the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress.

This is the third debate on steel that I have attended, and the first at which there has been a glimmer of hope that something might come out of this serious situation. I understand that hon. Members who are faced with disastrous job losses in their constituencies want to try to reverse the situation. I can also understand their lashing out against those whom they believe have caused the problem. However, in many cases, the target of their wrath has been misplaced and their energies misdirected. Constantly blaming Corus might be politically smart but I do not believe that the facts endorse the positions taken by many hon. Members.

In 1997, British Steel made a profit of about £1 million a day. The line on the graph then goes straight down, and Corus is now losing a fortune every day. That position is not sustainable, and it cannot be allowed to continue. Something must be done. I have enormous sympathy with steel industry workers who are caught up in a nightmare that is not of their making. I endorse what the hon. Member for Newport, West said about efficiency. It is unusual for me to quote the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, but in his recent announcement on this sad affair, he said that the productivity of UK steel workers is now 571 tonnes a year per man—a staggering figure that makes ours one of the most efficient and productive steel operations in Europe.

I come from a manufacturing background and, for several years, I was the Member of Parliament for Workington. At that time, the blast furnace at Workington required 14 man hours for every tonne produced, but over the past 20 years, productivity has risen by 5 per cent. a year, which is 3 per cent. more than the figure for general manufacturing industry.

Dr. Kumar: On the criticisms of the chairman of Corus, we recognise the bitter reality that he faces, but we are greatly concerned about how he has achieved his objectives and the approach that he has adopted towards the Government, Members of Parliament and the communities affected.

Mr. Page: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but I understand that because the Department of Trade and Industry is one of the most leaky Departments—the Vauxhall debacle resulted from information being leaked to the press in advance of the announcement—management at Corus has held things back. However, I shall not defend or attack the Corus management because I am not fully au fait with the facts.

We have touched on only some of the problems, many of which, I believe, have been caused by the change in the balance of trade resulting from the strength of sterling. The volume of steel used in imported goods now balances that produced in and for the UK. As a result of sterling's appreciation against the euro, the average price of a tonne of steel exported to the European Union has fallen by a quarter since 1996.

I shall not follow up the rather myopic contribution of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane). I suggest that he tries to cast the mote from his eye—or, perhaps, from the Government's eye—and looks to see who ticked the box to allow the formation of Corus, which has been blamed for so much of what we now face.

Mr. MacShane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: No. I am sorry, but if I do the Minister will not have time for his thruppence-worth, and I want to hear what he has to say about the joint statement.

The hon. Member for Newport, West spoke about Europe, and said that we must look to the future. The United Kingdom and Europe must face the fact that a number of industries have such a high volume of activity that if they get into difficulties, one Government alone will not be able to prop them up and keep them going. The hon. Gentleman's little package of measures would be a drop in the ocean against the losses and costs that would face companies such as Corus. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, which is unusual, but that is a debate for another day. It should take place soon.

Time is not on our side. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the developments of the past 24 hours. I, too, have received a copy of the joint statement from Corus and the trade unions. It offers a first glimmer of hope. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that we must not raise false hopes, but it is good to have something positive to look forward to. The working party's application to the EU should be submitted as soon as possible. What will the Department of Trade and Industry do to promote and support that application? The DTI does not usually push EU applications speedily. On behalf of all involved, the Minister should urge the Department to get its skates on and act quickly.

10.46 am

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on securing this debate. He said that he would make a different speech to that which he had originally envisaged, and I shall give a different reply, because of recent and important developments.

I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have a deep personal interest in the matter, and the concern felt by hon. Members across the House is shown by the attendance here, although it is felt not only by those who contributed to the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), was here earlier; he has taken pains to argue behind the scenes on behalf of his constituents at every opportunity, despite the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West pointed out, his ministerial responsibilities place him in a difficult position. Also here are my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) and my hon. Friends the Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), for Corby (Mr. Hope) and for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase). They have all expressed their concern about the future of the steel industry.

This is a crucial time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West said, we must not raise false expectations; neither must we suggest that these are simple problems with simple solutions. They are complex matters, caused by difficult international trading conditions. We speak of globalisation affecting industry, but globalisation has a bigger impact on steel than on any other industry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) pointed out, the problems do not affect jobs only in the UK; he told us of similar problems in the United States. Overcapacity, weak prices and low profit margins have long been a problem.

The important thing about yesterday's developments is what I might call social partnership. All unions, especially the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, which has a particular connection with the steel industry, have been extremely constructive over many years. From yesterday's developments, it seems that it has been recognised at last that talks with those who represent the work force and have expertise in the industry can produce solutions to complex problems.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Does my hon. Friend recall the experience in Corby in the 1980s, when thousands of men were thrown out of work? The town had 30 per cent. unemployment, and it has taken us 20 years to recover. Yesterday's announcement shows a different way in which to operate. It gives hope to other communities under threat of experiences similar to that of Corby when the Tories dumped it in the 1980s.

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have been round that course a few times in debates on steel.

I have little time and want to respond to the constructive contributions made. That might mean that I miss out the contribution from the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page). Frankly, I had heard it all before. This country had 20 wasted years in which not only were the work force attacked, but the only people who could stand up to defend them were excluded at every turn through spiteful pieces of anti-union legislation. If we had only created a climate of social partnership in that period, we might be much further forward with employment relations and the tackling of such issues.

Evidence of the work force's constructive approach is highlighted by the fact that productivity per employee in the industry has risen by 10 per cent. a year for the past quarter of a century. That cannot be said often enough. In 1999, the year in which the Corus merger took place, productivity was 571 tonnes per employee, higher than Germany at 543 tonnes per employee and France at 534 tonnes per employee. That is an amazing success record, and one can understand the feeling of steelworkers and their communities about last year's announcement.

I want to speak specifically about yesterday's developments, but I shall first pick up on some of the points made. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) mentioned operating aids, which are tightly restricted under the European Coal and Steel Community treaty. From the start of the exercise—not only from 1 February when the announcement was made, but from December when the two chief executives left Corus, which gave us an idea of what was to come—the Government and the Welsh Assembly have worked hard to find packages of assistance for the industry. That does not mean only operating aid, but whatever aid we can produce to meet the strict and rigorous terms of the treaty. No stone has been left unturned. The developments yesterday demonstrated some of our thinking on the issue.

We all hope that the initiative leads to a lack of job losses such as those announced recently. Nevertheless, we will ensure that Corus understands its obligation to clean up the sites that it might leave behind. That important environmental issue was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West in various debates last year, and we have worked hard on it in the interim.

If my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham did not indulge in name calling today, I would hate to hear him when he did. He rightly pointed to some of the complex international issues, and talked about the lack of effective partnership. That will be a big issue. If we can glean the support of the electorate for a second term of Labour government, I hope that we can develop the idea of social partnership. My hon. Friend has a great track record on such issues.

In another passionate speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) epitomised the views of people in the affected communities. He referred to research and development and the report of the Trade and Industry Committee, which we have studied closely. Our understanding of the rationale behind Corus's approach to research and development is that it wants to avoid inefficient duplication of research resources following the merger, by establishing one research and development centre in the Netherlands and one in the United Kingdom. Each operation will focus its attention on the areas where the equipment and expertise of its personnel are best placed to be effective in their research effort. We have made it clear that, wherever in this country Corus decides to site its research and development centre, the DTI is ready to

assist: it will provide advice and will pursue policies to help the company to increase its competitiveness by maintaining a significant level of research and development effort in the United Kingdom. We shall pay close attention to the matter in the coming months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) mentioned lack of consultation and made some fair criticisms of Corus's past approach. I want to concentrate my remarks on what a constructive approach could produce.

The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) said that British workers want the same protection as other European workers. We have initiated a review of the entire information and consultation process in this country under various pieces of legislation, from the acquired rights directive, through the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981, to the redundancy legislation. We are conscious of the criticism that it is easier to sack British workers than any others in Europe and we do not think that that is a good thing. Perhaps the Opposition do.

We are pleased at our record levels of inward investment last year. None of our analysis suggests that that had anything to do with more lax labour laws. It was related to other issues—productivity and skills, and the fact that our economy is so marvellous at the moment. The review that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced last month will be of use in this context. We want to analyse the facts and discover whether it is true that it is easier to dismiss British workers. It is not necessarily true; the issue is more complex than it appears. If we find that it is easier, we shall decide what to do about it.

We had a debate about the single currency in December. Many manufacturers told me that things would be much better if the exchange rate for the deutschmark was around 3.10. It is about that now, and Corus has made it clear that the single currency was not the sole reason for its announcements. The point about the single currency is in many ways a red herring.

We were all pleased about developments following the meeting involving Corus and the trade unions yesterday. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it clear to the unions and to Corus that he is willing to approach the European Commission and other member states to ask for their approval for a scheme, under article 95 of the European Coal and Steel Community treaty, to assist Corus. We understand that to comply with the treaty any scheme would need to contain a significant retraining component. We believe that to be a central feature of the Union's proposals, although we have not yet seen the full details of the submission. It is an imaginative approach to providing in-work training while the work force pick up their normal wages. It would make it possible to buy some time and to improve workers' skills for their local labour market.

Officials of the Department of Trade and Industry are happy to participate and to play a key role, alongside the company and union officers, in a small working party to help to develop such a scheme. I hope that we can soon work up the outline of a scheme to enable us quickly to make an initial approach to the Commission. That approach would not, as I understand it, be affected by any purdah that might descend on us from any quarter in future. After seeking permission we would need to ask for the approval of other member states. Unanimous approval is needed. A process must be undergone, and the timetable will be tight. Corus has told us that it is willing to work with the Government and trade unions to develop a scheme, as it sees the obvious benefits to all concerned, but has asked us to seek the European Commission's consent by the end of April. That is what we shall do.

The initiative is important and we should be optimistic that a chink of light has appeared. The steel industry remains a major part of United Kingdom manufacturing industry and a significant contributor to the economy and employment. The Government will continue to work closely with all parts of the steel sector to try to ensure its long-term competitiveness.

Tourism (South-West)

11 am

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): In the context of the present foot and mouth crisis, this an extremely important debate. I know that a large number of hon. Members will be hoping to catch your eye or to intervene, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I hope that that will show the cross-party concern that exists about the impact of foot and mouth on the wider economy in the south-west and other parts of the country.

There have been many statements and debates on the matter in the House. Yesterday, much of the debate focused on the impact on the farming community. That is why today I am raising the subject of the tourism industry, but that does not reflect any lack of concern for the farming industry, which is being devastated. The disease is no less devastating for the surrounding rural communities, especially in its effect on related businesses and tourism. I am not taking the opportunity to make any party points. We all understand that we need to find solutions to the crisis. Any Government would be struggling to cope with the scale of it. That is not to say that I have not had criticisms and suggestions to make.

As regards tourism in the south-west, there have been cancelled accommodation bookings; restricted access to accommodation and attractions; forced closure of environmental and animal-based attractions in urban as well as rural areas; a dramatic fall in inquiries about holidays and breaks; perhaps a tarnished image that will last for some time, at least overseas, if not in the United Kingdom; and a perception that the region is currently closed for business.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I have listened to my hon. Friend's list. Does he accept that every single one of those problems also exists in rural Wales and, I imagine, across the United Kingdom? Does he agree that one of the reasons for that is that internationally, people do not understand that foot and mouth poses no danger whatever to human health?

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend is right. A huge communications exercise needs to be conducted. I shall return to the matter later.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), the Welsh Assembly has produced a charter for responsible tourism, which sets out clearly what people can and cannot do during the foot and mouth outbreak. I commend it to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) as a way forward for the south-west.

Mr. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend. I will take the opportunity to discuss some of the positive measures that have been undertaken in the south-west.

For many years, I have fought against the perception that because the south-west is an area of sunshine, sand and sea, it is a comfortable place to be. In many parts of the south-west, there is severe poverty, and no more so than in my area in Cornwall, with high levels of unemployment, seasonal jobs, very low wages and problems of access to local transport. Much of the south-west is classified as a rural priority area. Cornwall has objective 1 status, because we have some of the highest levels of need anywhere in the European Union.

The foot and mouth crisis is impacting on an already poor area that is highly dependent on the tourism industry. The outbreak could not have come at a worse time, following the BSE crisis; swine fever last year; the strength of the pound, which has hit tourism hard, as well as hitting farming and exporting industries; and appalling disruption to rail services in most of the south-west. I have not been able to use the train regularly for months—it simply is not running down to my part of the world. *[Interruption.]* It is a disgrace, as the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) says. On top of all that, we have had the wettest weather for more than 130 years and possibly in recorded history.

The crisis comes at a time of the year when cash is at a minimum in tourism-related businesses. Most of them survive on their income from the Easter period through to the end of the summer. During the winter and early spring, they invest in improvements to accommodation and in advertising, so at this time of the year their resources are at a minimum. In the rural communities most significantly affected, tourism makes up 30 per cent.—a third—of local income, compared to 10 per cent. from farming.

The combined impact of all those factors represents an economic catastrophe facing the area. The regional development agency estimates that the total net loss to the south-west could easily be £1 billion or more, with tourism bearing the brunt. The industry in the south-west is larger than in Scotland and Wales together. In 1999, more than 12 million people took holidays in and trips to the region, which were worth almost £2.5 billion and accounted for 100,000 jobs. Other estimates put losses as a result of foot and mouth as high as £2 billion. In the most seriously affected areas, 30 per cent. of gross domestic product could be affected.

There is also an incidental impact on the farming community—as if it had not suffered enough as a direct result of the disease. In Cornwall particularly, and in much of the south-west, farms are reliant on diversification and their role in the tourism industry. Many farmers generate more than half their income from that.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate and allowing me to intervene. In Dorset, we have tended to close all the farmland and all the paths, yet the Government are telling us to make sure that everyone can go to the beaches. Unfortunately, they often need to cross farmland to get to the beach. Is that a problem in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and how has it been dealt with?

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is right. The problem is serious throughout the south-west. Access was closed on a blanket basis on MAFF advice at the start of the outbreak. In Cornwall, there is no access to more than 90 per cent. of the coast. Although some of the routes cross land used by livestock, some could be opened. The matter is under review, but the process is

extraordinarily slow. That impacts on the costs borne by local authorities and others. I shall ask the Minister what scope there is for help to be given to local authorities. We have spoken at length in the House, rightly, about the impact on business, but local authorities must devote huge resources to get the footpaths opened as quickly as possible and make sure that the right advice is given.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): The hon. Gentleman has identified the factor that may be doing more damage than anything else: the blanket closure of all our footpaths, whether or not they go anywhere near livestock. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister replies, she will say what exactly the dangers are. There are those who say that the danger posed by people walking on footpaths has been greatly exaggerated. If that is the case, should we not be moving much more quickly to open some of our beautiful and very important footpaths?

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is right. The impact is huge, and we need to find ways to make rapid progress to open up access where it is safe to do so. However, the first priority must be to contain the spread of the disease. If anything is done that puts that at risk, it will ultimately be worse not just for the farmers but for the tourism industry as well. That is why tourism organisations and all those who are dealing with the outbreak have said that their first priority is to support the containment of foot and mouth disease and to back the farming community on which it directly impacts.

The second priority must be to safeguard the long-term interests of the tourism industry and the related small businesses that are being hit. Such businesses are characteristic of the rural community, but they do not have large amounts of money to help them to survive the crisis. Most of them—I hope that they will not take this wrongly—have a pretty hand-to-mouth business existence and do not make huge profits. They work very hard and they employ local people, but all that is falling down around them.

That is why the third priority must be to limit long-term damage. These problems are not merely short-term; if such businesses close, many of them will never reopen.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): The problem in Devon is that nobody knows what is closed and what is open. Last week, we heard the Minister for the Environment say that it was business as usual in Devon and the west country and that everything was open. However, I have just been phoned from Dartmoor by my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who said that everything was closed. People who want to walk across fields in Devon do not know whether it is legal to do so. The situation has been muddled because the county council has not made clear statements and MAFF has not given clear directions.

Mr. Taylor: The provision of proper information at the right time is a huge issue, which I want to emphasise in this debate.

I should like to give some examples of how foot and mouth is hitting the region, as they will help to show what must be done. An enormous number of accommodation bookings have been cancelled, not only in farm accommodation, but in seaside towns. Although coastal towns are not directly affected by foot and mouth, their bookings are disappearing because of the belief both here and abroad that they are closed down. The Best Western hotel in Newquay, which specialises in student holidays from other parts of Europe, has had £50,000-worth of bookings cancelled. So far, the cancellations extend into June and are due mostly to the closure of coastal footpaths and the Pentire headland, as well as the negative pictures of burning animals in the region.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) has seen exactly the same thing in Torquay. Indeed, the situation there is arguably worse, as Devon appears as just one big red splodge on the maps that are shown on the evening news. One would think that the whole place was covered in yellow "do not pass" lines.

It is crucial that locations are reopened as soon as possible, but the right campaigning is also needed to promote the opportunities that are available in the affected communities. As hon. Members can imagine, many people have asked me to raise their concerns in this debate. The problem is hitting not only areas that have foot and mouth, on whatever scale. One person from Exmoor stated:

"There are no outbreaks of Foot and Mouth on Exmoor at the moment, (and I hope it stays that way) but the tourism industry is suffering just as badly as the other areas are suffering.

My wife and I run a small Bed and Breakfast business . . . We take up to eighteen guests, and normally in March/April and onwards we are very busy. For the last four weeks we have had no guests at all, and it does not look as if we will have any in the foreseeable future. We have had to date £15,000-worth of business cancelled. Enquiries for the summer and autumn have also stopped coming in."

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I should like to endorse his remarks, as the problems that he describes are seriously affecting towns such as Bournemouth. There is no foot and mouth in and around Bournemouth, but all the local attractions have been severely affected. The New Forest is closed, as well as Studland in the Isle of Purbeck, which is closed partly because deer graze on the dunes. Hengistbury head is closed because there are some sheep there. My area is just as affected as those to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and the letters that I am receiving from my hoteliers bear out everything that he says.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is right, although he will agree that we should concentrate also on the huge number of attractions and hotels that are still open.

I should like to give another example from my constituency. As I said, we do not currently have foot and mouth, and I hope that it stays that way. However, the Rosevine hotel says that the footpath along the coast into Portscatho, the local village, is closed. The path is 400 yards long, but the alternative route is a car journey of three and a half miles. The path has never been grazed by livestock in living memory and it provides no access into livestock areas, but it remains closed. The hotel has lost 84 per cent. of its bookings, and has already lost a total of £19,000.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about a parallel outbreak involving a

[Mr. Andrew George]

contagious human disease? I refer to the spread of benefit-of-hindsight disease, whose symptoms are brass neck and severe memory loss. The human race is also being affected by the disease of panic, which is out of place. As my hon. Friend points out, there are no outbreaks in Cornwall, so we should establish ourselves as a livestock island and a disinfected route through which humans can make their visits and enjoy their holidays. Cornwall is open for business, and we must shout that out loud from this place. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing us the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Taylor: I agree with all that my hon. Friend says.

I should like to give a further example of how badly businesses are affected. I have received a fax from somebody in Dartmoor, who says:

"Our last customer was on the 27th of February. The bunkhouse has been shut since then thus its income is zero. We are no longer operating courses and holidays on the moor, we have managed to run a couple of groups in Sussex and in South Devon but we have no more bookings. We would normally bring about 1500 people to Dartmoor each year—this year it is likely to be less than 200 and they will be at the end of the year.

If this crisis is not brought under control very soon we are going to lose the summer bookings. It is doubtful whether we can survive until September without an income but if we did and we lost all summer income we are unlikely to survive the winter!"

This problem is destroying tourist businesses and we need urgently to shout from the rooftops the opportunities that are available.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: I shall continue to give way to hon. Members. I hope that they will bear in mind the fact that their interventions will extend the length of my speech, but I am aware that it is helpful to allow everyone to make their points.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate at such a crucial time. Does he agree that decisions about which locations stay open and which stay closed rely on detailed scientific advice? Local authorities and councils do not have the necessary expert scientists, so will he confirm that central Government must concentrate on the matter and give authorities the most detailed possible advice and guidance about what should and should not stay open? Furthermore, does he accept that emergency powers should be given to councils, to enable them to move stock from small areas of common land, whether or not it is infected, so that such areas can be opened and stay open?

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend represents an area which has been hit hard by the outbreak, so he has direct experience of the positive efforts that have been made and also of the difficulties that are dragging us back. I agree absolutely that the Government have a key role to play in providing resources, back-up and information to the local authorities and to other emergency planning groups. That is largely why I sought to initiate this debate. In my county, an extremely good group is working out of county hall to bring together all the relevant services. I think that that is happening in most other areas. The group is struggling, however, as it does not have the necessary expertise. It is under-resourced, as the problem is costing a lot of money—a point on which I shall comment further in a moment.

There is some good news. For example, the National Trust is now reopening properties in Cornwall. It is concentrating on car parks that provide access to beaches, provided that they are located within non-risk areas.

The hugely successful Eden project is in Cornwall. Many people are visiting it, but they are mostly local because those outside the county wrongly believe that Cornwall is closed. Newquay zoo has reopened, but the enforced three-week closure has cost it £40,000. Only seven years ago, the current owner won the national small business award for turning a failing business around. Like other attractions, the zoo has been closed for the winter and relies on the income stream that begins to flow at this time of year. It is terrified of the impact of the adverse publicity.

Foot and mouth disease is affecting not only holiday businesses but businesses linked to them. For example, Millmans coaches, which is based in Dartmoor and has 16 coaches, has asked me to raise its case. Millmans usually take schoolchildren from the midlands and the south-east to residential centres on the moors. That cannot currently happen because the moors are closed. Devon county council has cancelled all extra-curricular activities and agriculture colleges are cancelling field trips. The company's bookings have inevitably been cancelled. It has lost some £20,000 and it is in serious danger because of cash-flow problems.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): My hon. Friend made the point that some small tourist businesses have just come through the winter months when they have almost no income. They are reflecting on the prospect of earning little if any income in the next few months. Does my hon. Friend agree that the benefits system is too inflexible to respond to those dire circumstances? Other hon. Members and I have fought cases in the past on behalf of constituents who have no money in the winter but are told that their income must be averaged over the year for benefit purposes. If they have no cash at the end of the winter period and will not now receive any, it is essential to fine-tune the benefits system to help them through these terrible times.

Mr. Taylor: It has long been a problem in the tourist industry that work comes in relatively short blocks, whereas the benefits system assumes that people are either in full-time, permanent, long-term work or not in work. That needs to be changed. I pressed the previous Government to change the system, and I hope that the current crisis will spark some rapid action at least on some temporary measures. It is not only businesses that are affected but those who are employed by them. Many people in my constituency depend on summer business in the local hotel or restaurant. Most of them find that they are not being taken on or that they are being laid off.

As I said earlier, Cornwall is largely unaffected by the infection, but Carbeil caravan and camping park stated in a letter to me:

"Enquiries for information and literature for our Park and Cornwall in general have become non existent".

That refers to future bookings. The letter continues:

"No bookings are being received. These should start to come through now, not just for now but for the whole of the Summer months.

Coastal Paths are closed; this is our main source of income at this early start of the season".

That is a key point. At this time of year, walking holidays maintain the business. The letter goes on to say that the proprietors

"Desperately need Easter trade but need money to finance advertising".

They cannot advertise to try to deal with the problem because, as they say in their letter:

"If we are spending what little money we have on advertising will the enquiries/bookings arrive? A difficult question in normal pre-season incentives".

They simply do not know what to do.

My office has received distressing phone calls from people in genuine personal need. They do not knock the Government; some try to cast blame, but all are desperately anxious about their future. My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) referred to our negative image abroad. The impression is given that the country is closed and that people cannot visit it. The British Tourist Authority has highlighted the problem, but I do not believe that it has the resources to overcome it.

Let me cite a couple of examples from colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) has been contacted by the City of Bath further education college, which received a fax cancelling a visit of a group of German students. The fax states:

"Much to our regret we have to cancel our stay at your college from 28th March to 12th April 2001 because of foot and mouth disease. The Ministry of Agriculture"—

that is the German Ministry of Agriculture—

"has given advice to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to stop all trips to England within the near future."

It is no wonder that we have a serious problem if such advice passes between German Departments and filters down to affect bookings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) had his attention drawn to the position of a coach company in Wincanton in his constituency. It has been forced to cancel a trip for students from Sexey's school in Bruton and King Arthur's school in Wincanton to Lahnau, their twin town in Germany. The coach company has therefore lost business. The mayor of Lahnau told the students that, on the basis of advice from his regional government, they must not come to Germany. Some extreme and incorrect information is being spread abroad. National American television is telling people that it is their duty as citizens not to travel to the United Kingdom.

The problem is currently being tackled by newspaper advertisements, which resemble the sort of information that was published in 1950s and told people to wrap themselves in brown paper and hide under the stairs in the event of a nuclear alert. Not many people will be attracted to sunny Devon and Cornwall by such adverts. Of course, accurate information must be provided. All parties have connections with major advertising companies, which are doing all sorts of work, in some cases free of charge. Surely the Government can do better than the full-page, black-and-white adverts.

I appreciate that the tourist associations, with Government support, are planning advertising campaigns in due course to overcome the negative impressions that may remain when the crisis ends, but we need positive advertising now to persuade people to go ahead with bookings and to explain the time scale. We should promote success stories—for example, Torquay and Newquay, which are as open as they have ever been, and new, vibrant attractions such as the Eden project. There is no reason why people should not visit them.

We desperately need to provide the back-up, resources and information to help the opening of the coastal footpaths and to promote other attractions that can be visited safely. The bridleways, cycleways and footpaths in Cornwall total 25,000 miles. They comprise 6,000 paths including 300 miles of coastal path. There are nearly 1 million annual visitors, and walkers bring in £10 million to Cornish tourism. However, almost all the paths are closed and the county is struggling to find the resources to reopen them.

South West Tourism provides regular updates and distributes supplements in the region's daily newspaper, the *Western Morning News*, which covers Cornwall and Devon. The supplements explain what is open and what people can do. However, they do not reach people from other areas. Only the Government can properly tackle that problem. It is fantastic that so many local organisations, businesses and others are pulling together to get through the crisis, but they cannot do it alone.

Let us consider compensation. The Government have made some announcements, but they are too limited and they affect only the smallest communities. They do not cover all the businesses that are being hit; frankly, they are insufficient. I appreciate that the Government are considering further action, but let me make one suggestion. There is an urgent need to make money available to affected businesses. The Government could cover the cost of the interest. They should be flexible about evidence, but if businesses can show that their problems are related to the crisis, money should be made available. The Government could pay the loan costs and the banks could administer the scheme. Although the banks claim that they are being helpful, they have to operate under commercial constraints. Only the Government can intervene to take the matter further.

The Minister should take a hand in sorting out the diabolical problems with rail services to the south-west. We have suffered a double blow. Not only are direct routes to much of Devon and Cornwall closed, but much of the rolling stock has been transferred to Wales to provide a more frequent service there. That has meant the loss of modern inter-city high-speed trains in and out of Cornwall. That causes further delay and does nothing for the image of access to the county. People believe not only that the countryside is closed but that when it is open they will have to travel on a 40-year-old train. That is unacceptable. Great Western Railways, with Government encouragement, could do something about that now. A bit of good news would be extremely welcome at the moment.

[Mr. Taylor]

I wanted to raise the issue of the local authorities and their problems, and I hope that the Minister has taken those points on board. Many local authorities are now spending large sums of money. Cornwall has just authorised £61,000 for the schemes in which it is involved so far; it has authorised £25,000 a week for further work during the crisis; and £250,000 has been set aside since the middle of March. The local authority does not even know whether the Bellwin scheme or some other scheme will help to provide compensation for those costs. It needs to know what funds it can make available, as that will make a difference to what can be done. It has other responsibilities such as education and social services, and it needs to know how to balance its spending.

I have given a large number of hon. Members the opportunity to intervene, and I know that others would like to speak. I understand that it is not easy to come up with quick answers, but I must say to the Minister that quick answers are what those businesses urgently need. Better adverts would at least make a start in showing that the Government understand that those businesses are open and that they want customers. Customers can safely come to the south-west, but the businesses need a bit of help to win those customers back.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. It might be helpful if I advise the House that the convention is to start the Front-Bench contributions 30 minutes before the termination of the debate, in this case at 12 o'clock. That gives us 29 minutes in which to hear from six hon. Members. Many hon. Members have already made interventions, and I ask everyone, please, to bear in mind the constraints under which we operate here, so that all hon. Members who wish to can make a contribution.

11.32 am

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on securing this debate, and I echo his concerns for the farmers. Although I do not want to detract from that, I want to concentrate on tourism and the impact that the foot and mouth crisis has had on Swindon. It is important to focus on the positive side of this issue, because there is still a great deal for tourists to enjoy. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the region being closed for business, but we should not use that term, because there is so much in it that is definitely open. That is certainly true for tourists in Swindon.

I see Swindon as the gateway to the south-west: it is sometimes described as the place where the Cotswolds meet the west country. We undoubtedly have some problems because of foot and mouth. Our wonderful country parks are closed. Lydiard park—in which one could normally learn about the chequered history of the Bolingbroke family in one of the finest small historic houses in the country—is closed at the moment. Coate water, where people who are mobility impaired and others can take beautiful walks, is also closed because of foot and mouth. So, too, are the farmers' centre, and Broome Manor golf course, where international golf champions have trained.

Although we have those problems, Swindon is definitely not closed for tourism. I want to emphasise that today, because Swindon's tourism trade has grown magnificently over the years and we are keen for that to continue. Indeed, we have an ambition to be the fastest-growing tourist destination in Britain. That may raise some eyebrows here, because Swindon has been well known as a boom town and the fastest-growing town in Britain—it is sometimes cited as the fastest-growing town in Europe—but we now want to share that success with tourists from Britain and abroad. We are being very successful in doing so. Last year, we raised about £216 million from the tourist trade, an increase of 73 per cent. since 1997. Tourism is now the second-largest employer in the borough, supporting about 6 per cent. of jobs; it is very important to us.

Many people do not know about the attractions of Swindon. We are not as good at advertising as some places. We have one of the best collections of 20th-century art and ceramics outside London, thanks to the work of the borough council. After the war, Swindon was the first local authority to build a purpose-built art gallery, and it is one of only a handful of local authorities to have collected a nationally significant contemporary art collection, to which it is still adding and which is one of the most important collections outside London.

That foresight is reflected in many areas of the borough council's work. It was the first local authority to adopt a percentage for art policy, and the first to establish and finance an arts centre. It is the only local authority to run a national dance agency, and many of the dance organisations in this country have their roots in the work started in Swindon. We have our own Billy Elliots now: people who came in off the streets of Swindon, never having danced before, now dance in the west end and on Broadway, with companies such as Rambert and others. That facility is in Swindon for people to enjoy.

Swindon has a world-class railway museum, well funded by the national lottery, that has been cited Wiltshire's family attraction of the year by the "Good Britain Guide". The McArthur Glen designer outlet at Great Western village was given two regional tourist board attraction of the year awards. These are all very much open to the public. For younger people, the Brunel rooms, where Billie Piper first performed, is just one of the many venues providing a good evening's entertainment in and around Swindon.

We are aware of the bigger issues involved with travelling to Swindon, and there are some problems with the railways, although the situation has improved recently. We do not have the on-going problems that areas further into the west country are experiencing. We are keen to continue to support the tourism trade, for the reasons that I have outlined. It represents an increasing success in the town.

I want to ask the Minister to comment on a couple of issues that could help tourism in Swindon and across the south-west. First, there is the big issue of getting information out about the foot and mouth problem. Even when that problem did not exist, there was a problem with information. The national helpline was set up for people to call, but sometimes that is tricky because it does not have the information that people on the ground have. If queries could be put through to the

local tourist information centres, that would be the best thing. Our centre in Swindon helps about 180,000 people a year, and it has detailed, on-the-ground knowledge.

Secondly, different people are running websites, and Swindon, too, is launching its own tourism website—it might even be up and running today. The English tourist board and the British Tourist Authority both run websites. If all that information could be co-ordinated across the country, it would be helpful.

Swindon is often the butt of criticism, but I have just given the House a flavour of the rich cultural activities that it has to offer. I invite all hon. Members to come and visit us as soon as possible and if anyone is free on 3 May, our literature festival will be running then. Hon. Members might want to come and hear a very good poet, Jenny Joseph, who is the author of the award-winning poem, "When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple". There will be culture throughout, and Swindon is open. Please come and visit us.

11.39 am

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) has done a great service to the House. I agree with everything that he said, and I should like to thank him for putting it so succinctly. I have cut my speech by at least 50 per cent., as I do whenever I speak. My speeches are always improved as a result.

The Minister for the Environment recognised the gravity of the situation in his statement on 20 March. I liked that statement because it represented a step in the right direction. However, it was a very small step. The seriousness of the situation in South Hams and the part of Torbay that is in my constituency, which the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) will tell me is about one third—

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): A quarter.

Mr. Steen: The hon. Gentleman says it is a quarter. The seriousness of the situation can only be guessed at. I am worried stiff about the business prospects in my area. Easter will be a watershed. I fear that media sensationalism has given people the misconception that vast areas of Devon are no-go areas full of mass burial sites and closed footpaths. People need the facts, not the latest culling figures. If they do not come to Devon for its countryside and seascape, they certainly do not come for its night clubs.

Let me give an example of how crazy the situation is. In Torbay, a footpath on Churston common, which is on one side of a road, is closed. Immediately on the other side is a massive golf course, which is open for business. That is sheer madness—people do not know what they can do. One of my councillors who was walking on a footpath with his dog was told that that was illegal. Dartmoor is allegedly open to the public, but my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) has just rung me from there to say that it is closed. He cannot stop his car. He cannot go into the car parks. He cannot go walking.

In spite of the whole of south Devon, including South Hams, Teignbridge, Torbay, Plymouth and Exeter, being free of foot and mouth, I believe that Devon county council has closed all the footpaths, although nobody knows. People are not coming to Devon, and understandably so. The Minister for the Environment said in his statement last week that the countryside is open for business and that tourists should go there, but that is no good if those who go to the countryside are told that they cannot stop, cannot go into car parks and cannot go walking. Tourists do not know where they can go walking, but they can play golf. Golfers are very welcome, but if people walk across a footpath with a dog, they are not welcome. That is sheer madness—it has to be put right, and the Minister could do it.

Let us consider two hotels in my constituency. The Thurlestone has four stars and 67 rooms—it is one of the best in the area. It has been in the same family since the 1890s, is highly regarded and has every possible facility, including a golf course where people can play. It has a swimming pool and people can swim there. It has grass and greenery and people can walk there, but if they go outside the hotel they cannot walk on the footpaths. The Royal Castle hotel in Dartmouth has three stars and 25 en suite rooms—it is one of the oldest in my constituency. I gather that its figures are down by between 12 and 15 per cent. on this time last year. Much more worryingly, it has noticed a 50 per cent. decline in bookings compared with the same period last year. My view is that seasonal staff will suffer as they will bear the brunt. Also, where will students go when they want jobs this summer?

Health and safety regulations cost a fortune to enforce. Why can they not be relaxed? If I may say so, since they were introduced, the instance of food poisoning has increased. If we got rid of or relaxed health and safety regulations, we could be sure that food poisoning would decrease.

Hotels are braced for a meagre season and they have enormous overheads to sustain. The hotels in a tourist area are intrinsically immersed in the whole rural community and even though south Devon is clear of foot and mouth, the disease pervades the very fabric of the community. Everyone feels affected: the roads are empty in South Hams, the caravan sites are deserted and Devon is like Britain on a Sunday in the 1960s—very little is moving.

Woodlands leisure park is usually visited by 400,000 people each year. The owners are already very worried men—they are all former farmers—and they have closed the park for a month. Pennywell farm, which is another tourist attraction, cannot understand why MAFF has sent out a directive saying that schools in Devon should not arrange visits to farms or farm attractions. Pennywell is deserted and its owners bereft because MAFF has told schools that they must not visit their farm.

Can the Minister please put that right? Can she please make sure that MAFF corrects that message and does not send out any more? If Devon county council has closed footpaths, people should know which ones and there should be clear information as to why. Most people believe that closing footpaths makes not the slightest difference to foot and mouth, which is mostly a wind-borne virus. People who have not gone near an affected area are perfectly safe to walk on those footpaths, are they not?

[Mr. Steen]

The problem is that we are relying on the public to have common sense. I suggest to the Minister that a lot could be done to relax those draconian measures, which should not apply to footpaths away from livestock. People should be able to walk on a public footpath on one side of a road and play golf on the other without having to draw a distinction between the two.

Besides advice from MAFF, the Government could do a number of things to help. If prudent and responsible action has been taken to prevent the spread of disease and attractions have closed voluntarily, the Government could underwrite a business interruption insurance. They could help with committed costs such as feed and business expenses and veterinary and medical bills incurred by farms and tourist attractions. They could suspend all business rates until the emergency is over.

The Government could also contribute the equivalent of jobseeker's allowance to affected companies while they are closed. That would prevent the loss of trained and experienced staff. On marketing funds, they could help to relaunch Devon in 2001. There is also the VAT problem, which could be alleviated by immediate suspension of VAT on entry tickets to tourist attractions until the end of October.

Have those measures been thought about? The Government have to take action, because my area is bleeding to death—not because it has to, but because of totally false and conflicting information that people do not understand and cannot grasp. The Government may not be responsible for this appalling disease, but they are responsible for not clearly stating what the situation is.

I ask the Minister to make perfectly plain in her winding-up speech exactly what the Government are doing to make people understand that south Devon is not closed for business, that the tourist attractions and hotels are open and that people can walk in the countryside without fear of prosecution or of encountering the problems associated with spreading foot and mouth. The Government have a responsibility to make a clear statement, but they have not done so.

11.47 am

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on initiating a debate on a matter that is crucial to all our constituencies in the south-west. Reference has been made to Cornwall, the South Hams and Torbay being disease free. That is true for the bulk of the end of the far south-west peninsula, including my constituency.

I want to make some brief points about the role of cities in the south-west in re-establishing confidence in tourism in a way that helps the countryside. Often, town is set against country, but nothing could better illustrate the way in which each relies on the other for a thriving economy than the current circumstances. The hon. Gentleman emphasised the scale of the tourism industry in the south-west, which is second to none in the United Kingdom in its importance to the economy.

The health of the economies of cities such as Plymouth depends on a thriving economy in the surrounding area. An example that came to my attention over the weekend was featured in our regional BBC television programme "Spotlight on Westminster". A fishing tackle business in Exeter street has just been decimated by the impact of the crisis on fishing in the surrounding area. There will be many more such examples unless we can get some confidence back in our tourism industry, but there is every reason to expect that we can achieve that, and the historic cities of the south-west have a key role to play.

Disease-free areas such as those to which hon. Members have referred can become bases from which tourists can undertake visits with confidence and we must provide imaginative, up-to-date signposts to the other facilities that are open for business in affected areas. I recommend that my hon. Friend the Minister work with all the people who, I know, are beavering away on the local taskforce to emphasise that ours is not a can't-do peninsula, but a can-do peninsula. I often refer to Plymouth as a can-do city and I shall give brief examples to illustrate that.

I believe that the Minister visited our area recently, and is aware of the importance of the national marine aquarium. The aquarium, which attracts some 400,000 visitors a year, demonstrates more than any other attraction in our city the magnificent experience that can be had. On 7 April, there will be a presentation entitled "The Jewels of Plymouth Sound", showing some of the creatures that can be seen on the shores of the west country—octopus, cuttlefish and, I understand, a fish called "Tom Pot blenny". The aquarium was featured in last Monday's edition of *The Daily Telegraph*.

Opposite the aquarium is Dartington Glass, which provides an important industry in the constituency of the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett).

I want the Minister to realise that such tourist attractions can be promoted in an upbeat way. They can serve as can-do signposts, encouraging people to visit Plymouth and Cornwall with confidence. Perhaps there could even be a twinning arrangement between industries and tourist attractions that are open for business, and others that are not so evidently in that position. Perhaps the aquarium and Dartington Glass, for instance, could signpost that Buckland Monochorum is very definitely open. It is a beautiful garden centre with one of the United Kingdom's finest gardens, which will be featured throughout the country on gardening programmes this summer.

Plymouth also offers much in the way of water sports, and, in the evenings, one of the country's pre-eminent regional theatres, the Theatre Royal. We should make much more use of such amenities. People often try to set town against country, but in the present circumstances we can help each other by being imaginative in promoting our area. The same is probably true of all our cities. The hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) said that hers had much to offer, but so have Bath, Bristol—with its splendid millennium projects—and Wells.

Let me make a final suggestion, which arises from an experience that I had. Earlier, someone referred to the advice that is given abroad. When I visited Turkey at about this time last year, I met members of the Turkish tourist industry. They were extremely concerned about information that we had posted on our Foreign Office

site describing the state of tourism in Istanbul, and mentioning the dangers of mugging and theft on the streets. They were at pains to demonstrate that that simply was not true.

I hope that the Minister can reassure us that not only our own sites and advice, but all web and internet information that is available across the world, are being monitored to identify both inaccurate information and opportunities to promote the can-do approach that we must make every effort to implement in the south-west peninsula in the next few days and weeks.

11.54 am

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). The debate could not be more timely.

My constituency—along with that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), and those of my hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) and for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser), who are also present—is well known to Members. We welcome the conferences of all three political parties nearly every year: we appreciate their business, and look forward to their return.

We in Bournemouth and Dorset have the greatest sympathy for our colleagues in tourism and farming in the south-west, who face devastation. No amount of compensation can make up for the trauma and loss that the rural economy is experiencing. Dorset has been fortunate so far, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West has said, we know from those who run smaller hotels and guest houses in Bournemouth that they are being hard hit by the closure of the New Forest, Hengistbury Head and the nature reserves along the River Stour.

I fear that the entire tourist industry will soon be hit as this national crisis develops. Given last year's fuel crisis, foot and mouth could not have come at a worse time for British tourism. Visitors to Britain are already in decline: there were 2 per cent. fewer last year than the year before, while the number continued to rise in Europe and throughout the world, by 6 and 7 per cent. respectively. Much of that is due to the strong pound, which I accept we can do little about. "You cannot buck the market," as someone once said. But the problem is also due to our high VAT, compared with the competition. We can do something about that, by doing what the French do and offering lower VAT rates for smaller hotels.

Having the most expensive petrol in the European Union does not help much either. The Government are, of course, entirely responsible for that.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Does my hon. Friend agree that the application of the minimum wage and the working-hours directive have had a very detrimental effect on small and medium-sized businesses in the south-west, compounding the problems that he has mentioned?

Mr. Atkinson: My hon. Friend is right. When faced with the national minimum wage, small businesses—especially those that the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell described as leading a hand-to-mouth existence—may choose to employ fewer staff, or even to go out of business.

It is clear that if British tourism is to maintain its vital contribution to the British economy, this Government and the next must restore our competitiveness with the rest of the world. During the present crisis, every little helps—for example, the "business as usual", and "the countryside is open" campaigns. However, as with farming, no quick fix can restore British tourism once the crisis is over. We shall need massive new investment, private as well as public.

The British Tourist Authority and the English Tourism Council, fully backed by the Government, need to plan now to re-promote tourism to Britain—especially in America and Europe, but also among our own people—as soon as the crisis is over. Those plans must not apply just to the areas that are hardest hit, or to those that have been in decline for many years, deserving as they are. Instead of assisting particular areas on the basis of European Union criteria, we should be helping particular industries in their entirety. Tourism, like farming, is one such industry.

A common tourism policy that does not discriminate between areas should not only invest in the regeneration of areas that have run down; it must invest in success, by which I mean resorts such as Bournemouth. To date, Bournemouth has done well to maintain investment from its own resources without major public funding or European Union assistance, but it remains a struggle. It is frustrating, given Bournemouth's courageous investment nearly 20 years ago in an international centre to encourage year-round conference and exhibition trade, to see Birmingham—along with Blackpool and other resorts—making similar investment with the help of considerable public and European funding. We in Bournemouth suffer as a result of unfair competition from subsidised competitors.

This year's standard spending assessment of nearly 6 per cent. for Brighton, compared with Bournemouth's 3.8 per cent.—which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West pointed out at Prime Minister's Question Time on 7 March, is responsible for an increase of nearly 10 per cent. in our council tax—encourages us to conclude that we are suffering from not just unfair competition, but political discrimination.

Mr. Butterfill: Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that we have the second-lowest police grant in the United Kingdom has forced our council tax payers to subsidise the police? That, too, has pushed up our council tax.

Mr. Atkinson: My hon. Friend is right, and I hope that his comments will be noted by council tax payers as another way in which this Government are discriminating against us.

Bournemouth is making the case to the Government for its development as Britain's world-class resort, based on its diverse range of markets and quality products that continue to receive so many national and international awards. I believe that the Minister was present, last month, when that campaign was launched. She will know that not only does Bournemouth have world-class potential, but that its surrounding sub-region includes the New Forest national park and the Dorset Jurassic coast—which is located in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset and is short-listed

[Mr. Atkinson]

as a world heritage site. As we all know, beyond Dorset lie the undoubted attractions of Somerset, Devon and Cornwall.

My appeal to the Minister is to use the opportunity of the crisis facing tourism as well as agriculture to begin to lay the foundations for a tourism strategy for England and Wales that is fair, does not discriminate, backs winners as well as losers and invests in success as well as failure, and to recognise the potential of Bournemouth not only by words and praise, but by deeds and funds.

12.1 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Tourism in the United Kingdom is worth about £61 billion. It is a growing industry, although it is not growing as fast here as it is in other countries. We always refer to it as a great growth industry, but the fact is that parts of the industry are in decline and have been for some time.

It is important to make it clear that there is a real difference between seaside resorts and rural tourism. Seaside resorts have been in decline for some time. On 4 December 1998, I was lucky enough to initiate an Adjournment debate on the problems facing seaside towns. The situation that I described in that debate has not changed. Seaside towns still have to contend with competition from package tours. They are end-of-the-line towns to which people go because there is something to visit and not simply because they want to go somewhere. They also have 180-degree economies, unlike market towns, which have 360-degree economies, and tend to be in peripheral parts of the United Kingdom. They have poor transport links and tend to have local government that has been underfunded for years.

Since that debate, various reports, studies and action plans have been published. However, we have seen little action. We have certainly not seen any money.

The tourist resorts themselves have done a great deal to try to diversify away from dependence on tourism. They have moved into the care homes sector, where they have experienced problems with social services funding. They have also moved into the language school sector. The schools have been a great success in many tourist resorts, but they have been hit hard by the foot and mouth crisis.

Seaside resorts have even become involved in high-tech industries. However, in the past five weeks, in my constituency and in that of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), 1,400 manufacturing jobs have been lost. On top of that has come foot and mouth, creating a sense of crisis. Indeed, with our football team at the bottom of the league, we are at rock-bottom.

The serious point is that we have had an urban White Paper and a rural White Paper and that we should now like to have a seaside resort White Paper. At last we have a Government who have recognised that seaside resorts have a problem and tweaked the lottery criteria to try to help. However, that is all they have done. We need more action—a need fuelled by the foot and mouth crisis.

There has been much investment in new tourism markets, but that investment irks many people from seaside towns. They do not object to the development of new farm-tourism markets or investment in attractions such as the national aquarium, which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) mentioned, or in other inner-city developments, but they do object to the fact that investment is being made in new markets in new tourism areas while the areas with experience in tourism are not receiving the same investment. For many of our seaside resorts, the difference in investment levels is making a bad situation worse. I believe that investment should match the level of tourism expertise.

The foot and mouth crisis has created some new problems. Other hon. Members have already mentioned the misrepresentation of the crisis in the south-west. As people cannot get to poor old Cornwall without going through Devon, Cornwall will have no chance at all if people are put off going to Devon. However, large parts of Devon are open for business. It is important that we concentrate on what is open, not on what is closed. Torbay is very much open for business, as are all the seaside resorts around the country.

There are various problems in respect of how rural tourism and seaside tourism are treated. For example, it has been acknowledged that rural tourism has problems, and the Government have said that they will provide assistance to deal with them. Additionally, the banks have said that they will help rural businesses, although we shall have to wait and see whether that happens. Moreover, this morning, South Western Electricity said that it will help farmers and farming businesses. Our regional newspaper is even running a "green welly day" campaign to help rural areas.

It is right for organisations to take such action. However, when a hotel loses a booking, there is no compensation. When a guest house goes out of business, there is no Government support. There is no "yellow flip-flop day" for landladies and other people working in tourism in my constituency, but perhaps there should be. There has to be some recognition that we are all in this together and that the assistance that is available should extend well beyond the rural areas and into the seaside areas.

We have to advertise and inform people about the real situation. Today, I spoke to a publisher and was told that, for about £1.5 million, he could produce and distribute to every one of the United Kingdom's 23 million households a four-page newspaper to get the message to everyone that they should come to the seaside resorts—particularly, I should hope, to Devon and Torbay. I believe that £1.5 million is nothing compared with the sums that are being lost. It is estimated that foot and mouth is costing my constituency about £3 million to £4 million per week in lost tourism revenue. As the Minister said, across the south-west, £17 million is being lost each week.

We need immediate cash flow assistance, as is being provided in rural areas. In the medium term, we need a major marketing relaunch of the British tourism industry and particularly of the seaside tourism industry. In the long term, we must examine the infrastructure—rail, road and air links—of our tourism resorts, particularly the coastal resorts. We should also build on the expertise and tradition of the industry in areas that have welcomed visitors down the ages. If we are to expand into new markets, let us have the same

investment levels in the established areas and not leave them out on a limb. Tourism is all that some areas have, and tourism is in serious trouble.

12.7 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on securing this timely debate. He and other hon. Members have given examples of the problems that they have experienced in their south-west constituencies. They have also used the widest definition of the south-west that we could have hoped for. The south-west is a massive tourist area. Recently, South West Tourism produced figures stating that, in the south-west, the industry is estimated to be worth about £6 billion annually. Additionally—I had not appreciated this—about 25 per cent. of United Kingdom domestic tourism spending is spent in the south-west.

It is therefore not surprising that hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have said that, in the past four or five weeks, as the foot and mouth crisis has taken hold, tourism businesses in their constituencies have been devastated by the cancellation of bookings and the loss of visitors who may have planned on staying for a day, an evening or a short break. The crisis has put off visitors both from within Britain and from overseas. Many of the businesses affected are small and medium-sized, and they cannot withstand the difficulties with cash flow that they are experiencing.

The Minister could not attend the British travel trade fair seminar last week, as she was promoting Britain in the United States, although her Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed), was there. The interesting point was made that many charities are also affected, especially the Youth Hostels Association.

I remember many happy days spent youth hostelling in the south-west, in the constituencies of some of the hon. Members present for this debate. I travelled by bicycle—I am sure that there is a story in that that the media might like to take up—but the point is that charities, too, are in financial difficulties. The problem is widespread.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I should declare a non-pecuniary interest, in that I am a vice-president of the Youth Hostels Association. The hon. Gentleman's analysis is spot-on. Does he accept that the rates relief being given to businesses is of no use to charities? That is a particular problem in the south-west.

Mr. Greenway: I agree: the charities already get that relief. The hon. Gentleman will know that the YHA already has a capital structure plan in place, and I hope that it will be possible to find other ways to help it and similar charities. The effects of the crisis will be devastating. We want young people to get out into the open air, which is what I enjoyed when I was young. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

South West Tourism has made it clear that the losses are cataclysmic. It estimates losses for March alone at between £70 million and £80 million, and this month's losses are likely to be as much as £125 million. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) said, Easter will be a watershed for many businesses.

However, all the hon. Members who have contributed to the debate have emphasised that there remains a lot for people to see and do in the west country. Much of the coast is not affected, and the numbers of visitors going to attractions make the point graphically. For example, the Roman baths and pump room in Bath normally get 905,000 visitors a year. Although not quite in the million club, the attraction draws a staggering number of people.

Other attractions, such as Crealy Country in Exeter, Flambards theme park, and the Woodlands leisure park in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, also draw huge numbers of people. The national marine aquarium in Plymouth gets more than a third of a million visitors every year, and almost a quarter of a million people visit Bristol's museum and art gallery. Those examples demonstrate that there are places for people to visit that are unaffected by foot and mouth, and we should promote them.

I was also favourably surprised to learn that the Tate gallery in St. Ives—which I do not think is in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler)—gets 180,000 visitors a year. There are no problems at all with foot and mouth in that part of the world.

Mr. Steen: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister has a serious obligation to the House and the country to make a clear and unequivocal statement about what land can be walked on and where people can go? Is not the present muddle inexcusable?

Mr. Greenway: I agree, and I shall speak about that in a moment, but first I wish to touch on zoos, a matter in which I have a constituency interest. The west country has several zoos of national importance—at Bristol, Paignton and Newquay—and it also contains the Combe Martin wildlife park, and Longleat, with its famous lions. There is a similar zoo and theme park in my constituency: Flamingo Land draws more than a million visitors a year.

Some zoos have closed voluntarily, while others have been closed for the winter period. Flamingo Land is due to reopen on Sunday 1 April, but it has received no advice from MAFF about what to do. Farmers with property surrounding zoos are petrified that people will bring foot and mouth and that their animals will be affected. Therefore, I hope that the Minister will help zoos and wildlife parks throughout the south-west. Will she ensure that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is aware of the problems that those attractions face? They need urgent advice and action on their behalf.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) made a significant contribution to the debate. I enjoyed meeting the tourism people in Bournemouth last autumn, and I hope that he will let me know how the area's world-class destination campaign is progressing. I was greatly attracted by what the local tourism industry was trying to do.

We welcome the Government's announcement of a business rates scheme, although it is limited and will not greatly help the major attractions, which have rateable values way in excess of £12,000. This morning, I was surprised to discover that the rateable value of Flamingo

[Mr. Greenway]

Land is £363,000—up by 51 per cent. this year. I dare say that attractions in the south-west area are similarly affected.

We welcome the rates announcement, but the Government need to go further. They should support businesses with cash flow problems with interest-free loans, as proposed by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell in effect supported that suggestion in his opening remarks. We would expect a reasonable ceiling to be fixed, perhaps of £10,000. Our calculations suggest that a loan scheme would require an outlay of around £500 million, although only the interest-free element would cost the Exchequer in the long run. Such a scheme would make a huge difference to many small concerns.

The Minister for the Environment has suggested that help would be given with regard to postponing value-added tax, national insurance and pay-as-you-earn payments, but the anecdotal evidence is that that help is not being given. One person apparently told his local Customs and Excise office that he had been informed that he did not have to pay his VAT bill, only to receive the response that the office had not heard anything about the scheme. Clear instructions must be issued in that regard.

We welcome what the Prime Minister has said today, but the message must be clear that visitors must keep away from livestock. An element of confusion is still apparent in the message being given out by the Government. The problem is not confined to areas that have foot and mouth, as areas without the disease are also affected. Cornwall, Dorset and south Devon do not have cases of foot and mouth, and they do not want it.

The key is to keep people away from livestock while promoting those attractions that people can attend. For example, local education authorities must stop cancelling school visits and Government Departments must stop cancelling conferences.

I shall conclude with the four requirements that I believe that the Government must meet above all else. First, they must eradicate foot and mouth disease, as the tourism industry knows better than anyone. Secondly, the Government need to open up rural assets such as the coastal paths as soon as it is safe to do so. Thirdly, they must give more funding to the English Tourism Council, and to the regional and sub-regional tourism organisations. Finally, the British Tourist Authority must have a budget and a plan—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East said—to re-promote and re-brand Britain when the crisis is over.

12.18 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on securing this debate, which could not be more apt. The presence of so many hon. Members shows that the House is very concerned about the situation in the tourism industry.

I shall not refer by name to every hon. Member who contributed, as there is not much time left and there are many important matters to deal with. However, I reassure all hon. Members that I came to this debate from a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing street; he understands clearly—as do we all—the impact on the tourism industry. We want to do what we can to help.

The first priority, of course, has to be to get foot and mouth under control—whatever it takes. That is not only in the interest of the farming industry; we are now aware that it is in the interest of many people. As Tourism Minister, I am sad that the importance of the tourism industry to the local, regional and national economies should have been brought to the fore in this way. However, I am glad that it has been brought to the fore, because now people understand. Rural tourism is worth £12 billion a year; nationally, tourism is worth £64 billion and employs almost 2 million people. It is the fastest growing industry in the world and, perhaps most important, we estimate that one in four of all new jobs created during the past 10 years were in tourism, hospitality and related activities. I reassure everyone that we understand the importance of the industry. I shall deal with what must be the main priorities—what people want most of all.

When I went to Devon, I visited the constituency of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) and went to the tourist information centre. I visited a hotel on the edge of the national park. There was no reason why people should not go to it, but, because they were confused, it had been empty for two weeks and the proprietor estimated that she had lost about £50,000. It is clear that better and more accurate information has to go out to people.

Today, my Department is issuing clearer guidance as to what can and cannot be done. We have set up a website to co-ordinate all the websites; my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) mentioned the need for that, and "www.co-ordination.gov.uk" does so. If it does not, please let me know so that we can look at it again. There is a helpline—0845 607 1071—to give people information about what they can and cannot do. The regional tourist boards and information centres will help as well.

Mr. Ian Bruce: In effect, everyone is being told, "Keep off the grass" because there might be animals nearby, yet almost all my tourism businesses rely on holiday camps and campsites that have often been grazed by sheep, but where there is no foot and mouth. Is the Minister saying that once livestock have been moved from such land, it is safe to go there and that we should encourage people to do so?

Janet Anderson: The short answer is "Yes, it is", although I shall have to check. One of the problems with tourism is that so many issues and policies that impact on it are matters for other Departments—although I do not make that point as a cop-out—so my understanding is that the advice being issued by MAFF is

> "Don't go on farmland or open country or walk dogs, even on a lead, unless you are sure that the land isn't used by cows, pigs, sheep, goats or deer."

I think that once the livestock have been moved off the land, there is less of a problem.

Many hon. Members referred to footpaths. I am pleased that, as they may know, the current restrictions on rural rights of way expire on 31 March. Today, Suffolk and North Lincolnshire announced the

reopening of some of their footpaths. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, who heads the rural taskforce established by the Prime Minister, has ordered a ring round of all county councils to ask them which footpaths are open and which paths they can open and to make a health risk assessment because we want more paths open. We very much want the message that Britain is open for business to go out. I understand—not least from my visit to Devon—how important the coastal footpaths are.

We are pleased that the National Trust has announced that it has already opened 160 of its properties. English Heritage will open 200 on 1 April. British Waterways is considering what it can do. We are putting the emphasis on the fact that Britain is open for business.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) mentioned that I could not be at Birmingham last week. I am sorry about that, but I had taken it upon myself to make a two-day visit to the United States. We went to New York; we held media interviews back-to-back; we talked to the travel trade press and the tour operators. I am very glad that we did so, because they were obviously under a misapprehension. The United States is so important to us—it is our most important market. Last year, 4 million visitors came from it to the UK; they spent £2.5 billion.

One problem is that people in the United States confuse foot and mouth—or hoof and mouth, as they call it—with BSE or mad cow disease. They thought that they could not eat our food or drink our water. At a lunch with the travel trade press, I listed all the places that are still open and told them, "There are all sorts of things you can still do in Devon and Cornwall." There are numerous examples, such as the Eden project or the national marine aquarium, which I have visited, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy).

I referred to several cities that American tourists like to visit and pointed out that they were all open for business. A journalist said, "Yes, but how do you get from one to the other?" I replied that our roads are not closed and that our public transport system is still working—*[Interruption.]* It may come as a surprise to hon. Members to learn that people in the United States like our public transport system; they think that it is better than theirs.

I had to reassure people that there is not a funeral pyre of animals in every field and that we are talking about only a small percentage of our livestock. I hope that that message has got across.

Hon. Members referred to school visits. We have made an approach to colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment pointing out that clearer information is needed. I am told that the DFEE has issued advice to local education authorities and schools that they must take decisions in the light of local situations, taking into account advice from the MAFF chief vet on visiting the countryside. Perhaps clearer advice is needed, so I shall see whether that can be provided.

In the short time remaining, I want to deal specifically with the south-west, which is one of the country's most important tourist regions. It follows that tourism is one of the most important sectors in that area. The hon. Member for Ryedale cited the relevant figures, so I shall not repeat them.

There is no doubt that the foot and mouth outbreak has hit the rural tourism industry in England hard. South West Tourism estimates that losses are running at about £20 million a week. When the debate finishes, I shall visit Cornwall where I shall stay until tomorrow afternoon to see the situation for myself.

Mr. Steen: Do not go by train.

Janet Anderson: I am flying to Newquay.

Mr. Steen: That is much better.

Janet Anderson: I am pleased to hear that.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: There are two key issues that would make an immediate difference. The first is to sort out the advertising campaign; as I said, words—the black and white method—do not do the job. Secondly, as the Minister is flying to Cornwall, she will avoid the problems on First Great Western, but perhaps she could ask her team to do something to tackle the appalling situation on the railways. Not only do trains not run into Cornwall, but even when they do, they are old ones.

Janet Anderson: I know what the hon. Gentleman means, because I have travelled on those trains. His example is good. I cannot go anywhere to talk about tourism without someone raising the transport issue. That is why one of the most important initiatives taken by the Department, since I have held my current position, is to set up an annual tourism summit with Ministers from every Department. Two summits have been held—the most recent was on 6 March. They are tightly-knit meetings that enable my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and me to tell our ministerial colleagues that when they take decisions about transport, planning or employment law—to which the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) referred—they should remember the impact on tourism.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Prime Minister has set up the rural taskforce, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, which is meeting as we speak. My right hon. Friend has announced to Parliament a preliminary package of measures for which businesses that have been badly hit by the foot and mouth outbreak will be able to apply. Of course, that does not mean that we are not continuing to monitor the situation to see whether more needs to be done. We are in no doubt about the cash flow problems faced by such businesses because there is no income. We want to do all that we can to get the visitors back. I shall visit the Lake district to help with that.

Mr. Steen: What a nice job.

Janet Anderson: It is a nice job. Usually, we do not have crises in my job, although when they arise we get to grips with them. I reassure the hon. Gentleman on that point.

[Janet Anderson]

The package announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment includes help through the rates system, including enhanced discretionary and mandatory rate relief, although I take on board the comments of the hon. Member for Ryedale on visitor attractions. There will be help through the tax system, including the offer to defer payment of taxes and national insurance contributions and the measures on VAT. If that message has not got through to Customs and Excise, we need to ensure that it does. I thank him for raising that issue. With the Small Business Service, we are working on a national helpline to give advice to small businesses.

We are trying to make procedures in the Department of Social Security as fast and flexible as possible. We are increasing Government support for the rural stress network and matching donations made by the voluntary sector.

I will take up the point that the Youth Hostels Association is a charity to see whether we can do anything more about that.

In government, we shall do all that we can to continue to monitor the situation and to help the businesses that are affected and, ultimately, to get visitors back to the areas where it is safe for them to go—to give out the message that Britain is still open for business.

Fire Stations (Wirral)

12.30 pm

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South): I should first express my appreciation of the opportunity to debate this issue, as, among the many public services, that provided by the fire service must rank as one of the most important, with its major roles of dealing with fires and other emergencies, such as road traffic accidents; advising on fire prevention measures and encouraging their implementation; and carrying out inspections for fire safety certification. Those services are provided by trained personnel and paid for through the public purse.

As a service funded by the public, it is only right and proper that the responsible statutory body, the fire service authority, includes representatives of the public as well as representatives of the professionals who provide the service. In principle, that should ensure that the service provided meets with public approval and professional agreement.

My reason for asking the Minister to look at the role played by the fire service authorities, and particularly by the Merseyside fire authority, is that I believe that the checks and balances built into the system of representation may be insufficiently robust, with the result that an authority may take decisions that satisfy neither the public nor a substantial number of the professionals in the service—the firefighters. That is the situation that has arisen on Merseyside as a result of the representatives of the public on the fire authority possibly being out of touch with public opinion, and the opinions of the senior professionals perhaps being unduly weighted by factors removed from the primary purpose of saving lives and property.

Because the Merseyside fire authority has reached a decision that is greatly at variance with public opinion in my local community, I hope to persuade the Minister that it must be carefully considered and, I hope, reversed. The decision that has prompted my raising this matter is the fire authority's decision to reduce the manning of fire stations in the Wirral from 24-hour cover to daytime cover, with night-time cover being based on fire crews on call. One of those stations is in Heswall, in my constituency, where I live.

First, I shall set out the main arguments, as I see them, of the fire authority in favour of its proposal, together with some comments of my own. Before I start, we should all be clear in our minds that, whatever rationalisation is presented for the changes, the underlying motive should not be merely to save money.

To put the main argument baldly, cutting out 24-hour manning reduces staffing costs substantially. The authority argues that the resulting savings in the running costs of the two stations will allow it to shift the emphasis from firefighting to fire prevention. It proposes to fit, without charge, smoke alarms in all the houses throughout the area for which it is responsible. It believes that that provides better value for money. If that argument were reduced to absurdity, we would have masses of smoke alarms, wonderful value for money and no fire stations.

I, of course, have no objection to the devoting of more effort to fire prevention; indeed, I welcome it. But fitting fire alarms does not of itself prevent fires. It merely

reduces the risk of catastrophic consequences should a fire break out. In any case, although fire alarms reduce the risk of loss of life in the event of fire, they require regular maintenance.

For example, and obviously, batteries must be fitted at regular intervals—a task which is unlikely to be undertaken by the fire service. That may sound like a trivial point, but if the authority seriously believes that fitting fire alarms is a significant contribution to safety and will reduce the need for call-out of firefighters, it must recognise that installation of fire alarms is not a one-off process. It, or someone, must ensure that the alarms remain fully operational. I have not yet heard from the authority its long-term plans on this matter, or the costs that will be involved; but, above all, whatever the arguments on detail, the point remains that fire prevention is complementary to firefighting, not an alternative to it.

What causes public concern is, of course, the closure of the fire stations at night, particularly as Merseyside, according to a statistic supplied by the fire authority, has the highest rate of fire deaths in the United Kingdom: 20 a year. Whatever the relative differences in fire statistics as between night and daytime, what are not the same are the consequences of an emergency, particularly in the case of a property fire. People are not around to see a fire in its early stages, and people are often asleep, so the fire gets a strong hold before the emergency services can be alerted.

The authority argues that emergency cover will still be available at night as the firefighters will be required to live within four minutes of the station and be ready to turn out should the need arise. That seems a rather theoretical notion. First, will firefighters be able to find affordable housing within four minutes' access time, by moving house if necessary? Heswall is a relatively expensive place to live. There is a real danger of arriving at the ludicrous situation of losing experienced staff and gaining inexperienced ones, merely as a result of that condition of employment.

Secondly, will firefighters really be able to get up in the middle of the night, get dressed and be at the station within four minutes of the alert, whatever they might have been able to do under ideal practice conditions? I am assured that firefighters are well used to that, but what happens if they get up to find their car windows covered in ice or if they have to drive to the station in thick fog or have some other unforeseen problem? At best, the procedure will add four minutes to the interval between receiving the alert and arrival at the emergency—four minutes that could mean the difference between life and death, or between minor and permanent injury. The latter reservation is shared by those at the coal face: the firefighters.

However, it would not be fair if I did not refer to what some people would regard as a powerful argument in favour of the proposal—the fact that many stations throughout the country operate the proposed manning system. In many cases, however, purpose-built housing is available for firefighters in the immediate vicinity of the station, so that the time taken to respond to an emergency is less of an issue.

My counter-argument is to ask, why degrade an excellent service to save money when the public support the expenditure? Moreover, I understand that the normal daytime crewing hours in other stations on daytime manning elsewhere are 9 am to 6 pm. Those hours do not fit the peak hours for call-outs at Heswall, which are 9 am to 11 pm.

Many would argue that the proposed changes to manning would result in fire cover arrangements below the national standard. Moreover, the performance of Merseyside fire service was, in my view, already deteriorating. From April 1999 to March 2000 inclusive, there were in Merseyside increases of 37.7 per cent. over the previous year in the number of fires, of more than 12 per cent. in other emergency incidents, of 11.3 per cent. in dwelling fires, and of 14.6 per cent. in the average time taken to carry out inspections for the issue of fire safety certificates.

In addition, the inspectorate, in the principal inspection report of 9 June 2000, sent a clear message in respect of its

"reservations over the intention to review individual station areas rather than discrete functions/services".

Section 2.8 of the executive summary drew attention to the

"difficulty in validating the Brigade personnel data, which added to the problem of determining the current establishment as approved by the Secretary of State following a number of Section 19 applications over recent years".

Crystal clear guidance is contained in the statement:

"There are opportunities to reduce the 'ridership factor', which could result in considerable savings without changing crewing policies or the current number of appliances".

In other words, there is ample scope to improve efficiency without shifting to day manning, by looking at other areas. The inspectorate's views on that could not be more explicit.

I have also been told, albeit indirectly, that some members of the fire authority have said that, had they been informed of the substantial decrease in the yearly target in respect of fire cover from the national average of 96 per cent. to 90 per cent. by October 2000, they would have voted against the decision taken in November 2000 to close Heswall fire station at night. Comparing like with like on a variety of counts, Merseyside can be seen as the worst performing fire authority in a metropolitan conurbation, so why seek to make it worse, as would happen under the proposals?

I shall now deal with the consultation process. Under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947, there must be adequate consultation before final decisions are taken. In fact, I understand that the Home Secretary considers it desirable that the fire authority should not only consult as appropriate, but consider any representation that it receives. A local meeting, convened by the Heswall and District Business Association in conjunction with the Heswall Society, was held at Heswall in October of last year; the fire authority was represented, together with the Merseyside branch of the Fire Brigades Union and, of course, many members of the general public.

It is fair to say that, at that meeting, the fire authority representatives merely reiterated their case, claiming that the proposed changes would not lead to an inferior service. The record of that meeting shows that none of the many members of the public present were convinced by the arguments produced and agreed unanimously to

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oppose the plans to downgrade the status of Heswall fire station. The fire authority also organised meetings at which the tenor of the argument was the same.

Lest it be thought that those meetings were in some way unrepresentative of the local view, let me remind the Minister that I have already presented to the House a petition, signed by more than 2,000 residents—there could have been many more—who object to the proposal. I have yet to meet anyone in Heswall who favours it. I have heard of someone with such a view, but I have not met that person. I have received numerous letters expressing objections to the proposal. Wirral metropolitan borough council has reservations and has expressed its concern that the fire authority is unable to guarantee that all the smoke alarms would be installed before the changeover in shift pattern took place, if it took place.

I feel bound to mention another issue, given that it has been raised by several Heswall residents. Many of them think it unfair that the Heswall station should be downgraded to release money to fund fire prevention throughout Merseyside. As substantial contributors, as council tax payers, to the local council's finances and, through precepts, to the other statutory bodies on Merseyside, they often already feel that they do not get their fair share of the benefits. They question the validity of losing a valuable amenity—the 24-hour manning of their local fire service—so as to provide alarms elsewhere. Others may not wholly agree with that view, but many people hold it strongly.

The Minister will recall that the fire authority should not only consult as appropriate, but consider any representation that it receives. I hope that I have made it clear that there is no sign that the fire authority has taken any account of local residents' views. The consultation process is regarded locally as a sham and as having been predetermined; the conclusion was fixed in some of the circulars that were issued in advance. None of the points made at the meetings or elsewhere have been met, or apparently even genuinely considered. The fire authority's decision-making process is thus flawed. When the representatives of the public do not represent the public view, and when the points made in consultations are ignored, the whole process is fundamentally unsound.

I shall summarise my views. The proposal to downgrade Heswall fire station is based on far too many dubious propositions. The consultation process has revealed that the fire authority has already decided to proceed with the proposal, so the consultation was not at all genuine. The decisions reached by the fire authority have taken no account of local residents' fears. We, in Heswall, have a particularly high preponderance of people aged over 60. So I ask the Home Office and the Minister to reiterate, as I have been told previously, that they are still open to receive representations. The Minister has agreed to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford), together with the Heswall Society and Heswall and District Business Association; I look forward to that meeting and to advancing further arguments.

I ask the Minister also to reflect on the points that I have made today and, I hope, having done so, to support my plea for that local issue to be referred back to the fire authority for further consideration; especially, I hope that he will insist that the authority do more to meet the wishes of local residents. I also ask him to look at the wider issue to consider how we might ensure that more weight is given to local opinion when such decisions, which directly affect their communities, are taken in future.

12.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) on securing this debate on the staffing hours at fire stations in the Wirral.

I apologise for the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), cannot be here today because of a long-standing prior commitment. I am happy to stand in for him. I shall pass the full text of the debate to him for his attention, and I shall discuss it with him. He has asked me to confirm that my hon. Friend is right; he has agreed to discuss the situation further and in more detail with a delegation of the type that my hon. Friend mentions. So I hope that further clarification of the issues discussed in this debate will be given at that meeting.

I fully understand the concern that my hon. Friend has expressed today about the proposal by the Merseyside fire and civil defence authority to change the crewing arrangements at Heswall and West Kirby fire stations from whole-time to day crewing, but, before I respond in detail, I should like to set the issue in context.

We have good reason to be proud of the fire service in this country, because it achieves consistently high standards of performance, often in difficult and hazardous circumstances. The fire service's high level of performance in responding to fire calls has been confirmed year after year by the Audit Commission. The latest figures published by the commission show that, in 1999–2000, the fire service nationally met attendance standards in responding to fire calls on 96 per cent. of occasions. In Merseyside, the standards were met on 96.4 per cent. of occasions—slightly above the average.

The inspectorate of fire services is considering, with the Merseyside fire authority, how it proposes to address the issues raised in the inspection report about attendance standards, such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend. I confirm that the ability to meet attendance standards in Heswall and West Kirby is one of the key issues on which the inspectorate will provide advice to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in relation to the authority's application under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947.

In general, the fire service is to be commended for the range of community-based initiatives it undertakes across the country to promote fire safety in the home. With the full support of fire service interests, we are seeking to make a commitment to prevention as the first line of defence against fire, to develop a clearer vision for the service and to set out a clear strategy with targets for improvement.

We want progress to be measured against that commitment. We have therefore publicly set a target of reducing the average number of accidental house fire

deaths by 20 per cent. over five years. We believe that the current strategy is paying dividends and we are seeing a pleasing reduction in the number of people being killed and injured in fires in the home.

I confirm that my hon. Friend's remarks about fire prevention being complementary, not an alternative to fire safety, are absolutely correct, and represent the Government's position. He refers to the absurdity of having smoke alarms and no fire stations, but that is not our aspiration; the two must go side by side. We should not undervalue the important role that community fire safety can play in our approach. In particular, the Merseyside fire and civil defence authority has an excellent programme of activity that is designed to reduce the number of preventable dwelling fires and the deaths and injuries that they can cause.

I now turn to the case of the Heswall and West Kirby fire stations that my hon. Friend raised. In November last year, the authority submitted an application under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947 seeking approval to change the crewing arrangements at Heswall and West Kirby fire stations from whole-time to day crewing. The application was made following a special meeting of the Merseyside fire and civil defence authority on 6 November at which responses to a consultation begun on 7 August were considered in detail.

I can confirm that Merseyside fire and civil defence authority is defined as a best value authority under the Local Government Act 1999. It therefore has a duty to secure continuous improvement to the way in which it exercises its functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

As I said, the application was made following a meeting of the authority on 6 November and, under section 19(4) of the Fire Services Act 1947, a fire authority cannot reduce the number of fire stations, fire appliances or firefighting posts without the express consent of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. The authority's proposed change of crewing arrangements at Heswall and West Kirby fire stations would result in a net loss of 14 posts at each station and the proposal therefore requires such consent.

My right hon. Friend has a specific role in considering section 19 applications. He can grant approval only if he is satisfied that the proposals have been sufficiently widely publicised, and in appropriate detail and with adequate time to enable any interested party to make representations; that the representations have been considered by the authority; and that Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services advises that the national standards of fire cover will be maintained. My right hon. Friend has to take those three rigid requirements into account, and two of them relate to the nature of the consultation process.

The point about national standards of fire cover was specifically addressed in my hon. Friend's speech, and it is for the chief fire officer to put in place such crewing arrangements as, in his professional judgment, will best meet the authority's statutory responsibility to provide effective fire cover in Merseyside, in line with the national standards.

Day crewing means that professional firefighters are based at the fire station during the day and the same firefighters then provide cover from their homes at other times. To do so, they are linked by pager and they must be able to reach the fire station within four minutes. The four-minute period represents the actual travelling time between home and station, and it is fully tested by timed runs. This arrangement is used by many brigades without difficulty, and has been used for many years in many parts of the country where my hon. Friend's points about the weather and other issues are taken into consideration. However, I am happy to assure him that I shall pass on his remarks about the potential difficulties of the four-minute period to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and, through him, to the inspectorate. They will then be able to address the concerns that have been raised in the debate.

Whether day crewing is appropriate for Heswall and West Kirby is one of the issues to which Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services will give careful consideration when advising on the section 19 application. The other fire stations in the Wirral—Birkenhead, Wallasey, Upton and Bromborough—are crewed on a whole-time basis and will continue to be so.

On the consultation process, there is no statutory requirement on the authority to consult, but my right hon. Friend considers it important—he has said so on several occasions—that proper consultations be undertaken, so that he can be sure that his first duty, which is to ensure that the proposals have been sufficiently widely publicised, can properly be met.

I appreciate that the section 19 application submitted by Merseyside fire and civil defence authority regarding Heswall and West Kirby fire stations has raised considerable concern locally among residents and the business community. Concern has also been raised, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford), that the consultation process undertaken in Heswall and West Kirby by the authority has differed from the one in Formby for a separate but similar section 19 application. That application was approved earlier this month after lengthy consideration.

An inspector from Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services visited the brigade in February to examine the consultation process in detail. His conclusion, at that stage, was that appropriate consultation had been undertaken and that sufficient opportunity had been given for representations to be made. However, once a section 19 application is made, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will also take into account representations that are made directly. As I said at the beginning of my speech, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has indicated his willingness to meet my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral, South and for Wirral, West to take account of their representations as well as the points that have been made in the debate.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's primary concern is the maintenance of the national fire cover standards—that is the principal issue. Successive Secretaries of State have interpreted the duty to provide an efficient fire service against those standards. I can give an absolute assurance to my hon. Friend that my right hon. Friend and the Home Office will not approve any proposal unless we are entirely satisfied that national fire cover standards will be maintained.

All fire authorities are obliged to review regularly the fire risks in their area against the national standards to ensure that the brigade's deployment of resources is

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updated in the light of changing circumstances. It is important to emphasise that the standards are not just nationally recommended, but are nationally agreed in the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council for England and Wales and in the Scottish Fire Brigades Advisory Council—both constituted under the Fire Services Act 1947 to represent fire service interests in advising the Secretary of State.

The standards dictate the initial attendance to a fire in terms of number of appliances and speed of response. They rest on four main standards of service, according to the risk category of the area, and they assume for each category that a predetermined number of firefighting appliances should attend within a certain time.

The areas currently served by Heswall and West Kirby fire stations are a mixture of C risk, which includes suburbs of large towns and built-up areas of small towns, and D risk, which is mostly rural. The national standards provide that, in normal circumstances, a fire authority should respond to a fire call in a C risk area by sending one pumping appliance to reach the incident within 10 minutes, and, in a D risk area, by sending one pumping appliance to reach it within 20 minutes.

I understand that it is, in fact, the Merseyside brigade's policy to send a minimum of two appliances to all property fires regardless of risk category, so it is ahead of the national standards. That policy will be unaffected by the proposed change of crewing arrangements at Heswall and West Kirby. Obviously, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will want to be assured that that point is clarified by Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services, and its report will assess whether the area covered by the two fire stations has been correctly categorised for risk and whether the brigade will continue to be able to meet the standards of fire cover.

As I have said, I fully understand the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South and his constituents have about the quality of their local fire service and about whether it will be affected by the authority's application to change the crewing arrangements at the two fire stations. We shall seek advice from Her Majesty's inspectorate and we shall take full account of representations, together with the points that have been made in this debate.

My hon. Friend's driving commitment is to ensure that national standards of fire cover are appropriately maintained, and I assure him that they will be. It is our intention, policy goal and ambition to achieve that side by side with improving significantly the ability to prevent fire in the first place, and to take the steps that he described that would enable us to achieve that aim. The two arms of our policy will work in parallel, without one being carried out at the expense of the other. The most effective way to reduce the number of fire accidents and fatalities is to have both arms of the policy working together, and that is the overall context in which we approach the problem.

I have tried to cover the points that my hon. Friend has made in the debate. As I have said, he will have the opportunity to discuss them directly with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary at an appropriate time.

Hospital Transport (Gloucestershire)

12.59 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am grateful to have an opportunity to debate the problems of hospital transport in Gloucestershire. I am also grateful to the Minister for being here to reply.

The provision of hospital transport for patients in my constituency is inadequate. I have received a flood of complaints from constituents who rely heavily on the provision of transport to and from hospital for appointments for in-patient and out-patient treatment. I shall focus on key aspects of the system that are letting patients down. I want to question the national and local criteria for assessing the patients who receive national health service-provided transport and I am concerned about the funding settlement for Gloucestershire health authority, which has had to divert money from the provision of transport to meet other Government health targets. I shall cite several constituency cases to illustrate the problem and explain that current criteria are incorrect because decisions are taken on a patient's medical condition, not on his or her capacity to travel.

I have corresponded many times with the Department of Health about the problem. It says that if a patient has a medical need for transport, it should be provided free of charge as part of NHS treatment. No one would disagree with that. It also states that medical need depends on the medical condition of a patient, the availability of public and private transport and the distance travelled. However, the principle that should apply is that each patient should be able to reach hospital in a reasonable time and in reasonable comfort without detriment to their medical condition. My examples make it clear that that is not the case. I will name only one person because others who have corresponded with me are elderly and worried about their names being divulged.

Mrs. Jackson is 83 years old. I have been in touch with her regularly in recent months. She had to go into hospital for an eye operation and also suffers from angina, but, because she is not in a wheelchair, she does not come within the C2 category for provision of free transport. A 67-year-old patient was sent to Cheltenham general hospital when she cut her leg badly. The hospital refused to provide transport home despite the fact that she suffers from a varicose ulcer on her other leg and is in great pain when she walks. The size of my constituency means that taxi fares are expensive. I met an 89-year-old lady who was forced to pay a £45 taxi fare to and from hospital. One constituent is crippled with arthritis and could not afford to pay the fares. Her daughter had to take her to and from hospital and, on her last visit, had to wait from 8 am to 5 pm to bring her home.

Those cases graphically illustrate the way in which our elderly patients are being treated by the NHS. According to the Department of Health:

"if a patient has a medical need for transport, then transport should be provided free of charge as part of NHS treatment".

How does that square with my constituency cases? The Minister needs to take urgent action to address that shameful problem. The health authority cites funding as the main problem and it is the Minister's responsibility to address that.

Gloucestershire health authority has introduced a new set of criteria for assessing whether people need transport. It provides transport for walking patients under the C1 category in four circumstances: first, if a patient is registered blind or partially sighted; secondly, if he or she has a combination of poor sight and total hearing loss; thirdly, if the individual is undertaking oncology treatment; or, fourthly, if he or she is receiving peritoneal dialysis treatment.

Under the separate C2 category, transport will be provided only for patients who are unable to walk and require the assistance of two people from their home to get them to the vehicle and back. Transport will also be provided for patients who are confined to their wheelchair and must be transported in it. The final category includes patients on stretchers who must be transported completely or mainly lying down.

In other words, Gloucestershire health authority is able to provide transport only for those who are deaf, blind or a combination of both, on a stretcher or receiving oncology treatment or treatment for coronary heart disease. We know that many sick people have serious conditions but do not fulfil those criteria. They, too, should be eligible for transport.

As a result of those restrictive criteria and the need to redirect funding, patients are not being treated with respect. The criteria unacceptably exclude many patients who desperately need hospital transport. Gloucestershire cannot provide that service because it is obliged to meet national targets that unfortunately do not recognise rural sparsity and the transport infrastructure of the area. There is little value in diverting money to meet national targets if that undermines other essential services that the NHS was set up to deliver. Hospital transport is an essential service for patients in my sparsely populated rural constituency. The Minister must recognise that they rely on it. There is often no suitable public transport for rural villages.

The Government have increasingly prescribed the way in which health funds can be spent by local health authorities. The problem is that the more that policies are prescribed, the less discretion the health authority has to meet the needs of patients in its area. Thus, spending on initiatives, however worthy, such as the waiting list initiative, ignores the clinical needs of health authorities and prevents them from having the freedom to spend money on local priorities, including hospital transport in Gloucestershire.

The Gloucestershire health authority has revealed that it cut funding for the provision of transport to meet other national targets. In September, the chairman of the health authority wrote to me stating that NHS resources have been made available to meet national priorities, such as improving services for people who suffer from coronary heart disease and mental illness and reducing waiting list times. I accept that those are laudable targets, but the health authority has had to adjust the criteria that determine whether patients in Gloucestershire receive hospital transport free of charge. The changes have saved £170,000 and NHS patient journeys have dropped from 200,000 in 1998-99 to approximately 135,000 in 1999-2000. I am all for saving money and for people providing their own transport when they can, but the criteria are too restrictive.

Health authorities with a market forces factor of 117 or higher are eligible to receive additional funding, especially for the recruitment and retention of nurses and doctors. The problem of funding Gloucestershire health authority has been a matter of extreme concern to me over several years and its solution is essential for the provision of hospital transport. Gloucestershire receives a lower weighting than it should because it is not considered to be an urban authority. That is because Gloucester and Cheltenham are six miles apart, but they have a high proportion of the council's population, so the authority is not considered to be rural. From a funding point of view, we are neither urban nor rural, so we get a poor deal from discretionary funding because of the market forces factor.

I represent 10 market towns covering almost 1,000 square miles of Gloucestershire, which at the extreme could be 30 miles from the district general hospital in Cheltenham. I say to the Minister in what I hope is non-partisan way that it is essential that, whoever is elected at the general election, the inequality of Gloucestershire's funding is addressed.

We should broaden the assessment criteria so that when a patient needs transport they will get it. The criteria must be based on the principle of the patient's capacity to travel and not just on their textbook medical condition. Funding should recognise the great distances that patients have to travel in rural areas and the poorer transport infrastructure in those areas. I make no political point about that; it is a fact of life that people in villages have little or no public transport to and from the local hospital.

Often, if there is transport, it does not operate at a convenient time to get people to their appointment, and if the appointment is delayed, it may not be available to take them back home. That is why the emphasis must be on capacity to travel and not just on medical condition. Common sense needs to be applied so that patients are not let down and harrowing cases such as those that I have cited do not happen in future, as I am sure everyone listening to the debate agrees.

I re-emphasise the point that we must treat elderly patients with dignity. According to Age Concern, almost one in three people in my constituency are pensioners, which is among the highest proportions in the country. The elderly can be very confused when they go to and from hospital. It is a stressful time, and it should be a fundamental principle of a decent society that we offer them the basic courtesy and respect of providing comprehensive hospital transport services. I hope that the Minister will recognise that human problem, and I look forward to her positive response.

1.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on securing the time to debate a topic that is clearly of considerable, long-standing concern to him. I note that, last year alone, he wrote to me on the subject and asked questions of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Before I deal with the patient transport service in Gloucestershire, I should like to explain a little about the Government's national policy. Although I do not

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

wish to be partisan or to score party political points, I point out that the guidelines were introduced in 1991 and have not been changed since, but there is the question of how they are implemented locally.

The NHS has a responsibility, which it has recognised, to provide transport to get patients to and from hospital if it is considered that their medical condition makes it necessary. That decision is made by a doctor or other health professional who decides whether there is a medical need for transport to be provided free of charge, as part of the patient's NHS treatment. In arriving at the decision, doctors or other health professionals must take into account the availability of private or public transport and the distance to be travelled by the patient. The transport infrastructure therefore informs that decision.

The principle that should apply is that patients should be able to reach hospital in reasonable time, in reasonable comfort and without detriment to their medical condition. The availability and suitability of alternative forms of transport vary from area to area and it is important that local arrangements cater for local circumstances. As a Member of Parliament for an urban area, I am aware that distances that appear small on a map may be terribly difficult to travel. Over the past decade, a wide variety of social, health and similar specialist transport schemes have been set up for different purposes.

There is no intention to undermine such services, but I believe that now may be the time to examine that provision. I strongly encourage all those providing transport for patients in the NHS, social services, local authorities and the voluntary and private sectors to take this opportunity to review their services together to ensure that people can access the range of services they require, that we can make the best use of health and other facilities and that all transport resources can be used most efficiently and effectively.

Having set the national scene within which the Gloucestershire patient transport service operates, I turn now to the service itself. It is important to point out that the service in Gloucestershire fully meets the standards that apply to the NHS throughout England. This debate is not about the quality of the service provided by the trust, but rather about who should receive that service. I see the hon. Gentleman nodding, so we agree on that point.

The patient transport service is too often seen as merely providing a bus service to hospitals, but it is an extremely important service which complements the emergency services of the ambulance trusts, and that additional role is often overlooked. The staff who provide the service are all trained in first aid. They provide care and possible intervention to patients whose medical condition is such that they need transport by the NHS. They also provide help and support to patients at a time when they are understandably anxious about their treatment and are feeling vulnerable.

The Gloucestershire Ambulance Service NHS trust considers the patient transport services vital to the operational needs of the service, particularly when dealing with major incidents such as train or coach crashes. The patient transport service can be called on in those circumstances to transport large numbers of walking wounded to hospital, allowing paramedics to concentrate on the treatment and care of the more seriously injured.

In addition, in of their normal duties, staff in the patient transport service are often the first on the scene of an accident where they can provide basic first aid, help and assistance until the paramedic crews arrive. A number of patient transport ambulances within Gloucestershire are equipped with defibrillation gear, which enables staff to treat suspected victims of cardiac arrest within the critical time. Patient transport staff may provide a first response to other life-threatening calls and help to stabilise patients before they are transported to the nearest accident and emergency department.

I stress that the patient transport service is not an add-on to the ambulance service; it plays an integral part in that service and we take it very seriously, as I know Gloucestershire does. Working in the service provides good experience and grounding to staff who wish to train to undertake accident and emergency ambulance duties in the future. It gives them a good opportunity to improve their driving skills, to gain experience in the handling and lifting of patients, to develop communication skills with patients, relatives and carers and to widen their knowledge of the care and treatment of a wide range of medical conditions.

As the hon. Gentleman stated, a review of patient transport services was undertaken in Gloucestershire in 1999. Its main finding was that there was considerable over-use of the service by patients who did not meet the criteria that apply to the NHS for access to patient transport services. The hon. Gentleman quoted reductions in some of the figures. In developing the NHS plan last year, we found huge variations in the delivery of services. We have to establish a common base, so Gloucestershire, rightly, reviewed its transport services.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady's point that hospital transport was being provided to people who did not need it. However, does she accept that cases such as those that I have cited today are unacceptable? Does she accept also that if there is discretion in the system, as there should be, it should be applied favourably to elderly people, first, because they are likely to be confused and anxious when they go to hospital, and secondly because there is a lack of rural transport in my big constituency?

Ms Stuart: I shall respond to those points.

The national guidelines call for the NHS to provide transport for those patients who have a medical need for such transport. In Gloucestershire, a considerable number of patients who had no medical need for transport to and from hospital received that transport none the less. Changes to the criteria have released £169,000 in the first full year of their operation; that money is now being used to provide health care for Gloucestershire.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about conflicting priorities: money is also being spent on reducing waiting lists and improving services. However, it is a matter of ensuring that all those things happen. To put it at its most extreme, it would be no good improving transport

services if hospital services were not improved at the same time. A balance has to be struck, part of which is to ensure that the right people get the right service.

I am advised that the local health economy has kept the criteria under continuous review and has already updated the policy to ensure that vulnerable groups, including the mentally ill and frequent attendees at hospital, such as patients having renal dialysis and cancer treatment, continue to receive NHS transport. Other exemptions are made on a case-by-case basis. If the hon. Gentleman believes that any of his constituents who should receive patient transport have not done so, I recommend that he contacts the trust involved and asks for a review of the individual cases. From my knowledge of some of the cases that he has raised with Ministers, I know that he has done that in the past. The system allows discretion to be exercised, but if that does not happen in certain cases, it must be investigated.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for her suggestion. I have indeed drawn cases to the attention of trusts. The problem is that, by the time a case has arisen, it is too late. Is she prepared to write to the trusts today, stating that I have brought the issue to her attention and expressing the Department's hope that in cases involving that discretion, the elderly in particular will in future be treated sympathetically?

Ms Stuart: I have found that, even when debates on such issues are sparsely attended here, all the health professionals concerned keenly read *Hansard* afterwards. In addition, I shall ensure that they are sent a copy of today's debate, so I am sure that the words uttered in the Chamber today will not go unnoticed in Gloucestershire.

To help to tackle specific cases, each trust in the county has appointed an officer who can permit exemptions to the usual criteria. An example of that exception would be a frail elderly person who encounters difficulty in using public transport or has no family support. The cases highlighted by the hon. Gentleman—those of Mrs. Jackson and the 67-year-old patient with a leg injury—appear on the face of it to be the sort that should be taken up.

I appreciate that, after the implementation of the new guidelines in 1999, there was some concern about the impact of the measures on voluntary transport providers, who play an important role. Local trusts are currently discussing future opportunities with the South Cotswold volunteer service and Gloucestershire county council.

The hon. Gentleman expressed concern about the perceived poor allocation to his local health authority. I should explain that the Department of Health uses a national weighted capitation formula as the basis for allocating hospital and community health services revenue to individual health authorities. The underlying principle of the formula is to distribute resources as equitably as possible based on the health care needs of the local population. Under the current weighted capitation formula, Gloucestershire health authority should receive £377 million next year. However, the Government are allocating nearly £394 million for next year—a real-terms increase of 5.7 per cent. and more than £161 million more than the health authority received in 1997 under the previous Administration.

In addition to those allocations, Gloucestershire health authority has benefited from a number of initiatives under the Government's investment in modernisation. Those include £100,000 to identify and implement service changes that will improve cataract services for local patients; £103,000 to help to reduce waiting lists; £407,000 for booked admissions projects—which will in themselves make it easier for patients to plan their journey; and more than £2 million to modernise the accident and emergency departments in the area. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes those investments and the many others that benefit his constituents.

The hon. Gentleman made clear his belief that the formula needs to be changed because it fails adequately to cover the costs of providing health care in rural areas. In November 1998, we announced a wide-ranging review of the formula used to make cash allocations to health authorities and primary care groups and trusts under the auspices of the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. The aim is to produce a new and fairer formula that reflects the way in which the new NHS is managed and uses its resource.

The review includes assessment of the health care needs of rural populations and identification of any unavoidable extra costs associated with providing health services in rural areas. Although there can be no guarantees about the outcome of the review, I am aware that this is not the first Adjournment debate in which Members of Parliament representing rural areas have expressed their view that the way in which resources are allocated should be changed.

We know that the announcement of large and complicated reviews can cause a period of uncertainty; therefore, at the time that we announced the review, the Government announced a freeze on further changes to the existing formula. That will help to maximise stability and certainty for health authorities and primary care groups, while allowing the wide-ranging review to take place.

The hon. Gentleman also touched on the subject of the poor public transport infrastructure serving his constituents. All of us know that that problem did not start in 1997; it is rooted in the more distant past. I trust that he welcomes the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister of considerable increases in funding for rural bus services, from £90 million over the past three years to £136 million over the next three. This year, Gloucestershire received nearly £800,000 to help to provide 36 new and enhanced services in Gloucestershire. Next year, there will be an increase of more than 20 per cent. in the rural bus subsidy grant for Gloucestershire, taking it to more than £1 million; that will be followed by a further 15 per cent. increase the following year.

Not all rural areas are alike, and traditional transport solutions are not always appropriate in some of the most remote areas. The rural White Paper also announced our intention that smaller communities should benefit from a new £15 million special parish fund. Parishes will be able to apply direct for up to £10,000 for small-scale projects such as buying a minibus, setting up a social car scheme or a car or moped pool, or paying a bus company to divert a route through an outlying village,

[Ms Stuart]

which I know has been most helpful in some areas. That will give them more freedom to decide on the sort of help that they need.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about patient transport, which is a matter that we take seriously. However, the hon. Gentleman raised the question of medical needs and their assessment. We have to draw a distinction between vulnerable groups and patients who really need hospital transport so that their condition does not deteriorate, and cases in which the problem is inability to pay. Therefore, I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the hospital travel costs scheme, which supports low-income patients and allows some reimbursement of such costs.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: It might not be strictly relevant to today's debate, but, in connection with funding, will the Minister take into account the fact that her Department has recently altered the coverage criteria for the south-east living allowance to include Bristol and Swindon? That is causing great problems with recruitment of nurses and doctors in Gloucestershire because in many areas, including the Cotswolds, the cost of living is higher than in Swindon and the rest of Gloucestershire. When a formula is changed, problems always arise at the margin, and that is what has happened as a result of the changes to that allowance. Will the Minister consider whether anything can be done to solve that problem?

Ms Stuart: That problem has been raised in this Chamber before. We continuously examine those matters, because we know that wherever a line is drawn, some people are left on the other side.

In addition to expressing specific concerns about patient transport in his constituency, the hon. Gentleman has stated his belief that we must give the elderly the respect that they deserve and must treat them properly. In that context, I hope that he welcomes yesterday's launch of the national service framework for care for older people. It is designed to provide a blueprint for care and to tackle problems of age discrimination throughout the NHS.

Everyone has a right to first-class treatment in the NHS. In every part of the service, whether in urban or rural areas, we need to identify and meet the needs of those who may be vulnerable. I hope that today's debate will enable the hon. Gentleman to take up individual cases involving decisions that he believes were wrong, although I believe that the overall framework is the right one.

Unemployment (Jarrow)

1.30 pm

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be pleased to hear that the content of my address will not be as negative as the title of the debate implies. If we practised joined-up government—rather than just talking about it in government—and got down to grass roots to deliver it, the Department of Trade and Industry would have a far easier job in creating wealth in the northern region.

Since we were elected in 1997, a lot has been done and there is much to be proud of in the northern region, especially in my Jarrow constituency. We certainly picked up a poisoned chalice from the Tories. When I see the farmers' present plight, I can do nothing but sympathise with them and hope that they get over their problems quickly. What they are going through is certainly nothing that we have not experienced in my constituency. When the previous Government were in power in the 1980s, we lost the mining industry, the steel industry and the shipyards—and that was only in my Jarrow constituency. Decent men were thrown on the scrap heap and forgotten.

I do not remember Prince Charles packing in his holiday and saying, "I'll not go on holiday and I'll not go skiing; I'll stay in the country and look after this tragedy." I do not remember anyone saying that we should have emergency daily Cabinet meetings to sort out the unemployment problems in Jarrow, when all those great industries collapsed through Government inaction. As I said, I hope that the farmers get over their problems; certainly, they have our sympathy because we have been through similar problems.

When I got into Parliament, I was nagged by the question of how we were getting on creating manufacturing jobs in my Jarrow constituency. Obviously, I am talking about manufacturing jobs, but that is not to demean other areas of the economy. None the less, manufacturing jobs are important in Jarrow, as they are in Tyneside. Tyneside communities and towns in my constituency were built on the back of manufacturing, and that will always be the case. When I asked the Chancellor how many manufacturing jobs had been created since the election—given concerns about the running-down of the industry in the past—I was careful to take into account manufacturing jobs that had been lost in the same period. I was pleased that there was a net gain of more than 800 manufacturing jobs in Jarrow; that shows that the manufacturing sector in my constituency, which reflects the rest of Tyneside, is picking up.

In the same period, thanks mainly to the new deal, youth unemployment has dropped in Jarrow by a massive 75 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by an impressive 63 per cent. I am wary of using percentages in talking about unemployment because, even if there is only 1 per cent. unemployment, people within that percentage are 100 per cent. unemployed. However, I use those figures showing a massive decrease in unemployment to give an indication of where the Government are going and how they are tackling unemployment.

We are delighted at the way in which all sectors in the north have taken up the Government's challenge to work in partnership. Of course, that is not a new

initiative. It was started by the Tories, but the difference is that we want it to work. If it is to do so, every part of the partnership, whether the private sector, the Government sector, Government agencies or trade unions, have got to have an input, and feel that they are valued and being listened to. Above all, they must feel that they have made a contribution. Under the previous Government, the only sector that got to make a contribution was the private sector, so partnerships did not work. I am pleased to say that partnerships are now working on the Tyne, and there have been some landmark agreements between employers and trade unions in ship-related industries.

Employers, trades unions and politicians formed a unique group called the Tyne Maritime Group under the chairmanship of Kevin Curran, the regional secretary of the GMB, and a north-east member. A charter has been agreed with each Tyne company that is involved, which addresses basic but important issues such as health and safety, labour agreements and training. It also deals with contracts between companies—if one company is quiet, another will help it out—and exchange of labour during boom times in the industry.

The Tyne Maritime Group will play an even greater role in promoting Tyneside as a cluster of shipbuilding expertise. It is the first time that employers, trade unions and Government agencies have worked together to promote that great Tyne industry, which made our communities what they are. Employers are not doing that from benevolence, but because they know that if the Tyne is working and there is shipbuilding and ship repair on the Tyne, the rest of Tyneside is working. Tyneside was built on the shipyards; it will survive and, indeed, prosper through them in future. We are therefore making marvellous progress.

I do not want to create the impression that everything in the garden is rosy, however—it is not. We have done a lot, but we have much more to do. The average age of a skilled worker on the Tyne is now 50, owing to the running-down of the shipyards in the 1980s, which I have already mentioned. A whole generation between the ages of 25 and 40 has been lost. We must address that urgently if we are to benefit from the skills of the 50 year-olds, which need to be passed to young apprentices to make the Tyne prosper. If we do not do that immediately, the Tyne's maritime industry will go, with the loss of lots of jobs, signalling the end of Tyneside as we know it.

That is the main issue addressed by the Tyne Maritime Group, whose members are working together and promoting the area. However, they can only succeed with Government help. I shall come to that point later. The Tyne is doing well at present and is the envy of the country. For example, Swan Hunter has orders totalling £130 million for Ministry of Defence supply vessels, and Cammell Laird has placed a bid to build £340 million-worth of cruise vessels. We are still waiting for clarification of the Cammell Laird contract from the DTI, and I hope that the Minister will deal with that today. There is an order to build a floating production and storage vessel at Aker McNulty's and, of course, last week the Prime Minister made a great announcement of 2,000 jobs that would be created by AMEC in a massive contract for Shell, again for production and storage vessels.

Basically, a lot of work is going on, but we have skills crisis which, I hope, is being addressed. There is a contract with the MOD on the horizon for a £1 billion aircraft carrier, but to build that we need a skills base. What was a sunset industry under the Conservatives has become a sunrise industry under Labour, and the orders that I have mentioned have given us a much-needed boost.

However, I cannot let this opportunity pass without mentioning the disappointment that I share with all of Tyneside at the MOD's decision to give a contract for the construction of roll on/roll off ferries to Germany. I see from the newspapers that the MOD has been experiencing difficulties with the Weir consortiums on commercial issues. It has taken control of part of that order and has placed the construction of two ferries directly in Belfast. I only hope that it sees the light, has the guts to take over the rest of the order and gives it to Merseyside and Tyneside. That would create an extra 1,500 jobs, and another 1,000 jobs would be created in local businesses and suppliers; it would inject £650,000 of workers' money into the local economy. We cannot ignore that. That is what joined-up government is about. The DTI is doing much to create wealth and jobs in the area, but what on earth can it do when the MOD turns round and stabs it in the back?

I shall finish my contribution by saying something about the public sector and its role in job creation and joined-up government. Again, I believe that the DTI has been let down by other parts of the Government in its efforts to create jobs and wealth in the northern region. In the past, Governments have had the nationalised industries in the north through which to regulate employment levels. If they wanted to create jobs, they would put in more investment, the number of apprentices would go up and output would increase. Now, of course, we do not have the nationalised industries. They have gone, but we have the public sector, which is in an ideal position to take over the role of boosting the economy in the northern region. It is already one of the largest employers in the region.

Over the border in Scotland, there is a vastly better grant allocation system, owing to the Barnett formula. In the north-east, we are told about the million-pound divide—

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He just touched on an important point. My daughter lives in Sussex, and me and the wife were down there with her at the weekend. It is a lovely little village and we went to the local pub and had a drink on Sunday night. Some people were playing cards in the corner, and someone came in and asked, "Have you sold all your shares? Did you panic and sell your shares?" Someone else said, "No, no, I have kept my shares." The conversation among everyone was about shares. The barman said, "I was buying when you were selling, because I was buying cheap." Imagine that conversation back home, in a pub in my constituency or that of my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn). It would more likely be, "Hello, Joe. When do you get your giro? Did it come on Saturday?" and the reply would be, "No, no, I had my incapacity benefit."

[Mr. Ronnie Campbell]

That would be the conversation. That is the difference between the north and the south—and to some extent, with Barnett, even Scotland.

Mr. Hepburn: My hon. Friend is right, and Ministers must grasp the difference. We need extra investment in the north. We need extra public investment, and that can be done through a Barnett formula 2. The conversation in the south is about which shares people have. In the north, the situation is vastly different. We have struggled in the past, and the only way that we will drag it round is by means of a Barnett formula 2. If it were the same formula as in Scotland, that would put an extra £1 billion into Tyne and Wear, £100 million on to the budgets of South Tyneside councils and 50 per cent. on to Gateshead council's budget.

The DTI has been let down. It is promoting regional development and the concept of One NorthEast, but how can One NorthEast compete with the Scottish Development Agency, which is working under an entirely different funding regime and a vastly better one than in the north-east? I am not suggesting that Scotland should come down to our level—rather that we should go up to Scotland's level, to allow us to compete for jobs and promote our area.

I heard—or read in the newspaper—with pleasure that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor had said that, after the election, millions of pounds would flow from the south towards the north. I assume that that is an indication that they plan to tackle the Barnett formula, to the benefit of the north-east.

We have come a long way since those dark days when the only announcements in Jarrow were about another closure or further lay-offs, but with 2,492 people still unemployed, I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree that we have a long way to go. If we are to achieve the Chancellor's goal of full employment—a dream that we never had in the past, in the dark days of the 1980s when lay-off followed lay-off—we need to achieve the goal of joined-up government. Until we achieve that, with the MOD and the Treasury working with and helping the DTI, we ain't going to get there. I have great hope for the next Parliament and for a new Labour Government who will address the problems that I have outlined.

1.45 pm

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) on obtaining the debate. I intervene briefly, as his constituency and mine are inextricably linked. Ours are the two authorities in the South Tyneside local authority. My hon. Friend spoke about partnership, which is a matter that I want to raise with the Minister.

We have done extremely well over the past few years under the Labour Government. We had the unenviable reputation of having the worst unemployment record in England. Currently, the level for South Tyneside is 11 per cent. out of work. The two constituencies are neck and neck, although in South Shields the official figure for male unemployment is still 18.1 per cent. One in five men is currently out of work.

As I said, we have made great progress. We are well on the way, but I urge the Minister to start drawing up plans to take our progress further under the next Labour Government. The new deal has been a success. In South Shields, 2,000 people entered the scheme, and 900 of those young people have entered full-time employment. That is a great tribute to the Government, but we take the responsibility on ourselves, as well. It is our responsibility to pull ourselves up by our own bootlaces.

I hope that we will have every assistance from the Minister, working across government. If we speak of worthwhile jobs in the future, we are speaking of highly skilled jobs—jobs requiring high educational attainment. I am delighted that in the key stages examinations in English, there has been an 11 per cent. improvement over the past four years, and we are almost up to the national average. In mathematics, there has been a 21 per cent. improvement in attainment, and we are better than the national average.

I make that point because I want to get across to the Government the fact that we recognise that that is the result of a partnership not only between Government Departments, but between the people of South Tyneside—the people of Jarrow and South Shields—and the Government. If the Government continue to give us the tools to help ourselves, we will deliver in South Tyneside. That is my message. We have made tremendous improvements and tremendous progress, and I am very optimistic that, after the next general election, when we have a new Labour Government, we can move forward and reduce those horrific levels of overall unemployment from 11 per cent. to the national average.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) on securing the debate on issues that are obviously close to his heart, and close to the hearts of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), whose point about the Labour Government continuing to promote social progress and attack social exclusion is well made, and of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell), who was helping to bring civilisation to Sussex at the weekend. I can well imagine a similar conversation taking place in a pub in West Hull. I hope that he sympathises, though, because, although there are many good things about living in Sussex, you also have to drink the beer. That is a very big difference between our constituencies and the constituencies in Sussex.

I am well aware of the excellence that exists at Tyne shipyards and of the important role that they play in the local economy. I am also aware that those shipyards, like shipyards throughout the UK, face difficult challenges. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow said, the situation has been transformed under this Government. There have been considerable improvements in the prospects for Tyneside yards in recent months. It is worth elaborating on some of my hon. Friend's points about the success of Tyneside companies involved in both shipbuilding and the related offshore fabrication sector.

Swan Hunter at Wallsend has secured a major contract to build two troop landing ships for the Royal Navy, which will create up to 2,000 new jobs at the yard.

In addition, it has secured a contract from Kerr McGee to build an FPSO—a floating production, storage and offloading facility—which will create a further 800 jobs. Between them, those contracts are worth almost £300 million.

On Cammell Laird, before I deal with my hon. Friend's question, I can tell him that the UK's largest ship repair and conversion company recently completed a passenger ferry for a Norwegian owner at its Hebburn facility. That was the first ship to be built on Tyneside for seven years. The UK's other major ship repair and conversion company, A & P, remains a major presence on the Tyne.

With regard to Cammell Laird, there is the prospect of building the first cruise liner in this country for many years. At this delicate stage of negotiations, when we are continuing to talk to Cammell Laird and to Luxus, I can say nothing more helpful than that the DTI has gone to extraordinary lengths. We have made an exceptional and unprecedented offer aimed at helping Luxus to attract a commercial lender to share the risk, so that the project can proceed. We are continuing to talk to the companies about the proposal. We share my hon. Friend's concern that we should leave no stone unturned in our efforts to assist in any way that we can. That work is still in progress. It would be wrong to go into further detail, however, as sensitive negotiations are under way. Along the river from my hon. Friend's constituency, Aker McNulty has had success in the FPSO field. The most recent good news is the award to Amec by Shell of the Bonga contract, which will create 1,000 jobs in Wallsend and another 3,000 in the UK, many of which will be in the north-east.

Such contracts are not won easily. Neither my hon. Friends nor I are complacent about the difficulty of sustaining that level of activity on the river. The developments show, however, that the industry is alive and well on Tyneside and that we have companies and a work force with the skills, technology, ability and determination that are necessary to succeed in a competitive global market.

The key challenge facing the UK shipbuilding industry is to improve its competitive performance. We recently published a White Paper entitled "Enterprise, Skills and Innovation: Opportunity for all in a world of change", which developed some of the themes raised in this debate. It deals particularly with education, skills and training, which are especially important for the future. It is for a second Labour Government to take those forward, providing that we receive the electorate's support. The White Paper also explained how we are helping British businesses to respond to challenges in five key areas: developing a more highly skilled work force; building prosperous regions and communities; investing for innovation; fostering enterprise; and ensuring that markets operate effectively and fairly.

We are working closely with the shipbuilding industry to help it to improve its competitiveness. As my hon. Friend said, we have established the shipbuilding forum to facilitate that process: for the first time in the history of this maritime nation the shipbuilding industry, its work force and the Government are sitting down around the same table to discuss the industry's problems. The forum was established thanks to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), who introduced the initiative.

The shipbuilding forum has taken forward a great deal of work, and my Department is committing substantial funds to competitiveness projects. For example, we are contributing £2.8 million to the link research project, which is led by the Shipbuilders and Shiprepairers Association, to help the industry to identify where improvements are necessary. We are providing grants of £176,000—50 per cent. of total costs—towards a three-year marketing project that is aimed at generating new orders to match the increased production that the link project is expected to generate. We are also introducing an idea that was developed by the trade union movement to improve skills and training. Indeed, an initiative is currently under way in my constituency to advance that aspect of the forum's work. We are also considering creating a pilot training scheme within a selected area. That proposal is based on the excellent training initiatives that are already under way on the Tyne.

There are concerns in shipbuilding about Korean competition. I know that my hon. Friend is aware of those anxieties, as we had a meeting about them recently. The Government are still aware of the matter and we are considering carefully whether to support World Trade Organisation action. Our preferred option was a bilateral agreement between the Commission and Korea, but Korea has recently been extremely unwilling to restart the talks that began last year, so we may not have any alternative but to pursue WTO action. That would be time-consuming and bureaucratic, but it might be the only course open to us.

Before I deal with some of my hon. Friend's other points, I should like to comment briefly on the marine export partnership, which my Department launched earlier this month. The initiative seeks to strengthen the promotion of British marine industries, including the shipbuilding, conversion and repair industries, to overseas markets. It is supported by Trade Partners UK and brings together the trade promotion work of the DTI and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which are trying very hard to achieve the sort of joined-up government to which my hon. Friend referred. People often use platitudes when they speak about joined-up government, but I know from experience that it is difficult and complicated to achieve. The marine export partnership is another attempt to achieve joined-up government, and we are providing it with support of more than £100,000 during the next 18 months.

The shipbuilding market remains difficult. I am encouraged by recent developments on the Tyne. Few shipbuilding regions in the UK can match the range of new building, conversion and repair capabilities that the Tyne yards now possess, building on their proud history. I assure my hon. Friends that the Government will continue to work closely with those yards further to enhance their competitiveness and to help them to win new and vital orders. In particular, we want to help them to deal with the problem of a work force who are dedicated and skilled, but who are ageing, like many of us in this Chamber. We must tackle that problem, which is probably the most serious challenge that the industry faces. My hon. Friend's point about that was well made.

My hon. Friend spoke about the wider problems in his constituency. Unemployment is a huge concern to us all and was one of the major challenges that faced us when we took office. This month, we took great comfort

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

from the announcement that the number of people who are unemployed has dropped below 1 million for the first time since 1975. At the same time, we have the lowest long-term interest rate since England won the world cup and the lowest inflation for 25 years. Prices are rising at the lowest rate since 1973 and the economy has grown by 2.7 per cent. per year since the election, in contrast with the abysmal performance of the previous Government, who presided over the worst growth record since the second world war of any country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—and we were told that the Conservative party was the party which could run the economy.

Reducing unemployment in the context of that stable economic platform is a tremendous achievement, but I agree with my hon. Friend that somebody who is unemployed is 100 per cent. unemployed. We have to work towards the target of full employment—a goal which was announced recently by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I was wondering about the Barnett formula, which my hon. Friend has not mentioned, even though my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) did so. Scotland was given the Barnett formula all those years ago in the 1960s because it had high unemployment, and because shipyards were closing on the Clyde and in other such places. As we have made clear, our area is now in the same position, so why can we not devise a Barnett formula for the north-east? We get blanket replies to that question. I can see that my hon. Friend is trying to avoid it, but I am trying to get him on the right track and to get some words out of him.

Mr. Johnson: I was rather hoping to avoid the Barnett formula, but I accept my hon. Friend's point. I am not equipped to speak about any plans for the Barnett formula, but I can say that the initiative announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who knows a thing or two about Tyneside, is geared towards the need to ensure that the prosperity that is created from our fine economic record does not leave people out in particular areas, such as my constituency and those represented by my hon. Friends.

Perhaps this assurance will not solve the Barnett formula problem, but I can say that the funds that are being generated and distributed through the regional development agencies are directed at tackling those very problems. Such assistance seeks also to deal with earnings problems and the traditional earnings gap between the north and south. Thanks to the minimum wage and many other initiatives, that gap narrowed considerably this year. From memory, I think that earnings have increased by 4.7 per cent. in the past year, whereas in London and the south-east, they increased by about 1.2 per cent. That is the first indication for many years that some of these problems are being tackled. Unfortunately, however, we may have to wait for another debate before questions about the Barnett formula can be given a more lucid and comprehensive reply.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I feel an Adjournment debate coming on.

Mr. Johnson: I hope that I will not be the Minister who responds.

Economic stability is helping UK areas to prosper, but my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow makes a valid point. Unemployment has fallen in his constituency and in the north-east. Spectacular gains have been made, although they are lower than the national average. In his constituency, the reductions are lower than the average in the north-east in general. It is, however, worth repeating that unemployment in the north-east has fallen by 27 per cent. and by 39 per cent. in the UK since 1997. As my hon. Friend rightly said, long-term unemployment has fallen by 63 per cent. throughout the country.

I should like to return briefly to the recent successes on the Tyne. The projects were not won because of hidden subsidies or state intervention, but because the best of our businesses and work force are truly world class and can compete with all comers. Having created a stable economy, our next challenge is to ensure that all our businesses, regions and work force benefit from that stability. It will not be easy, but that objective can be achieved if Government, business, education, trade unions and Members of Parliament work together.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 March 2001

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Electoral Malpractice (Northern Ireland)

[Relevant documents: Second Special Report, Session 1997-98, HC 781, Second Special Report, Session 1998-99, HC 484, and First Special Report, Session 2000-01, HC 148, from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee; Administering Elections in Northern Ireland—Report of the Elections Review, October 1998, Cm 4081; and Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland, Cm 5080.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): It gives me great pleasure to open what may be the last debate in this Parliament on a Select Committee report.

The report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs on electoral malpractice was agreed in March 1998, a little more than three years ago. I thank the Liaison Committee for agreeing to put the report forward for debate. It was the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's second report of the Parliament, and it may yet prove a highly topical subject for debate.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Would my right hon. Friend care to comment on the fact that it has taken three years to bring the report forward for consideration in debate?

Mr. Brooke: I am glad to respond to my hon. Friend's question. To be fair to everyone concerned—I shall allude to the Government's role later—there has been a continuous thread of intermittent activity on the issue throughout the Parliament. Our Committee saw no reason to ask the Liaison Committee for the opportunity to debate the report when we first produced it, but that thread has given grounds for today's debate on the report.

I am conscious that the last Thursday in March, when the sword of Damocles of an election being called may fall at any moment, is not necessarily the best time for a debate on any Select Committee report. Due to the uncertainty about the election date, our Committee was occupied until a late hour last night agreeing not one but two reports that we wanted to produce.

Like Wellington at Waterloo, I hope that I shall be joined by allies. Indeed, two members of the Committee have come into the Chamber while I have been speaking, so we are not totally absent from the ground. If we do not use all the time allotted to us, I want it to be clear that the report is nevertheless timeous and timely. The debate will not be prolonged because the issue is not especially complicated, but that is no reflection on the process of debating such reports.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The right hon. Gentleman said that the issue was not complicated, but it has taken a long time to come to fruition. The harsh reality is that the problem has caused tremendous concern. It did so in an earlier Parliament when we argued for measures to be brought in to tackle it. Do we now think the issue so complicated that it might be another two Parliaments before we have measures to protect against electoral fraud in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which I think was directed more to others in the Chamber than to me, though he intervened on my speech quite properly. There will clearly be further opportunities in the debate to hear why people thought the issues complicated, despite the fact that some of us do not think that such complications exist.

Allegations of electoral fraud have been a feature of the political scene in Northern Ireland for many years. The apocryphal cry of "Vote early, vote often" is familiar in much parliamentary literature. To be parenthetical for a moment, I recall a Northern Ireland debate on the Floor of the House some years back, which was obviously going to go the full time. A former private secretary of mine was in the Official's Box, and I inquired how many Divisions were envisaged by the Government for the business, and he said that there would not be any Divisions in the early part of the evening, but there would be a lot at the end, to which I said that this must be one of those rare instances of "Vote late, vote often."

Parliament acted on reports that vote stealing in the Province was widespread by introducing, in the Representation of the People Act 1985, a requirement that voters in Northern Ireland should produce specified evidence of identity when asking for a ballot paper. Given that allegations were current about the impact of electoral fraud at the May 1997 general election, particularly in relation to the constituencies of Mid-Ulster and Belfast, West, the Committee made this inquiry a priority.

The Committee took oral evidence from the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland, a former deputy electoral officer, the then Secretary of State and the Social Democratic and Labour Party. In addition, a range of interested parties submitted written evidence. The Committee was ably advised by Dr. Sidney Elliot of the department of politics at Queen's university, Belfast, and we were grateful to him for his assistance.

In his evidence to the Committee, the chief electoral officer identified four main ways of cheating: multiple entries in the register; personation, where someone pretends to be another person entitled to vote; absent voting abuse; and undue influence, which can take a variety of forms, ranging from outright physical intimidation to following postmen who are delivering postal votes and then calling at the houses to collect the postal vote forms or the votes themselves.

One difficulty in this area is gaining access to hard evidence. There have been many allegations of voting fraud, but much of the evidence is anecdotal and circumstantial. Even the chief electoral officer was unsure about the extent of the problem. However, we considered that there was sufficient evidence of organised voting theft to show that the problem of electoral malpractice in Northern Ireland is serious.

[Mr. Brooke]

The Committee proposed a number of possible solutions. It considered the inclusion of every elector's signature in the register of voters and on any application for absent votes to be an essential component of checking. We envisaged that the signatures would be digitised and accessible in polling stations. We also sought an increase in the identifying details included on registration forms to counter the problem of illicit multiple registration and to make fraudulent applications harder. The Committee's report also proposed measures to improve the reliability of the register and called for the chief electoral officer to be given the technology that he needed to collate useful, collaborative information for checking applications to be put on the roll and for absent voting.

Central to our recommendations was a proposal to improve the standard of the proof of identity documents that give entitlement to a ballot paper. Some of those documents do not include a photograph, which assists their fraudulent use. National health service medical cards are particularly vulnerable to convincing forgery. Our preference was for a new, universally issued and electronically readable electoral card. Although a relatively expensive option, there was broad agreement that that was likely to be the most effective in preventing abuse.

On timing, we sought implementation of our recommendations at the earliest possible date, and in that respect I march with the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth). In evidence to the Committee, the then Secretary of State said:

"Before the European elections in 1999 we will be well on the way to looking at the changes we would like to make."

The reality has been rather different. In July 1997, at about the time that we announced our inquiry, the then Secretary of State announced her own review of electoral practice in Northern Ireland. Initially meant to report by the end of November 1997, it had not reported by the time the Government replied to the report in May 1998, which arithmetic tells me is six months overdue. In view of that, the Secretary of State felt unable to give any commitment to change until she had considered the outcome of the review, completion of which was expected "shortly". She said that a more substantive reply to our report was likely to be given in mid-August.

In the event, the report of the election review was not delivered to Parliament until October 1998, almost a year after it had originally been expected to be ready. It was not until May 1999, following some prompting from the Committee, that the full response to our report was received. By then, we had reached the date by which the Secretary of State had originally expected to be considering next steps. It was supportive of many of the Committee's recommendations but, somewhat disappointingly, was vague about any time scale for implementing the measures that it envisaged.

When the Committee took evidence from the new Secretary of State on 5 April 2000 on recent political developments in the Province, we raised the lack of progress with him. The Secretary of State again expressed the Government's concern about electoral malpractice, and confirmed their commitment to the eventual introduction of electronic voting cards. Although he did not rule out the early introduction of primary legislation, he added:

"I do not have a slot to introduce such legislation at the present time."

He described as "very unlikely indeed" the possibility of introducing smart cards before the next general election—and, consequently, the local elections due in May. He added:

"You are right to be nudging my elbow on this. You are right to focus me on it."

In November 2000, as part of the Committee's contribution to the Liaison Committee's "shifting the balance" exercise of reviewing outstanding recommendations, we asked the Northern Ireland Office—not unreasonably, I think—for an update on progress. That revealed that a working group had produced a draft Bill, which had been the subject of consultation with political parties and others, and from which several new ideas or modifications of existing ideas had emerged. The Northern Ireland Office was "considering the next steps".

I think that I speak on behalf of the whole Committee—we do not have a bad record of being unanimous—in saying that the Committee was singularly unimpressed. In its first special report, published in January 2001, it commented:

"Although we welcome the fact that the general thrust of the Department's current proposals accord with our general approach to the problem of reducing electoral fraud in Northern Ireland, we are very concerned about the length of time it is taking to secure any progress, even on such basic matters as replacing the most vulnerable identification documents which currently entitle a voter to a ballot paper. When we reported in March 1998, less than a year after the General Election, we had a reasonable expectation that rather more progress might have been made before the next General Election in tackling the serious problems of electoral malpractice than appears likely to be the case. Given the extensive consultation that took place following publication of the Government's review"—

that is the one that was issued in October 1998—

"we find the need for yet more rounds of consultation surprising, and the level of progress disappointing. Given that it is now unlikely that legislation can be introduced before the 2001-02 Parliamentary Session, at the earliest, we recommend the early publication of a draft bill on measures to counter electoral fraud, based on the proposals of the Working Group, modified to reflect the Government's consideration of the points raised in the most recent round of consultations."

Those strictures appear to have galvanised the Secretary of State into action. This month the Government presented to Parliament the White Paper "Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland". Besides a series of proposals for legislative change, it includes details of some welcome reforms initiated by the chief electoral officer that have immediate effect. One disappointment, though, is that the key to further progress remains the enactment of appropriate primary legislation. The White Paper merely states that that will emerge

"at the earliest possible opportunity".

The particular ways of describing time—I have already quoted the previous Secretary of State's use of the word "shortly"—are familiar to all connoisseurs of ministerial language. I do not know how I would calibrate "at the earliest possible opportunity" against

the other circumlocutions that are available, but at least the Government are saying that it will happen at the earliest possible opportunity.

However, that is no real advance on the position described by the Secretary of State on 5 April 2000, the anniversary of which we will reach next week. I hope that the Minister will say something more specific about the timetable today and, perhaps, give a commitment that the preparation of the legislation will not be delayed by work on the legislation arising from the implementation of the criminal justice review, a draft of which was promised in the Queen's Speech, and which I understand may emerge in the near future.

I conclude by saying that when the report was agreed in 1998, I did not expect to be standing before the House on what might be the eve of the next general election, three years later, with Northern Ireland's electoral system still substantially as vulnerable to electoral fraud as it was in 1997. To be doing so is frankly disappointing. Therefore, I commend also to the House the Liaison Committee's systematic interest in ensuring that pressure is maintained on the Government, not simply to reply to Committee reports and then forget them, but to take due and proper account of their continuing relevance to policy development. Finally, to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor), we are having this debate today because of that interest, and I commend the report to the House.

2.46 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who is the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I have been a member of that Committee throughout this Parliament entirely under his chairmanship. As in his role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, when he found a form of words that began to lead to the peace process, and was therefore the first of the long line of facilitators who have assisted Northern Ireland in that development, he has also been a great facilitator of the work of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He has assisted us greatly by his full involvement in that Committee and by making decisions that might seem to be remarkable, given the range of Members who are on the Cttee. The Committee has seldom been divided. The right hon. Gentleman was always careful to see that we produced not only words, but ensured that Governments took on board what we were arguing about. When the Government did not, as on this occasion, they were prodded and pressed, not only by the right hon. Gentleman, but by the Committee collectively, or else he would seek our support for the position that he adopted.

The debate brings together the two subjects of Northern Ireland and electoral matters, both of which I am closely involved in, so it is a pleasure to take part in the debate. Although reference has been made to the work of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the response of the Northern Ireland Office to measures that we put forward and the development of the White Paper, we are not the only ones who have been prodding and pressing on electoral matters. The Northern Ireland Forum produced a report, work on which was developed by a sub-committee. As part of that process, I gave evidence on matters such as the need for a rolling electoral register, which we have moved towards in the Representation of the People Act 2000.

I shall refer to an incident that I hope to show is relevant. It relates to elections in Yugoslavia. I went with others to monitor elections in the rump of Yugoslavia—the Milosevic Yugoslavia—until Christmas 1992. The group was chaired by the late Sir James Kilfedder, who was the first Chairman of the Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs that was set up in the previous Parliament. The other people involved in the work were Lady Olga Maitland, Simon Clarke of the Electoral Reform Society and another former Member, Michael Meadowcroft, who remains, I believe, with the party that calls itself the Liberal party, not the Liberal Democrat party.

We monitored the elections in Serbia, Kosovo and Vojvodina and discovered at polling stations and the count that a committee composed of the political parties in Yugoslavia was running things. With us were people from the former communist party, a fascist party and centre democratic parties, all of whom were working together monitoring what happened. Sir James Kilfedder was amazed by the extent to which it worked. Probably what was most wrong about the elections in Yugoslavia was the domination and control of the media and the influence over people's right to make up their minds. What we saw of the electoral procedures was astonishingly smooth, given that the people involved were drawn from such different groups.

Sir James could not believe that such a system would have a hope of working in Northern Ireland. He thought that allowing procedures at the count and polling station to be carried out by members of Sinn Fein, the Democratic Unionist party and the loyalist parties close to paramilitaries would be a recipe for disaster. Fortunately our tradition does not require that approach, but it was amazing how well it worked in Yugoslavia, despite the fact that the result was greatly distorted because of people's frame of mind, and state manipulation.

Northern Ireland is, apart from occasional odd incidents, the only area of the United Kingdom where serious organised electoral fraud and malpractice take place. If we consider ourselves to be a democratic Parliament, we should be seriously concerned about that and try to change the situation. We should see it as an important aspect of the development of the peace process. If parties are supposed to be committed to the use of the ballot box and democracy, that cannot mean a fiddled ballot box and manipulation aimed at fixing results. Everyone, including the Government, is firmly of that opinion and wants to press forward with such a policy—but perhaps it should be done more swiftly.

A difficulty is that as more is done to try to stop fraud, more difficulties are created for people exercising their rights of franchise. The checks and controls become significant, as the White Paper shows. A balance between the two sides of the matter is needed, and the mechanisms that make fraud possible should be eliminated.

One of the most serious forms of fraud in Northern Ireland is the appropriation of the votes of people who do not usually vote. Following checks to establish which people do not turn up to exercise their franchise,

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

someone else, by personation or postal ballots, will act in their stead. That needs to be controlled. It raises the question for Northern Ireland—it was not raised in Britain—of whether the marked register should be available to political parties in Northern Ireland, as it will allow them to discover who has not voted. Information on who has not voted can be collated election after election as an insurance, and others can make use of it.

Acting on behalf of those who do not vote is probably more serious numerically than voting on behalf of people who have died whose names still appear on the register, which is thought to occur in Northern Ireland more often. In report HC 316, from the 1997-98 Session, the Select Committee recommended at paragraph 19 that the chief electoral officer should have the power to remove the names of those who have died from the register. The recommendation states:

"On notification by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages of a person's death, the Chief Electoral Officer should have the power to remove their name from the Electoral Register immediately."

The chief electoral officer in Northern Ireland, unlike his counterpart in Britain, receives information from the registrar of births, deaths and marriages when people have died. He marks his register to show that they are dead, but he cannot remove the names from the register. In evidence to the Select Committee, he told us that he knew of five case in which the franchise had been exercised on behalf of someone who had died.

It would be a simple exercise in Northern Ireland, and in the rest of the United Kingdom, for people's names to be removed once they had died. To ensure that nothing had gone wrong, information could be sent to those households to check that the details were correct. That would prevent further intrusion into a family's grief being caused by the sending out of election addresses and polling cards to people who had died. That provision could be made for the whole of the United Kingdom. If electoral registers are to be correct, that Select Committee recommendation is important. We should try to ensure that no one is registered except those who are entitled to vote. We should stop these continuing errors.

We have done something about people who might not be entered on the register through the rolling register provision, but we have not yet acted to delete the names of those who should not be included. In Britain, information from the registrar of births, death and marriages is made available to the person—it might be the returning officer—within the local authority who deals with housing benefit or other provisions, such as council tax, which may have to be sent as a result of the death. However, the electoral register cannot be corrected at the same time.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about multiple registrations. Although the Select Committee did not propose banning them, the White Paper attempts to ensure that they are monitored, checked and controlled and that action is taken on any abuse that is brought to light. Multiple registration is not normally necessary in Britain, but there is a particular problem in Northern Ireland.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Will the hon. Gentleman say from his experience of the Committee's investigations why that principle was changed in Northern Ireland? At one time, multiple registration was not allowed.

Mr. Barnes: We may have discussed the history of the situation although I do not recollect what was said at that particular time, but, for our mutual benefit, I shall check our records to discover what occurred.

Multiple registration would be easy to control and contain in Britain. We have a rolling register; it may not roll fast enough for me, but supplementary lists are produced each month and people who move about the country can get on to those lists. If registration arrangements were speeded up, it would be possible for students, for example, to be taken quickly off one register and put on another, according to where they were living at a particular time. The problem in Northern Ireland is that that might be open to fraud. There is a three-month residency requirement for electoral registration in Northern Ireland so that people are not encouraged to move into an area just to be able to vote, thereby committing an electoral fraud. The residency qualification applies to by-elections as well as to general elections to prevent people taking up temporary residence and flooding an area in order to affect an election result.

If there were no residency requirement, problems would be presented in a general election; citizens of the Irish Republic might move into Northern Ireland on a temporary basis in order to vote. One way round the problem might be to retain the three-month residency requirement for citizens of the Republic of Ireland but not for citizens of the United Kingdom. I grant that difficulties might still remain, but I am looking for a way round these problems.

The Northern Ireland door-to-door electoral registration arrangements are excellent; they are a lesson to the rest of us. They have to be done in a way that avoids people getting hold of the forms fraudulently and filling them in with fictitious names, and so on. To overcome such problems, and to get the forms completed, canvassers will visit people at home and be face to face with them when they hand the forms over. That practice was probably widespread in Britain at one time, and I should like to see it extended beyond Northern Ireland. It is not only a matter of putting things in order and preventing fraud in Northern Ireland; it is sensible to ensure that as many people as possible who are entitled to be registered actually appear on the register. Something that developed in Northern Ireland because of different circumstances is, nevertheless, a good example for the rest of us.

Government responses to Select Committee reports are never ideal; they will never contain everything one might wish. However, the White Paper contains several valuable provisions that build on the recommendations in the Select Committee's report. It is a move down the road that the Committee wished to follow. Electoral investigation teams, the monitoring of multiple

registrations and personal identifiers would all be helpful in ensuring that electoral registration is not subject to fraud, as it has been in the past.

The great shame is that legislation has not been introduced. We shall have to wait until after the coming election—the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster said 2001 or 2002—before legislation in on the cards again. I thought that we would move much more quickly.

The White Paper contains a provision for voluntary voter identity cards. The Government see that as a temporary measure; they may be expecting future developments that will lead to the introduction of better technology. The logic is that identity cards should have photographs on them. Driving licences with photographs and passports will be satisfactory for the purpose but, because not everyone is able to obtain a passport or vehicle driving licence, there should be some mechanism by which people can get identity cards. The White Paper mentions that the poor and the elderly might need to resort to such a facility.

The problem is that the poor and the elderly are probably less likely to exercise their rights than other groups. In contrast, others will readily have appropriate documents with a photograph, or will have no great difficulty in obtaining a photo ID card. There might be some resistance or lack of understanding about people's rights. If it is a temporary measure, I hope that we can quickly move on. A situation in which people who are lower on the social scales find it more difficult than others to get on electoral registers is unacceptable, both socially and politically. In the interests of democracy, as well as of our respective parties, we should not accept that. I have some difficulty arguing for my party's interests in Northern Ireland, because the Labour party has not yet come round to organising in Northern Ireland. Everyone should have the right to vote or not for the party that aspires to govern. By their nature, the Northern Ireland parties will always be small parties within the United Kingdom system. I hope that we move beyond a voluntary system and introduce a system that is fairly automatic and easy to use.

The key to everything going right is the development of the peace process. Those groups that are associated with paramilitaries must make a commitment to give up such activity, not as a tactic but to absorb themselves in the political process genuinely. The hope is that the operations of the Assembly and the Executive are such that people from paramilitary groups will be educated to take that approach. If they do so, it will be inconsistent for them to have any association with fraudulent activities. That is probably our greatest hope for putting things right.

However, there will still be problems in respect of the extension of some of the paramilitaries' activities. The Royal Ulster Constabulary has just produced a report showing that there are 78 gangs, 42 of which emerged from paramilitary activity, either current or historical, which are now the equivalent of what I call IRA plc. There might be an equivalent on the loyalist side. That residual problem from the past needs to be tackled and overcome, but it cannot be removed by good hopes. Tough measures must be taken to control the problem. Likewise, electoral malpractice may be reduced by the development of the peace process, but we cannot expect that it will just disappear. When we remove a cause, we do not necessarily remove its effect. Therefore, action needs to be taken in line with the White Paper and quickly.

3.11 pm

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate on an extremely important and pertinent issue. First, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who has chaired the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee so well. After listening to his speech this afternoon, anything that I say will be repetition, because he covered the many issues so adequately, emphasising the Government's long delay in acting on the issue.

The term "electoral malpractice" is eloquent and grand. We must not forget, however, that what we are discussing is nothing grander than blatant cheating and deceit, which attack the heart of our democratic process. The cancer of electoral fraud is especially damaging in Northern Ireland as we have been called to the polls so frequently over the past 30 years. Since 1972, there has, on average, been one poll a year in Northern Ireland. Given that statistic, we cannot underestimate the impact of organised electoral fraud on the political process in the Province. The impact is far-reaching. In the contests for many seats across Northern Ireland, one often finds a very close fight between two or three candidates in which only a small number of votes will separate the winner from the rest. As I come from such a constituency, I can understand the importance of fairness in the electoral system.

As has been acknowledged, at the previous Westminster election there was a high degree of fraudulent activity in the west of the Province, especially in Mid-Ulster. I certainly hope that such activity will not take place in the forthcoming election, because it could affect the overall result.

Local government elections are often held according to a system of proportional representation. Decisions on candidates winning or losing often come down to decimal points, so it is extremely important that we have a fair electoral system. The least that the people of Northern Ireland can expect is for the electoral process accurately to reflect their wishes. Parties across the United Kingdom are struggling to lift people out of their political apathy and reluctance to vote, so we must provide them with every incentive to do so.

As has been said, the most common forms of malpractice identified by the former chief electoral officer were multiple registration, personation, absent voter abuse and undue influence. It is entirely legal—and often beneficial for the honest voter—for someone to be registered to vote at more than one address. That is particularly true of students at colleges in Northern Ireland or on the mainland who wish to remain registered at home—when they might not in fact fulfil the registration qualifications. We need to discuss whether multiple registration is necessary. During the previous general election, there were examples of five or even six people registered as living in the same one-bedroomed flat in west Belfast. After closer investigation, it often emerged that none of the

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individuals concerned actually lived at the stated address. For every case of fraud that was discovered, it is reasonable to assume that many more were not. Fraud is not a random phenomenon but something much more organised and influential.

The register must be as accurate as possible. At the moment, it is based on the information in household forms; in many instances, the householder who fills in the form puts down everyone living in the house, even if they are not entitled to be on the register. The onus is then placed on political parties to argue that such people should not be included, but it is extremely difficult to sustain such an objection because one has to provide proof, and how can such anomalies be proved? The electoral officer generally accepts the household form as gospel truth. Without doubt, some people on the electoral register should not be on it, but political parties find it extremely difficult to have them removed. We welcome rolling registration, but we should also be able to remove from the register the names of not only those who have died but, through a system of rolling objections, those discovered during the year to have been incorrectly included. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If we can add someone to the register, we should also be able to remove someone from it.

In the recent White Paper "Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland", the Government propose that those who are registered more than once should be more closely monitored so that their voting patterns can be traced and any irregularities pursued through the courts. However, that system of monitoring will regrettably not be implemented until 2002, thus being of no benefit at the coming elections. I hope that investigation procedures into irregularities will be much more thorough and efficient than in the past.

We would all welcome the additions—signature, date of birth and, I hope, the postcode—to the household form. The postcode is universally used nowadays to find out where people live. With the aid of a computer programme, a postcode provides an immediate address and it would make it easier for the electoral officer to trace a proxy vote application. I therefore suggest that the postcode be added.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I have followed my hon. Friend's argument. Not only in Northern Ireland, but even in England, Scotland and Wales, some people have similar names, which makes the postcode even more vital for identification purposes.

Mr. Thompson: I entirely concur with my hon. Friend. The electoral number that used to be on the electoral register will change when the election is called, though I do not understand why. A form of additional registration existed before, under which additional numbers appeared on the register. Now I gather that when the election is called, a button will be pressed and a new register with changed electoral numbers will appear. That will make it more difficult for political parties to put the electoral number on the application forms for proxy votes, and more difficult for the electoral officer to discover where the person on the register lives. In rural areas of Northern Ireland, many people have the same Christian names and are sometimes known by their nicknames. That makes it difficult for the electoral officer to choose the right person to give the vote to, which makes the postcode essential.

Mr. John M. Taylor: I sympathise with the problem of sharing the same name with other people. I have had to live with that most of my life.

Mr. Thompson: The hon. Gentleman has had to live with that problem in the House. Mistakes have been made here and they could be made on postal vote applications. National insurance numbers could also be used on the household form. Such numbers are distinctive and could be used to avoid mistakes of identification.

It is regrettable that legislation is unlikely to be implemented until 2002, and that the issue was not raised before the household registration forms appeared in 2000. If it had been, the additions could have been included for the coming election. There was considerable electoral abuse during the previous general election and it is likely that, because of the Government's inability to act quickly enough, there will be similar abuse in the coming election. I should have liked the next household form to include the additions rather than have to wait until 2002.

Vote stealing is a major issue in the procurement of postal or proxy votes. The number of people applying for absent votes in each constituency in Northern Ireland is approximately double that anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It provides massive potential for fraud. Often in the past individuals have been wholly unaware that an absent vote has even been applied for on their behalf. More rigorous scrutiny of the applications is essential if we are to restore a modicum of fairness to our democracy.

There is undoubtedly quite a lot of electoral malpractice in Northern Ireland, but the majority of it comes from false applications for postal and proxy votes. A smart card will be useful for people going to the polling station, but it will not be of much use for those applying for postal or proxy votes, especially in preventing those who are doing so fraudulently. If the household form were brought in as quickly as possible, it could be used in a more beneficial way to stop the fraud in postal and proxy votes.

I accept that the introduction of a smart card would benefit those who go to the polling stations, but if the presiding officer had a register that additionally contained dates of birth, that would also be a deterrent. If the presiding officer saw someone coming in, he could reasonably judge his age, and if he were in doubt he could question him. It would be unlikely that someone coming to vote fraudulently would know a date of birth. That would be beneficial too.

As the Bill to make the changes will apparently not be introduced all that soon, we could also make acceptable forms of identification other than passports or driving licences. I have known people who have gone to the polling station and produced a pass with a photograph that they used at work, but they were refused a vote

because it was not a designated document. If someone produces a photograph that clearly identifies him, that should be acceptable too.

Mr. Barnes: On the hon. Gentleman's earlier point about the date of birth, I just pass on the information that, in Malta, identity card numbers end with the date of birth and that number appears on the electoral register. There have been problems with identity cards in Northern Ireland, but they might nevertheless be a means by which one could try to ensure 100 per cent. electoral registration, because they would make it easier to trace people and place them on registers.

Mr. Thompson: I am not as far travelled as the hon. Gentleman, but there is much to be said for the wisdom of the people of Malta. I cannot see why we cannot all have an identification card, as it would make things a lot easier in many ways. It is certainly worth looking into.

In conclusion, we are all disappointed that it has taken the Government so long to act. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report was printed in March 1998, we had a preliminary response from the Government in June 1998, followed by another in May 1999, and a recent White Paper. It is clear that the Government are not in any hurry, despite my understanding that we were to have legislation in this Session. I do not blame the Minister for that, because I believe that his intentions were good, but he was overruled in another place. I hope that the Government will examine the matter more urgently and take the promised steps, so that we can look forward to a fair electoral system in Northern Ireland, with abuse at a minimum.

3.31 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I start with a confession to right a wrong of 18 years standing. I was in an election that I am certain was rigged. When I stood for the first year representative position in the economics department of Bristol university, I managed to accrue a first preference vote of 84 votes, while the second placed person came in with 26 votes. That was an impressive achievement, especially considering that there were only 76 people in the class. I can now tell the House, and thus the country, that the two culprits were Ian Williams and Clive Banks, who should never be allowed to stand for Parliament.

I welcome the opportunity to debate such a serious issue, albeit with an amusing side from time to time. I welcome the fact that it was also debated in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 13 February, which demonstrates that the Assembly is taking the issue seriously. I am concerned about the speed with which the Government have acted, and look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that. As hon. Members have said, we must bear in mind that the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue published a report on the issue immediately after the 1997 general election, and that there has been a long delay in the Government's acceptance of its findings. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report, which again has already been mentioned, came out three years ago and, despite that work, there has been little action since the previous election.

I understand that the peace process has had to take priority and that ministerial and officer time is limited, but one might have expected a little more progress on the issue given that personation and electoral malpractice are probably responsible for increasing tension, especially when individuals in Northern Irish politics conclude that outcomes have been materially altered by personation. The point was also made that, in proportional representation elections, smaller influences lead to bigger changes, and I do not need to rehearse the reasons for that.

We all agree that electoral malpractice is deplorable. Democracy is based on the assumption that the will of the people, fairly expressed in the ballot box, influences outcomes. One need think only of the work of individuals such as Emily Pankhurst at the turn of the past century to see how fundamental that right has been, and it is wrong to deprive deliberately some individuals of that right by effectively discounting the value of their votes compared with the votes of those who seek to cheat the system. Let us remember that our democracy is founded on the basis of trust. Everyone is entitled to believe that others will respect the system and, when that does not happen, the entire system comes into question.

Although we are discussing Northern Ireland, we must recognise that there is probably an underlying level of malpractice elsewhere; one occasionally hears about cases of personation on the United Kingdom mainland. However, the incidence of such malpractice is much less pronounced outside Northern Ireland, and there seems to be a cultural rejection of the acceptability of widespread electoral malpractice.

The way that we operate and the way that the system in Northern Ireland has operated has been based on that assumption. However, as we have already heard, people in Northern Ireland have different views. A small number of individuals feel more able or perhaps more entitled to pervert our system of democracy.

Rev. Martin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman used the term "discounting votes". Is he aware that in the implementation of the law on identification, many genuine voters have been turned away and their votes discounted, even though presiding officers knew who they were and knew that they were genuine? As a result of that, we have been pressing for records of those who have been turned away. The electoral officers have not been prepared to give them to us, but it is an aspect of the process that is adding to concern about voting.

Mr. Öpik: I presume that the hon. Gentleman is thinking of occasions when people with the right to vote turn up at the polling station only to find that a vote has already been cast in their name. I have come across such cases. Of course, they do not know who has cast the vote. They do not expect the staff at the polling station to recall the person, and the incident is not followed up or taken through the courts.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Recourse should have been made to tendered ballots in those cases, but I gather that, on certain occasions, people have not been told that they could vote using a tendered ballot. I am thinking of cases such as the one in which a wife came to the polling station with her husband, brought the wrong handbag and left her driving licence at home. Although the

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

presiding officer knew who she was and her husband identified her as well, she was refused her vote. That is a greater discount, when the state turns people away and prevents them from legitimately voting.

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Gentleman raises a comparable injustice to the one that I described. It must be galling for such individuals to be turned away, especially when they know that a proportion of the votes being cast in their neighbourhood may not have been cast legitimately. The hon. Gentleman made that point most effectively.

Sometimes we have campaigns to increase electoral turnout, and, somewhat whimsically, I would like to point out that it is ironic that we are now trying to stop people from voting too much. The correct allocation of votes is one per person. I do not think that is in dispute.

There are also plenty of examples, many of which have already been mentioned, of the ways in which the system is cheated. One of the obvious ones, which the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) has described, is when five or six people are registered in one house or in a one-bedroomed bedsit. I understand that, due to student poverty, that might be the true number of residents of such a bedsit in the environs of Queen's university, Belfast—I will not make a point about tuition fees, because I would be ruled out of order. Nevertheless, when a pattern emerges in certain areas, one has to be suspicious.

It is difficult to prove that sort of abuse. Considerable resources are required—more than is available in Northern Ireland for the task—to follow up all such examples. Ultimately, it can come down to individual members of the public reporting such incidents, but in doing so they lay themselves open to intimidation, given that those who cheat the system are hardly prone to take a fair-minded attitude to being found out. Many other examples could be adduced, but I think that we all agree that we have a serious and particular problem in Northern Ireland that is not shared by the rest of the United Kingdom.

Various proposals have been made. I favour the collecting of personal identifiers such as date of birth and signature, using the registration process. That information can then be used to verify voters' identity. Again, other Members have defined that proposal in detail. However, even with that, the presiding officer would still need discretionary powers to refuse ballot papers. In theory, I could turn up to vote with my grandfather's pension book and say that my date of birth was 1916. The presiding officer should be able to refuse me a ballot paper in those circumstances, as I am not 85, although the past four years in Parliament have definitely put years on me. It would be relatively easy for me to get away with electoral fraud if the difference in date of birth were smaller. My brother, for example, is only a few years younger than me and is also called Öpik. If he were on the electoral register, I could get away with it easily on the assumption that the electoral staff did not know of me. We need to recognise that the measure would not be a panacea for the problems.

A photographic identity document would be a step forward, but it would take time to legislate for such a scheme. I welcome the suggestion that such a card should be free. To charge people for being enfranchised would be unacceptable. The elderly, poor, infirm and others may be disinclined to apply for such a card. If so, we would be concerned about disfranchising people through additional bureaucracy. Will the Minister comment on that?

Perhaps the most radical proposal is to replace all the specified documents with an electoral identity card, although it has been suggested that that might take 10 years or so. I see the Minister shake his head, so I am optimistic that the Government think that the card could be introduced rather faster. I look forward to hearing what he says about the timetable for such a change.

In the specific circumstances, it may make sense to introduce such an identity card scheme. I doubt that it would completely eliminate fraud, but it would probably massively reduce it. It would be a good idea for elections, but I have always had reservations about identity cards on a more widespread basis for citizens in the United Kingdom. I am not a number; I am a free man—well, I sometimes think that I am probably simply a mobile number to the press, but I shall live with that. Nevertheless, the issue should not be used as an opportunity to introduce an identity card on a UK-wide basis. It should simply stand to try to eliminate electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. The other debate should be had separately, on the Floor of the House. Creeping legislation has always concerned me, and I see the possibility of it in this instance.

The system is most open to abuse at present through postal and proxy votes. In evidence to the Select Committee, the former chief electoral officer, Mr. Bradley, said that two thirds of the applications for postal votes that he saw were marked red to show that they were discounted and disqualified. That proportion demonstrates the magnitude of the abuse of the postal vote system. The proposals to introduce checks for postal and proxy votes similar to those required for normal registration, combined with a unique serial number or barcode on each application form, would be useful. I am sure that the fraction of two thirds is right. Can the Minister confirm it? When I was told of it, I was immediately suspicious as it was so astoundingly high. He may not be able to answer now.

As we know from experiments last year on how people vote, postal ballots seem to increase turnout. They had a 60 per cent. positive effect in one of the local government experiments last year. So long as the votes have been cast legitimately, that is great, but we would have to ensure that the increase in turnout was not at the cost of electoral integrity. That is an aside, but the issue of postal ballots must be handled in conjunction with the other considerations.

Despite all the changes, we must recognise that malpractice is tempting to some and achievable by a few. I do not favour compulsory voting, as I think that politicians should positively motivate individuals to vote and earn individuals' votes. Even if it were introduced, it would probably be abused in some way. I shall give an example that illustrates the humility of the Liberal Democrats. In 1992, an individual called Sluggo Copeland voted in the elections for a federal president of the Liberal Democrats. To the returning officer's surprised, it turned out about six months later that Sluggo was a dog that lived in the United States. To

the dog's redemption, its ballot paper arrived after the close of nominations, so it did not significantly influence the outcome. Most intriguingly, neither the Liberal Democrats nor any other party specifies the category of species entitled to membership, so that vote was technically in order—although the handwriting was somewhat illegible. If the Liberal Democrats can have that sort of potential problem, we shall always have people trying to cheat the system. On balance, however, most people, including those in Northern Ireland, take their electoral responsibilities seriously, and do not seek to pervert the course of democracy.

Mr. John M. Taylor: I do not think that I heard the hon. Gentleman correctly. I thought that he said that his party's constitution includes a species definition on who can be a member and who can vote. Would I be right in assuming that, in order to be a member of that party, one has to be a human being? That has not always been my experience.

Mr. Bill Olner (in the Chair): Order. I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman should stray down that route.

Mr. Öpik: Had I been tempted, Mr. Olner, I would have used the phrase often heard in "Just a Minute" and said, "I shall give the hon. Gentleman a point for his entertaining intervention, but he does not get the Floor." If I were a Minister, or even a member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, I should say that I would look into the matter and write to the hon. Gentleman.

We cannot realistically expect to eliminate electoral fraud 100 per cent. It would probably be unfeasibly expensive to try. We certainly are not doing so in the rest of the United Kingdom. We are trying to bring the degree of malpractice in Northern Ireland to a level comparable to that in the rest of the UK. Of course we want a zero rate, but we live in the real world—an imperfect world, with political opportunism, in which some people have different values. I urge the Government to take the necessary steps to require some form of photographic identification to be produced at polling stations to at least start to combat the problem.

In a democracy, it is our responsibility to protect the interests of law-abiding citizens, who will always form the majority. We must make it absolutely clear that society will come down hard and positively on those who seek to upset that valid, honourable and proud electoral system.

3.47 pm

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): As a general principle, I should like the law in Northern Ireland to be the same as it is in mainland Britain. However, I can see that, in this matter, Northern Ireland may have to be treated differently. I shall not press the Minister to answer my questions today.

When I intervened on my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), I wrongly asked why it had taken so long to have this debate. I should have asked why it has taken the Government so long to act on the findings of the Select Committee's report. A collateral question is: when do the Government propose introducing legislation to combat electoral fraud; and collateral to that, in the light of the Select Committee's recommendations, should the Royal Ulster Constabulary's general powers to prevent obstructive and intimidating behaviour be increased?

That having been said, I refer in passing to the remarks of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). I have listened to him many times, and he rightly claims to be an expert on Northern Ireland and on electoral registration; and when those two subjects converge it is a rich cocktail in which he can claim to be a specialist.

The hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) kindly took an intervention from me on the subject of people who have the same name. Of course, it is a well-known fact that, in our honourable House, the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) has the same name as mine. It will not surprise anyone to know that, from time to time, post that arrives for us at the House is muddled up. He once said to me that when I received cheques intended for him I put them in my bank account, and when I received death threats meant for him, I sent them on by second-class post.

Clearly, as a student, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) achieved a prodigious over-performance in the electoral college of his class. It is not a proper matter to discuss here, but I should like, in the margins of the meeting, or on some social occasion, to learn more about that. Whatever went wrong, he was clearly on top of it.

With your indulgence, Mr. Olner, I conclude on a different note, with a matter that is merely tangential to the proceedings. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire paid tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster in his roles as Chairman of the Select Committee and, previously, as Secretary of State. For me, he is not merely my right hon. Friend but my personal friend, and this may be the last time that he and I take part in a parliamentary debate together. His thoroughness, scholarship and wit are legend, and his parliamentary career and achievements are awesome, not just because of the high responsibilities that he has undertaken, with distinction, but also because of his infinitely careful attention to the small things. I admire what he has done more than he may know. To anyone seeking to embark on a parliamentary career I hold him up as an example of how it should be done.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): I am grateful for the opportunity afforded by the debate to discuss electoral abuse in Northern Ireland, and for the many informed contributions, and I acknowledge the expertise and commitment of the Select Committee and its distinguished Chairman, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke).

I should like to add to the sentiments just expressed by the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). I know from my own involvement in Northern Ireland that the right hon. Gentleman is well regarded and held in great affection in the Province. Parliamentary convention dictates that I should not refer to him as my right hon. Friend, but as he knows, I have for several years now

[Mr. George Howarth]

been his constituent, at least for several days a week, and I have been very well served. I resorted to his services only once, and that was for a letter confirming my existence in the block of flats where I live, so that I could gain a residents' car park permit, and I am grateful to him for that. He has played a distinguished role, not only in the House, but in his dealings in Northern Ireland, to which he brought great expertise, warmth and affection.

I shall try to cover as many of the points raised in the debate as I can, in the time available. There is no shortage of time, but I do not want to test the patience of the House too far. I shall not be drawn into commenting on who may or may not vote in elections for any Liberal Democrat party office, but, in the spirit of confession of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), I confess that, in one election for which I was standing—not for Parliament, but for my local authority—an elderly gentleman came up to me outside the polling station and said, "Mr. Howarth, I have just voted for you, and you will be pleased to know that my dog did too." When I questioned him further about that to ascertain the possibility of it happening legally, he produced a polling card with the name Jack Russell on it. I am not sure whether the dog or another member of the man's family was called Jack Russell, but I am happy to report that the size of my majority in that election exceeded one, so I was not elected fraudulently.

I confirm that the Government take the issue of electoral fraud very seriously indeed. Although, as the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster acknowledged, it is difficult to quantify the amount of abuse that occurs in Northern Ireland, the perception of abuse is a threat to the democratic process, a point which the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire made extremely well. I share the disappointment of the House that legislation to counter abuse is not already in place, and I say that especially in view of the fact that elections are expected during the year, if not sooner.

As we have repeatedly made clear, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) said, any measures that we take must strike a balance between limiting opportunities for abuse of the electoral system and not putting unnecessary obstacles in the way of legitimate voters. That sounds like a simple balance to strike, but from the extensive consultations in which I have been involved, I can tell hon. Members that it is not as easy as it sounds.

The measures outlined in the White Paper, which has been referred to extensively in the debate, are largely based on the excellent work done by the Select Committee when it investigated electoral malpractice. The conclusions of the report of the Northern Ireland Office, published at about the same time, have also been taken into account in formulating the proposals in the White Paper. Some, including the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster and the hon. Member for Solihull, have pressed for an explanation for our not having already included the proposals in legislation. That is not because of any lack of commitment to the problem, because the matter is of grave concern, something on which I have received many representations, and an issue that I take seriously. The truth of the matter is that the measures in the White Paper have been refined and developed after detailed consultations with all political parties, with the chief electoral officer, and with registration and electoral officers in Great Britain, as well as after an examination of all the measures that have been introduced in other parts of the world to combat electoral fraud.

Whatever measures we introduce must be broadly acceptable to the House and, as important if not more so, they must be broadly acceptable to the electorate. Because the measures that we want to introduce will affect how people register to vote and how we introduce new attainers, we will have to bring forward primary legislation, as the right hon. Gentleman said. However, much of the proposed change will involve new technical equipment that is not in place. If we were to introduce legislation now, its procedures simply could not be implemented straight away. I shall say more about that in a moment.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that other measures that do not require legislative provision have already been brought forward by the chief electoral officer. For instance, he has initiated a programme of enhanced training for those who administer elections, and he will issue new guidelines for those who work at polling stations on polling day. Given what has been said during the debate about how abuse is often conducted, the Chamber will realise that those two initiatives are welcome and important. The chief electoral officer has also decided that absent vote applications should be processed locally in future to facilitate their scrutiny. There has been on-going liaison between the chief electoral officer and the police, but the Chamber will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to give further details about that now.

We have also commissioned research that will provide valuable information about the extent of vote stealing and perhaps shed more light on the manner in which it happens. I should issue a warning. Those who may be contemplating such abuse should be aware that, if a pattern emerges, it is open to the police to investigate. I need say no more than that. The research is not aimed specifically at that purpose, but if a pattern were to emerge in any constituency, the police could well carry out a more detailed investigation.

Mr. Thompson: The Minister will appreciate that the police have done some good work in the past and have recommended prosecutions that have gone to the Director of Public Prosecutions, but nothing has ever happened. Perhaps he would advise the Director of Public Prosecutions to be more exercised in the matter.

Mr. Howarth: I do not propose to get involved in advising the Director of Public Prosecutions in this debate. The hon. Gentleman may realise that it would be most inappropriate—perhaps even counterproductive—for me to do so. However, we and the police are concerned about the quality of evidence that can be produced to demonstrate that fraud has been carried out, which will determine whether the Director of Public Prosecutions feels that a case can be brought.

As I pointed out, measures have been put in place by the chief electoral officer. I cannot give the Chamber a commitment that a Bill will be introduced

soon—I should probably stick to the formulation "shortly"—because we cannot anticipate how long this Session will last; nor, as is the convention on such matters, can I say what may be in the next Queen's Speech. However, I can give the assurance that if the opportunity to legislate arises, we will bring forward proposals. Most of the White Paper's provisions have a considerable lead-in time; there are no quick solutions for countering electoral abuse.

First, the voter identity card that will be included in the list of documents to be used at polling stations will certainly be issued as quickly as is practicable. However, the House will understand that, when developing such a database and issuing cards of that nature, it is important that both the information technology and the organisation are of the required standard.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I can understand why dates cannot be given, but I urge the Minister and the Government to move quickly after the next election. We have been dragging our feet for so long. We do not know whether we will have a full term until the votes are cast, but we know that in Northern Ireland there will be an Assembly election in a couple of years. We are equally aware that there will be a European election. We should not think of a general election in five years' time. We want this dealt with sooner.

Mr. Howarth: I shall come on to that point in a moment. To return to the question of the voluntary voter identity card, for such a system to be developed in a way that was faulty, inaccurate or open to abuse would only further undermine faith in the electoral system in Northern Ireland and waste public money.

As I mentioned earlier, and the hon. Member for Solihull spoke about this too, many of the changes proposed in our White Paper will depend on information being collected during the autumn canvas. That again requires new information technology and software in the electoral office to ensure that, when that information is collected, it can be used in the appropriate way and, as with the voter ID card, is an accurate basis on which to take forward further counter-abuse measures. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the views and thoughts of the RUC about whether it has sufficient powers. We have consulted the RUC and it believes that it has sufficient powers. It is working closely with the chief electoral officer to ensure that its powers go in the right direction. It would be inappropriate for me to go much further than that. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there has been a useful and productive dialogue between our officials, the chief electoral officer and those representing the Chief Constable.

It is hoped; and this goes directly to the point raised by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), that the legislative measures, particularly those that we put forward in the White Paper, will be in place for the Assembly election scheduled for May 2003. I personally hope that we will be able to achieve that. Had all the practical difficulties been overcome, I should have liked to have done something more before the next general election, but it simply was not practicable. It was not because we were dragging our feet.

In a radio interview shortly after the publication of the White Paper, one of the elected politicians in Northern Ireland, who is not here today and so I shall not name him, accused me of dragging my feet on this, and I was struck by that phrase. I looked back at our office note of a meeting that I had had with him as recently as November, and that confirmed my memory that, at the time, he had urged me not to rush into anything until we were certain that all the technology and correct procedures were in place—a legitimate argument to ensure that we did not disfranchise legitimate voters. That was in November, so it was upsetting to be accused in March by the same hon. Gentleman of dragging my feet. I shall not labour the point, but I have been waiting for an opportunity to get that off my chest.

Mr. Brooke: Will the Minister accept that members of Select Committees—I do not know about the rest of mankind—would prefer the Government to make conservative estimates of when they are likely to deliver rather than to suggest that developments will occur faster than they do in the event?

Mr. Howarth: With his customary wisdom and good sense, the right hon. Gentleman makes a point with which I could not disagree. That is certainly the intention behind our announcements.

I shall now deal with the some of the issues that I have not yet addressed. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire mentioned Pat Bradley, the former chief electoral officer, and asked about postal vote applications. As the hon. Gentleman anticipated, I do not have that information to hand and, despite frantic efforts, I still do not know. When I receive the information, I shall certainly respond to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Öpik: I did not expect to receive the information right now and I thank the Minister for undertaking to find out. We have one eye focused on specific malpractices in Northern Ireland, and what goes on there could have implications for the rest of the United Kingdom that are wider than we realise. I hope that we can use the information about Northern Ireland to check that malpractice is not going on unnoticed elsewhere.

Mr. Howarth: That may have wider consequences, but let us gain the information first and then see what conclusions can be drawn from it.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about Northern Ireland voters taking specified identity documents to the poll. As Northern Ireland Members will know, the necessary documents are widely advertised during elections and, if an election were to take place in the near future, are likely to be so again. Unfortunately, as the hon. Member for Belfast, South said, some people will always turn up without the documents and will be unable to vote unless they can find them and return with them.

The hon. Member for Solihull was right to say that, ideally, what happens in Northern Ireland should be exactly the same as in the rest of the UK, but if special arrangements are necessary, they will sometimes be

[Mr. Howarth]

inconvenient. Unfortunately, that is an inescapable consequence. We must make every effort to remind people in Northern Ireland that specified documents are necessary, but it may pass some people by.

The hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) referred to the potential usefulness of the postcode. I suspect that it is already used, but I may be wrong. Rather than give a direct answer now, I shall check up and advise the hon. Gentleman later.

Mr. Thompson: I think that it is, but that it is not mandatory. I want it to be mandatory to enter the postcode.

Mr. Howarth: That is an interesting point, which I shall check. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned re-numbering on the register as a result of rolling registration. The Representation of the People Act 2000 means that there will be re-numbering to indicate where a new resident has moved in, but most of those on the register will have the same number as in previous elections. Those who have moved will be affected, but not, we hope, those who were in the same place for previous elections. Although there will be that difference, it will not be as difficult as the hon. Gentleman expected.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire mentioned voter identity cards. We will need to make it easy for people to take up that option when it is introduced, because it will be a voluntary card. I take the view—if another Minister is responsible at the time, I am certain that he or she will take the same view—that we will have to make enormous efforts to ensure that obtaining a voter identity card is as easy as possible, even to the extent of having mobile units go round the streets so that people can step outside their door and make the necessary arrangements. It is enormously important to introduce a voluntary voter identification card and dispense with non-photographic specified documents. There will be many people who have no wish to travel abroad and therefore do not have a passport and who do not drive or anticipate driving a motor car and therefore do not have a photo-identity driver's licence. The only document left for them to have will be a voluntary photo-identity card. In those circumstances, it is incumbent on us to ensure that they are as available as possible to legitimate voters. My hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman made a good point well, and I take it seriously.

My hon. Friend also made a number of points arising directly from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's recommendations. With your tolerance, Mr. Olner, I shall deal with those points in something like the order in which they were raised. He said that a recommendation was that, following the notification of a person's death by the registrar of births, deaths and marriages, the chief electoral officer should have the power to remove that person's name from the electoral register immediately. That has been done in Northern Ireland on an informal basis for a number of years, following arrangements made by the chief electoral officer. The Representation of the People Act will place a statutory requirement on registrars to supply that information, which will make easier what my hon. Friend wants to happen.

My hon. Friend also referred to the recommendation on cross-checking with the information from planning services and local authorities as a way of providing information on occupancy, the number of dwellings or even whether a property is derelict. As he made clear, there is an annual canvas in Northern Ireland, whereby, as far as possible, a canvasser visits every household to collect information on those in any dwelling who might be on the electoral register.

Rolling registration, which was introduced in February 2001, will increase the register's accuracy by allowing those who move home to re-register quickly. It empowers the chief electoral officer to collect information from the land valuation registry, the rates agency, the registry of births, deaths and marriages, and local authorities. That list could be lengthened by order, if that proved necessary.

My hon. Friend mentioned another recommendation from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which says that

"evidence indicates that there may be a serious level of multiple registration, at least in some parts of Northern Ireland."

Many hon. Members have referred to that. Multiple registration is not a crime. Those with holiday homes or on full-time study courses, as has been mentioned, may have the right to be registered in two places. Indeed, I suspect that several hon. Members exercise that right; I have already confessed to doing so myself, not that I have any desire to vote in the Westminster constituency merely to have a residents' car park pass. That is another matter.

Mr. Barnes: I also admitted in the House not to using that right, and there is a question of whether it is legitimate that I should not appear on registers. The law can be interpreted in two ways, because we generally adhere to the principle that people should take up only one registration in their sole or main place of residence, to refer to the poll tax. Therefore, I have not made use of that right, but there is some dispute as to whether I should do so. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Ôpik) admitted to adopting the same position.

Mr. Howarth: I should be resuming my place soon, because the debate is bringing forward far too many confessions for the comfort of the House. I leave that concern with my hon. Friend.

Of course, it is a criminal offence to vote more than once in an election, which is the issue with which we are concerned.

Mr. Brooke: May I interpolate a parenthesis to what the Minister has just said, and say that it is criminal except in two by-elections that occur on the same day and in which the individual has the right to vote?

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for drawing that to my attention. I should

have been aware of that, but we are all the wiser yet again for his intervention.

Mr. Öpik: For clarification, will the Minister confirm that he should have said that it is illegal to vote in more than one constituency in the same election?

Mr. Howarth: For argument's sake, if I were registered in Westminster and in Knowsley and there were local government elections on the same day, I could choose to vote in Westminster or Knowsley, but not in both. The same would apply in a parliamentary election. For obvious reasons, I will vote in Knowsley when the general election comes, although, because of the actions of the Boundary Commission for England, it will not be for myself. However, I take the hon. Gentleman's point. I thank him for the opportunity to amplify my point.

I hope that I have made it clear how much we appreciate the excellent work of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and value its continuing interest in pressing the issue. I hope that we have made clear our commitment to finding proposals that will work, while not imposing unreasonable burdens on people legitimately seeking to exercise their democratic right. The overwhelming majority in Northern Ireland want to vote and they do not want to abuse that position; just as importantly, they do not want anyone else to abuse that position for them. The messages from this debate are, "Yes, we need to act," and, "Yes, this House deplores the stealing of votes." If those who are contemplating stealing votes get that message, it will be to the greater good—

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's giving way, as I missed the earlier part of the debate.

As a former teacher, I remember our 16-year-olds being presented with a national insurance number in their last week at school. Surely, that is when we should introduce proper identification for all school leavers. That, in itself, may encourage them to take more interest in the democratic system.

Mr. Howarth: There is an argument for using the national insurance number as a unique identifier, but there are data protection and other difficulties with the suggestion. The national insurance number is issued for one purpose; to use it for another purpose as a statutory requirement would be in breach of the data protection principles in legislation. We could argue about that, but legal advice on the matter would suggest difficulties. I understand the attraction of the proposal but I am advised that it would not be legally possible.

If the message from the Committee is that we are opposed to people's votes being stolen and will take appropriate action to stop it, the debate has been worth while.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes past Four o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 19 March 2001

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Advertising

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what major advertising campaigns his Department is carrying out; and what the cost and duration of each is. [154265]

Dr. Howells: Current major advertising campaigns through COI are:

Campaign	*Expenditure (£) (including VAT)*	*Duration*
Departmental		
Paid Annual Leave	4,034,956	9–25 March
UK Online for Business	1,546,031	19 February–end March
British Trade International		
Trade Partners	1,233,329	5–end March
Agency—Small Business Service		
Hooked on Helping Business	1,439,457	14–28 March

Miners' Compensation

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former miners in the South Shields constituency have *(a)* claimed and *(b)* received payments in compensation for (i) chronic bronchitis and emphysema and (ii) vibration white finger. [153299]

Mr. Hain: In the area of South Shields (as defined by the postcodes NE3 and NE4, which encompass the South Shields constituency) IRISC, the Department's claims handlers have registered 728 claims in respect of compensation for respiratory disease and 1,049 claims in relation to vibration white finger, VWF. To date, there have been 156 individual payments totalling £600,000 in respect of respiratory disease and 348 individual payments in respect of VWF amounting to £2.5 million.

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the action he is taking to improve the consistency of the procedure for claiming compensation for vibration white finger between the Department for Social Security and his Department's schemes. [153612]

Mr. Hain: The Benefit Scheme administered by the DSS and the compensation scheme administered by this Department are two completely different schemes.

Industrial Industries Disablement Benefits (IIDB) are payable to people who are disabled as a result of an accident at work or are one of over 70 prescribed diseases known to be a risk of occupation. VWF is one of these prescribed diseases. Benefit is normally paid only in respect of an assessment of 14 per cent. disability or more. Criteria for deciding claims are narrowly defined and set out in detail in legislation.

The DTI's compensation scheme is based on common law principles and negligent exposure to vibration must be substantiated before any payment is made. An assessment is made on the level of disability which is set out in a Handling Arrangement agreed between the Department and miners' solicitors.

Departmental Policies (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Walthamstow constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154185]

Mr. Caborn: The parliamentary constituency of Walthamstow has benefited from a range of initiatives since 1 May 1997. Direct business advice and support to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) has been provided by the DTI through core programmes and the Business Links. While my Department does not collect detailed statistical information on a constituency basis, over 590 requests for advice, information and support from SMEs in Walthamstow have been handled by the Business Links since May 1997.

During the same period, grants totalling £215,000 have been awarded to companies through Regional Selective Assistance, as four of the wards in this constituency qualify for this aid.

All wards in the constituency are eligible for the Enterprise Grant Scheme which was introduced in 2000.

Credit Facilities

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will take steps to dissuade companies which offer credit facilities to customers from encouraging people to build up substantial debts. [154425]

Dr. Howells: Last November, I set up a taskforce, which includes credit industry representatives, to explore the causes and effects of over-indebtedness and develop practical solutions for achieving more responsible lending and borrowing. The taskforce will present proposals to me in April and I will be aiming to implement measures as soon as possible after that.

Internal Market Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the outcome was of the Internal Market Council held in Brussels on 12 March; what the Government's voting record at the Council was; and if he will make a statement. [153814]

Mr. Caborn: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State responsible for consumers and corporate affairs represented the UK at the Internal Market, Consumers and Tourism Council in Brussels on 12 March.

The Council discussed the Cardiff economic reform process and reached agreement on conclusions for input to the Stockholm European Council which support the reform agenda agreed at the Lisbon Summit in March

2000. The Council also discussed the Commission's Communications on the removal of barriers to trade in services, simplification of the regulatory environment and the Commission's Communication on New European Labour Markets.

Efforts to achieve a single EU-wide Community Patent were discussed, but there was no agreement on procedural conclusions allowing an early approach to the European Patent Office. The issue will be discussed again at the June Internal Market Council.

The Council discussed the Presidency's draft compromise on the Directive on Distance Marketing of Financial Services but was unable to reach political agreement. This will also revert to the June Council.

There were Commission presentations on the Strategy for the Customs Union; proposals relating to the traceability and labelling of genetically modified organisms; the Green Paper on integrated product policy; and the forthcoming Communication on the eEurope Action Plan. The Presidency introduced its strategy on integration of environmental protection and sustainable development into Internal Market policy, which will be discussed at the Council in June and adopted at the Gothenburg Summit. The Council generally endorsed the Commission's approach to a strategy for a chemicals policy, with a number of member states emphasising that the competitiveness of the EU industry needed to be taken into account. It took note of the progress made on the negotiations on the Commission's proposals relating to a European Food Authority.

There were no votes at the Council.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will seek from the Chairman of the Post Office, an explanation of the reasons for which he has failed to reply to letters to him dated 12 January and 24 February from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to sporting opportunities for Post Office workers. [154068]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been advised by the Post Office that the Chairman's office has been in contact with the parliamentary office of my right hon. Friend. They have apologised for the failure to reply to these letters, which was due to an internal administrative error, and say that a response has now been prepared.

Weights and Measures

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the financial effects on traders who *(a)* have and *(b)* have not complied with regulations requiring loose goods to be sold in metric units. [154136]

Dr. Howells: Most imperial weighing machines can be converted to metric at an average cost of £100 per machine. The price of a new metric weighing machine starts at about £450. No assessment has been made of the financial effects of non-compliance because it is expected that the conversion will be completed in the near future.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress towards compliance with regulations requiring loose goods to be sold in metric units. [154135]

Dr. Howells: It is expected that the remaining imperial machines will be converted to metric or be replaced by metric weighing machines in the near future.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effectiveness and compliance of United Kingdom legislation introduced as a result of Directive 80/181/EEC. [154190]

Dr. Howells: The conversion of all weighing machines to metric units, as required by Directive 80/181/EEC as amended in 1989, has taken longer than expected, but is expected to be completed in the near future.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the number of imperial weighing machines still in use in the United Kingdom. [154134]

Dr. Howells: There are approximately 160,000 weighing machines in use for the sale of goods loose at the point of sale. The Department understands that nearly 130,000 are now metric and that just over 30,000 are still imperial.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under what circumstances he uses the powers available to him under section 71 of the Weights and Measures Act 1985 to seek to encourage proper enforcement by local weights and measures authorities of legislation introduced as a result of Directive 80/181/EEC; and if he will make a statement. [154140]

Dr. Howells: The Department considers that local weights and measures authorities have taken steps to secure compliance with regulations on units of measurement that implement Directive 80/181/EEC as amended. The Department will consider any representations alleging a lack of proper enforcement.

Mobile Telephones

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will introduce legislation requiring retailers of mobile telephones to obtain the name and address of those purchasing such equipment and for this information to be registered with a telephone licensing authority. [152307]

Ms Hewitt: There is currently no plan to introduce legislation requiring purchasers of mobile phones to provide their name and address. However, this is an important issue and one which will be kept under review.

Telecommunication Masts

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce the outcome of the consultation on telecommunication mast development. [154293]

Ms Hewitt: The announcement on the outcome of the consultation was announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning on 16 March 2001. Details of the announcement can be found on the DETR website at www.detr.gov.uk.

Export Credits (Saudi Arabia)

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the applications for credit guarantees relating to Saudi Arabia received by the ECGD in the last 20 years, indicating the companies, amounts and projects in Saudi Arabia involved. [153726]

Mr. Caborn: Over the last 20 years ECGD has issued no guarantees in respect of credit business with Saudi Arabia. There have however been some 54 guarantees issued totalling £14.6 billion in respect of cash contracts.

Details of applications which have not been the subject of a guarantee are subject to legitimate confidentiality under Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and are not included in this answer.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the impact of foot and mouth disease has been on the Royal Mail postal service; when full postal service will be restored; and if he will make a statement. [154219]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been advised by the Post Office that Royal Mail and Parcelforce Worldwide are following advice from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about delivering letters and parcels during the current outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Guidelines have been issued to all staff about deliveries in affected areas, and where advised appropriate precautions are being taken.

Post Office staff can deliver mail and parcels as normal in all areas of the country except those within the restriction zones where special arrangements have been agreed with affected customers. Royal Mail and Parcelforce Worldwide are co-operating fully with all sanitary arrangements, which have been put in place by landowners outside quarantined areas regarding deliveries.

The Post Office is in constant contact with MAFF and will continue to co-operate fully with their instructions. The full service will be restored when the current outbreak has been eradicated.

WALES

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the total cost, including travel, accommodation and subsistence allowance, was of the two visits to Brussels undertaken by a departmental or non-departmental special adviser, mentioned in his answer of 5 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 46W. [152061]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The two visits referred to in my earlier reply included one to Brussels and one to Dublin. The average total cost per trip including travel, accommodation and subsistence for the departmental special adviser was £649.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152043]

Mr. Paul Murphy: All Government Departments are required to report annually on timber purchases, explaining what steps are being taken to buy timber and timber related products from sustainable and legal sources and the quantity and types of purchase. Information on timber procurement by the Wales Office will be published, along with information for other departments, in a report by Green Ministers in the autumn of 2001. The Wales Office has no other plans to publish information on timber procurement.

Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will meet Welsh members of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss issues raised in the Parliament's manifesto. [152962]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I understand that most parts of Wales have yet to elect members. When this process has been completed, I shall be happy to consider an invitation to meet them.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152787]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* Pay settlements for the Wales Office are linked to those of the National Assembly for Wales. The full value of the award for 2000–01 was 5 per cent., taking into account the basic award, performance and progression elements, changes to the pay bands, and all other elements. The average percentage increases in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the senior Civil Service, was 4.2 per cent. for 2000–01.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Advertising

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by her Department; and if she will make a statement. [153416]

Clare Short: DFID does not have an advertising budget. The vast majority of advertising relates to recruitment advertising in newspapers and journals, costing £1 million-£2 million annually.

DFID has no agencies or other public bodies.

Human Rights

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to promote human rights in poorer countries. [153752]

Clare Short: Human rights are central to my Department's work which is dedicated to the realisation of the human rights of the poorest people of the world. In October last year we published our strategy for achieving this goal, entitled "Realising human rights for poor people". A copy was placed in the Library of the House. I shall send one to my hon. Friend.

Ethiopia (Refugee Returns)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to investigate the refugee screening process of the Oramo people in Sudan returning to Ethiopia; and if she will make a statement. [153721]

Clare Short: We support the efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Ethiopian, Chadian, Somali and Ugandan refugees in 2001, unless after screening they have compelling reasons to remain in the Sudan.

Colombia

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the Government's policy with regard to Plan Colombia. [153935]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

Plan Colombia is the Colombian Government's strategy for tackling the interconnected problems of internal violence, social and economic inequality, abuse of human rights and drugs cultivation and trafficking.

Concerns are raised by some aspects of Plan Colombia, in particular the eradication of illegal crops by aerial spraying. The UK has not given any financial or other support to the plan. Instead, the UK is contributing to and fully supports assistance to Colombia through the European Union of 105 million euro over the next five years. The EU package will focus on measures to support human rights, long-term economic and social development and an end to violence.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to *(a)* the Colombian Government, *(b)* the USA Government and *(c)* international organisations about the position of the trade union movement in Colombia. [153932]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

We are very concerned about increasing levels of violence in Colombia, particularly that directed at trade unionists and other human rights defenders.

The British Embassy in Bogota is in regular contact with the main trade unions in Colombia, and has discussed the position of trade unionists there with both the ILO special representative, Rafael Alburquerque, and the Colombian Government. Following a meeting with Alexander Lopez of the CUT Union (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores), who has received death threats in Colombia, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office wrote to Colombia's Vice-President on 21 December 2000 to underline our concern that he and other trade union leaders be afforded the protection necessary to go about their lives and work safely.

The UK Government have a regular and on-going dialogue with the US Government about the human rights situation in Colombia.

The UK supported the appointment to Colombia in June 2000 of a special representative of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to report on trade union rights and the security of trade union members and to verify measures taken by the Colombian Government to protect trade unionists.

We expect the European Union to make a statement on these issues when the Commission on Human Rights meets in Geneva from 19 March to 27 April.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Stationery

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if bespoke stationery provided for hon. Members' use is 100 per cent. recycled; and what the definition is of the term environmentally friendly, used in the House of Commons stationery catalogue. [154404]

Mrs. Roe: Bespoke stationery, as approved by the Administration Committee in May 1998, is manufactured from 75 per cent. pre-consumer waste and 25 per cent. virgin pulp harvested from sustainable forests. The current stationery catalogue contains no reference to environmentally friendly stationery.

SCOTLAND

Policy and Strategy Units

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when her policy unit was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for the unit on a full-time basis. [150361]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department does not have a policy unit.

SERC Contracts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the contracts that exist between SERC and the Department, its executive agencies and associated public bodies; and if she will list those which have existed in the last three years. [151349]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department has one contract with SERC, for the provision of cleaning services at the Department's office in Edinburgh. There have been no other contracts with SERC since the Department was established on 1 July 1999.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the terms of reference, composition and consultation mechanisms of the Performance and Innovation Unit's inquiry into health in developing countries, indicating when it will report. [152120]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit's project has three key aims:

(i) to develop a more effective approach to reducing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria in developing countries;

(ii) to identify which instruments might best deliver solutions at an affordable price to developing and developed countries; and

(iii) to produce a framework for a more effective partnership between governments and the private sector, including the pharmaceutical industry, and the voluntary sector to combat these diseases in developing countries.

The challenge is to find mechanisms to improve incentives, deploying new and existing solutions for tackling infectious diseases alongside developing countries' health care delivery systems and policies. This project will consider the attractiveness, efficacy, cost-effectiveness and affordability of the different types of the alternative approaches; sustainability will be an important criterion for assessing interventions.

As with all PIU projects, the project team comprises secondees and other Government Departments, including the Department for International Development, as well as specialists from the academic and private sectors. An advisory group is to be appointed including members from a wide range of backgrounds.

The project team is developing its ideas with a wide range of people and organisations already undertaking work in these areas. The team works closely with the Department for International Development and HM Treasury, and is meeting international stakeholders, including the World Health Organisation, the World Bank, UNAIDS and Governments of developing countries as well as NGOs and the private sector.

The project's major output will be a set of proposals to feed into the UK position at the G8 summit in July 2001. Two consultation papers have been published so far, and are available on the project's website: http://www/cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2001/health/mainpage.html.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to publish the report prepared on the future of UK renewable energy by the Performance and Innovation Unit. [154196]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit study on resource productivity and renewable energy will be published in the autumn. The study will outline a long-term strategy for moving to a low-carbon, low-waste, knowledge-intensive economy in which renewable energy technologies are expected to play a major role. The study will set out how the £100 million announced in my environment speech on Tuesday 6 March will be used to support the development of a range of renewable technologies.

Foot and Mouth Disease

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment Her Majesty's Government have made of the overall economic consequences for areas where foot and mouth disease has been discovered; if he will identify the consequential losses that flow from the disease with a view to proposing a package of financial measures to assist; and if he will make a statement. [153975]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 753–54W.

The overall economic consequences cannot be quantified until the full extent of the outbreak is known. However, the situation is clearly a serious one. That is why I have asked my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to chair a Task Force to consider the implications of the outbreak for the rural economy, both immediately and in the longer term and to report to me on appropriate measures.

Environmental Policy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to discuss with business the implementation of environmental productivity indicators and long-term resource targets contained in his speech on environmental policy at Chatham House on 6 March. [154194]

The Prime Minister: We are already taking this forward. Last month, the Department of Trade and Industry held a joint conference with the Green Alliance on how to measure improvements in resource productivity. We will follow this up with further discussion with business, including asking the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment for its views on the use of long-term resource targets to stimulate business innovation and improvement. The Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office is also carrying out a major study on resource productivity and renewable energy.

House of Lords (Membership)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to exclude from membership of the House of Lords those persons who are not resident in the United Kingdom for tax purposes. [154243]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* As the Government made clear in their White Paper "Modernising Parliament Reforming the House of Lords" (Cm 4183), I have relinquished much of my power over the award of peerages. I have retained the right to determine how many recommendations to ask for from the other political parties and the Appointments Commission, but otherwise have made it clear that I will pass these recommendations on to Her Majesty, except in the most exceptional circumstances such as those endangering the security of the realm.

Leaked Reports

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what mechanism exists for investigating leaks of reports commissioned by him where the leaks occur before he receives them. [154398]

The Prime Minister: It would be open for the author of an independent report commissioned by the Government to request the Government's assistance to investigate alleged leaks of drafts of that report. I have received no such request in respect of any recent independent report, nor do I expect one.

The right hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) delivered a letter on his behalf to the President of Syria during his recent visit to that country. [154332]

The Prime Minister: When in Syria, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was invited, at short notice, to a private meeting with the President where he delivered a short courtesy letter from the Prime Minister.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Burns: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the rules in the ministerial code of conduct governing Ministers visiting hon. Members' constituencies. [154408]

The Prime Minister: The rules are set out in paragraph 79 of the ministerial code.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Policies

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if he will make a statement. [152031]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Ilford, North has benefited from two strategic Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) schemes in the London Borough of Redbridge, Bridging the Gap and the Health Ladder to Social Inclusion.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 required the establishment of partnerships covering all local authority areas led by the police and the local authorities to reduce crime. Local initiatives supported under the Government's crime reduction programme include two CCTV schemes—a £203,000 scheme in Ilford town centre and a £714,000 safer parking scheme.

The principal funding that this Department has provided to the London Borough of Redbridge in 1997 to 2002 is shown in the table. These included grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Ilford, North. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£000

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Revenue support grant	94,657	102,643	107,450	107,450	118,642
Income from national non-domestic rates	49,620	52,488	57,187	64,381	63,123
Housing capital allocations	3,525	4,456	3,113	2,665	2,494
SRB funding—Bridging the Gap	193	550	547	992	691
Health ladder	—	—	75	1,050	1,500
Transport supplementary grant	154	147	169	n/a	—
Transport annual capital guideline	154	147	169	n/a	—
Transport block supplementary credit approval	640	479	644	1,375	—
Capital Challenge (supplementary credit and basic credit approvals)	1,460	1,634	162	0	0

[1] Where known

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Stroud constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152404]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The principal kinds of funding which this Department has provided to Stroud in 1997–98 to 2000–01 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals from revenue and capital expenditure.

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant[1] (£ million)	1.736	1.462	1.305	1.013	1.288
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[1] (£ million)	3.407	3.465	3.732	4.149	4.104
Housing Investment Programme (£ million)	1.630	1.167	1.250	2.660	1.179
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy[2] (£ million)	2.332	1.790	1.396	0.982	4.588
Capital Receipts Initiative (£ million)	0.282	0.855	0.869	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme (£ million)	0.060	0.030	n/a	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing[3] (£)	132,597	132,597	132,597	132,597	132,597
SRB funding[4] (£)	nil	41,580	117,907	862,066	85,590
Transport Supplementary Grant[5] (£ million)	2.565	1.555	3.573	0.463	0.409
Transport Annual Capital Guideline[5] (£ million)	1.965	1.489	2.973	0.389	0.408
Rural Bus Challenge Grant[6] (£ million)	0	0.25	0.999	0	0
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant (£ million)	0	0.794	0.794	0.794	1.0

[1] The figures shown for Revenue Support Grant [1] and income from National Non-Domestic Rates [1] are the amount received by Stroud District Council.

[2] The figure for Housing Revenue Account Subsidy for 2000–01 is provisional and may be revised by subsequent claim forms. The figure for 2001–02 is based on the maintenance and management grant for the area, multiplied by the number of houses eligible.
[3] The figures for Loan Charges Defective Housing for 2000–01 are provisional at this stage since it is claimed retrospectively.
[4] SRB Funding—N.B. SRB was not paid to Stroud in 1997–98. Also the 2001–01 figure is forecast and another 5,000 may be paid at some stage.
[5] Transport Supplementary Grant and Transport Annual Capital Guideline represent the amount paid to Gloucestershire in 1997–98 to 2001–02. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure. It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Stroud. It is for the local authorities to decide where within their boundaries these resources are applied.
[6] Rural bus challenge—figures represent awards in that year, actual expenditure may be over a longer period. 2000–01 figures for RBSG represent allocation, actual outturn figure is not yet known.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly to the locations as possible, the effects of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997 on *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district. [153000]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to Wakefield local authority in the year's 1997–98 to 2001–02 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on the Hemsworth constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Revenue Support Grant	105.616	113.327	121.378	117.791	126.779
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	69.240	72.239	78.291	88.749	86.879
Housing Investment Programme	[2]6.812	5.541	6.302	[3]14.711	[4]22.429
Capital Receipts Initiative	1.227	4.153	4.272	n/a	n/a
SRB Funding	2.33	2.14	3.39	3.92	2.82
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (award date)	—	—	—	—	[5]9.990
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.721	0.702	0.876	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.721	0.702	0.876	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	1.104	1.086	1.130	4.608	[6]—

[1] Where known

Notes:

Housing Investment Programme

[2] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from the previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98.
[3] Single Housing Pot introduced 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP.
[4] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02, with the introduction of the Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in sound condition. Wakefield's MRA allocation is £18,088 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation above.

Housing Revenue Account Subsidy

£

Wakefield	*M&M allowance per dwelling*
1997–98	761.67
1998–99	767.98
1999–2000	791.67
2000–01	832.01
2001–02	839.81

Note:
Figures for the HRA are given as allowance per dwelling rather than in global figures

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund

[5] Wakefield is one of 88 local authority areas, which have been targeted for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and over the next three financial years will receive £9.990 million (£2.222 million, £3.329 million and £4.439 million respectively over the next three F/Ys).

Because of this, Wakefield is also eligible for the Community Empowerment Fund (£400,000 over the next three years) and the Community Chest (no details yet, but will be a national fund of £50 million over three years).

Transport

[6] This figure will not be known until agreement has been reached on the split between the five West Yorkshire local authorities of the Transport Supplementary Credit Approval allocated to the West Yorkshire PTA.

In addition, the following funds have been allocated to the West Yorkshire PTA, some of which have been/will be spent in the Wakefield MDC area:

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0	0	3.000	2.500	[7]57.607
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	0	0	0.364	0.209	0.917
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	0.556	0.556	0.556	0.710

[7] This figure has yet to be split between the West Yorkshire PTA and five other West Yorkshire highway authorities

SRB Schemes in Wakefield Area

Round 1: SESKU—Wakefield Economic Alliance

Aims to introduce a coherent and sustainable programme of regeneration to break the decline of the South Elmsall, South Kirby and Upton (SESKU) areas which have been dependent upon the coal industry.

SRB Support: £6.563 million

Scheme Total: £64.76 million

Round 3: Foundations for a Competitive Economy

Four-year scheme led by Wakefield Learning Partnership aimed at raising IT attainment and skill levels, fostering a culture of lifetime learning and equipping people for employment through community multi-media centres.

SRB Support: £2.3 million

Scheme Total: £7 million

Round 4: Fresh Aire

Six-year community-based scheme focusing on employment, education and training, community safety, and community capacity building. The target area covers the Airedale and Warwick, the most socially excluded estates in the district.

SRB Total: £4.127 million

Scheme Total: £14.910 million

Round 5: Hemsworth Coalfield

A six year scheme submitted by the Hemsworth Coalfield Partnership led by Wakefield MDC which focuses on the coalfields area in the south of Wakefield District, covering the communities of Hemsworth and Elmsall.

SRB Total: £8.050 million

Scheme Total: £20.319 million

Round 6 Working on Cold Coal—North Wakefield

To further the regeneration of neighbourhoods and communities in the northern half of Wakefield District. Increase the employability of those excluded from the regional economy and reviving the neighbourhoods within which they live.

SRB Total: £7.87 million

Scheme Total: £28.93 million

European Funding

Under the 1997–99 Objective 2 Programme, the Action Plan for the Wakefield district was worth £5.3 million in ERDF and £2.4 million in ESF, together with capital projects (a development site and Yorkshire Sculpture Park projects worth over £6 million in ERDF/ESF).

Objective 3 (ESF), Wakefield had £113,000 in 1998 and £236,000 in 1999.

Objective 4 (ESF), Wakefield had £194,000 for 1998 and £490,000 for 1999.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Don Valley constituency, the effects on Doncaster of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153517]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to Doncaster local authority in the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Don Valley constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Revenue Support Grant	117.119	124.896	131.060	129.066	137.215
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	63.941	66.425	71.946	80.861	78.797
Housing Investment Programme	[2]4.383	4.257	5.054	[3]12.524	[4]16.590
Capital Receipts Initiative	1.015	3.424	3.241	—	—
New Deal for Communities Funding	—	—	—	—	[5]50.0
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (award date)	—	—	—	—	[6]19.8
Transport Supplementary Grant	1.216	0.383	0.785	Nil	[7]11.350
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	1.216	0.383	0.785	9.750	[7]9.120
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0.300	0.270	1.280	9.934	[7]4.320

[1] Where known

Housing notes:

[2] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98.

[3] Single Housing Pot introduced from 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP.

[4] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02, with the introduction of a new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in a sound condition. Doncaster's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £11.976 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation.

[5] Over 10 years

[6] Over three years

Doncaster's overall capital allocation of £16.590 million, represents an increase of 261.60 per cent. on the inherited 1997–98 HIP allocation.

Housing Revenue Account Subsidy

£

Doncaster	*M&M allowance per house*
1997–98	748.06
1998–99	753.97
1999–2000	776.37
2000–01	814.59
2001–02	820.29

Note:

In addition, Doncaster benefits from HRA subsidy. Figures are given as allowance per dwelling rather than in global figures.

Transport:

[7] This figure includes £9 million Transport Supplementary Grant held back until required.

In addition, the following funds have been allocated to the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority, some of which have been/will be spent in the Doncaster metropolitan borough council area.

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	5.500	6.125	8.500	11.923	22.500
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	0	0	0.028	1.383	0.674
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	0.339	0.339	0.339	0.433

SRB

No awards have been made to Doncaster since May 1997. However the Dearne Valley was awarded £1.6 million in 1998 to help the long-term unemployed back to work and to improve educational attainment. Doncaster also stands to benefit from the two successful South Yorkshire Coalfield bids (£16.5 million in 1999 and £80 million in 2000) and the £0.6 million bid in 2000 by the South Yorkshire Black Forum to support ethnic communities.

European Funding

Doncaster has had 2 Objective 2 Action Plans (covering Business Support and Community Development). Together they have had allocations of £6.3 million ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) and £5.4 million ESF (European Social Fund). There were also Objective 2 offers for Tourism projects (including the Earth Centre) of £4.5 million and for the development of major industrial sites (Redhouse/Brodsworth) of some £2 million.

South Yorkshire has been designated an Objective 1 area, of which Doncaster and Don Valley are a part, and stands to benefit from over £700 million of European Funds over the next seven years.

Vehicle Tax

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many owners of vehicles were prosecuted in 2000 for *(a)* not registering and *(b)* not paying tax on their vehicles in 2000. [153760]

Mr. Hill: In 2000 there were 4,755 successful prosecutions for failure to comply with registration requirements and an additional 7,772 offenders paid out of court settlements. There were also 229,069 successful prosecutions for not paying Vehicle Excise Duty. An additional 202,020 motorists paid out of court settlements.

Abandoned Motor Vehicles

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which agencies are responsible for the reporting, checking and removal of abandoned motor vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [153800]

Mr. Hill: The agencies responsible for the reporting of abandoned motor vehicles are the local authorities, the police and the Environment Agency. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the police are responsible for checking abandoned vehicles and contractors employed by these bodies and the local authorities are responsible for their removal.

New arrangements for closer working between these bodies are currently being piloted.

Rail Accident (Hither Green)

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the collision of two Connex South Eastern trains outside Hither Green station on 12 March. [153755]

Mr. Hill: At 08.30am on Monday 12 March, the 07.58am Connex South Eastern Sevenoaks to Cannon Street passenger train passed a signal at danger at Hither Green. It continued for approximately half a mile before running through points which were set for the 08.08am Connex South Eastern Crayford to Cannon Street passenger train. A collision then occurred with the front of the Crayford train striking the side of the Sevenoaks train. There was no derailment, but both trains sustained superficial damage.

Four people were taken to hospital for treatment of minor injuries. The traction current was isolated to allow passengers to begin to leave the train at 10.00am. The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) were at the scene and have confirmed that the collision was caused by the driver of the Sevenoaks train passing a signal at danger (SPAD).

All serious SPADs are thoroughly investigated by HMRI and the rail industry. Further details of this incident will be reported in a future edition of HSE's monthly SPAD report, copies of which are placed in both House Libraries each month.

Initial indications suggest that this incident would have been prevented by the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS). Regulations made under this Government require that TPWS be installed across the network by the end of 2003.

Audit Commission

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many times in *(a)* this Parliament and *(b)* the last Parliament, the Audit Commission has given evidence to the House of Commons Environment and Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committees. [153942]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Audit Commission has in this Parliament given evidence to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee on five occasions. The Audit Commission is reviewing its archives to ascertain the number of occasions it gave evidence to the Environment Select Committee in the last Parliament and the Controller of Audit will write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the changes the Government have made to the powers of *(a)* the Audit Commission and *(b)* the District Audit Service in the past three years. [153799]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government amended the powers of the Audit Commission, and of auditors appointed by it, in the Local Government Act 1999, the Health Act 1999 and the Local Government Act 2000. The Audit Commission was given a new power to inspect compliance by Best Value authorities with the requirements of Part I of the Local Government Act 1999; and to work jointly with the Commission for Health Improvement in the Health Act 1999. Auditors appointed by the Audit Commission have been given new a new power to audit the best value performance plans of Best Value authorities under the Local Government Act 1999. The powers of auditors to issue prohibition orders have been replaced by a power to issue advisory notices. In the Local Government Act 2000, the auditors' surcharging powers were repealed.

Local Government

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government *(a)* signed and *(b)* ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government. [153817]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The European Charter of Local Self-Government was signed by this Government on 3 June 1997 and ratified on 24 April 1998.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy towards scrutiny by local government of services provided by *(a)* the National Health Service and *(b)* local water companies. [153806]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under their new constitutions, a council's overview and scrutiny committees can make reports or recommendations on any matters which affect their local areas or communities.

The Government have long recognised the democratic deficit in the NHS at local level, and for this reason are making provision to ensure that scrutiny of the NHS is placed in the hands of democratically elected councillors.

The Health and Social Care Bill, which is currently before Parliament, provides for overview and scrutiny committees of county councils, county borough councils (in Wales), unitary authorities and London borough councils, established under Part II of the Local Government Act 2000, to take over the scrutiny of local NHS services from Community Health Councils. The Bill also provides for the involvement of district councils under joint scheme arrangements.

Overview and scrutiny committees will have new powers to review local NHS bodies, and will make reports and recommendations to the bodies which they review. Local NHS bodies will have to provide clear justification for any recommendations which they do not accept. They will be subject to a duty to provide information about their operation and activities requested by an overview and scrutiny committee, and their Chief Executives will be required to attend committee meetings twice a year to answer questions about their organisations.

Health authorities will have a specific duty to consult overview and scrutiny committees on any major changes to services in their area. If a committee finds that the proposed changes are not in the interests of the local community it will be able to refer the matter to the new national Independent Reconfiguration Panel. A committee may also refer proposed changes to the panel if it believes that the process of involving patients and the public in their development is inadequate.

As to local water companies, under section 77 of the Water Industry Act 1991, local authorities have a duty to keep themselves informed about the wholesomeness and sufficiency of water supplies, including private supplies, provided to premises in their area. Section 200 of the Act also gives a duty to every sewerage undertaker to provide local authorities with copies of maps of public sewers and any modifications to those maps.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the guidance on councillors' allowances issued since May 1997. [153804]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In August 1997, the DETR issued a guidance document entitled "Guidance on Councillors' Allowances, Tax and Social Security". This updated an earlier version of this guidance which had been issued in 1993. We are currently consulting on draft statutory guidance which will give guidance to councils about members' allowances following the introduction of the requirement to establish and maintain independent remuneration panels and the abolition of attendance allowance.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the pilot schemes that have been initiated with local councils since May 1997 and the councils which have been involved in each pilot. [153818]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This information is not held centrally.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government have taken to attract more *(a)* women, *(b)* young people, *(c)* people of an ethnic minority background and *(d)* people with disabilities to become local councillors. [153803]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In our White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch With the People" (Cm 4014) we stated our belief that a combination of the new rewarding roles envisaged for councillors and steps taken to address some potential financial and other disincentives would serve to encourage a wider cross section of the community to serve as councillors. We have now legislated for new council constitutions which will open up new and rewarding roles, and we are consulting on a new regime for allowances including, for example, proposals for a new child carers and dependant carers' allowance.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is on local councils holding annual elections with a third of councillors up for election each year; how many councils currently hold annual elections; and how many did so in 1997. [153772]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Our policy on councils electing one third of their members each year for three years out of four is set out in the White Paper "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People" (Cm 4014). There are 131 local authorities in England which elect one

third of councillors each year for three years out of four. Of these, two authorities held elections during 1997. Part IV of the Local Government Act 2000 provides us with powers to implement fully our policy.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will *(a)* publish Ministers' instructions to civil servants relating to the allocation of local government grants and *(b)* take steps to make the local government finance settlement process more transparent. [153902]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We consulted local government on the provisional local government finance settlement for 2001–02 in November. The reasons for our decisions on allocating grant in response to that consultation were given to the House by my colleague, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 19W.

The method of grant calculation is laid out in the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001–02. Other related documents and statements are publicly available and can be found in the *Official Report*, the House of Commons library and on the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions website.

Creating a more intelligible and transparent local government finance system is one of our key aims; and reforms to this end were outlined in last September's local government finance green paper. Our White Paper later this year will set out our decisions on the way forward.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what Government policy is on the establishment of more unitary authorities in local government. [153776]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government have indicated that a move to elected regional government in England would imply changing to a predominantly unitary system of local government. It is too early to say what this would mean in practice, as Government would need to take careful note of what the people in the regions think. In the meantime, there are no plans at present to reform the structure of local government in England and no presumption that, if there is to be any local government restructuring, it would have to come before the introduction of regional government.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if proposed referendums on regional assemblies will include options involving abolition of county councils in two-tier areas. [153773]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We remain committed to move to directly-elected regional government, where there is support as demonstrated in referendums. No decisions have been taken on the form of the proposals which might be the subject of such referendums.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidances he has issued on the conduct of referendums held by councils on local issues; and if he will make a statement. [153940]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 539W.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to introduce simpler local government grant system which is based predominantly on population. [154142]

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to simplify the local government grant system and to base it predominantly on population. [153847]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last September's local government finance green paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for all local authorities fairer. A White paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward.

The existing formulae for distributing revenue grant are based predominantly on local authority population figures including relevant client groups (such as schoolchildren or elderly people). Were we to decide to continue to distribute grant by formula, this would continue to be the case.

As with the present system, such a formula could be modified to take other factors into account such as levels of deprivation and the higher costs of recruiting and retaining local authority staff—but in a more transparent and comprehensible way than the present system.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that a future grant system will reflect the importance of community consultation to local democracy. [153848]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last September's local government finance green paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for local authorities fairer. One option was to distribute grant on the basis of consideration of an authority's corporate plan. Clearly, such a plan would reflect community consultation processes.

The other option was a grant distribution system based on formulae plus safety valve grant, targeted grant and local public service agreements (PSAs). Under such a system, local PSAs would provide the scope to reflect the priorities of the local community.

A White Paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward. More generally, the green paper noted the welcome trend of consulting local taxpayers about local tax and spending decisions—and the Government are working with the Local Government Association to devise good practice in doing so.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if future grant distributions will ensure that the specific needs of town and country authorities which have both urban and rural characteristics are adequately met through the SSA system. [153850]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 537W.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish a White Paper on local government finance. [153852]

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish a White paper on local government finance. [154137]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A White Paper on local government finance will be published later this year.

Council Tax

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on Government policy towards the introduction of new council tax bands; [153901]

(2) if he will make a statement on Government policy on the introduction of regional variations in the valuations used to determine council tax banding. [153816]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We believe that the council tax is working well as a local tax. In our Green Paper on modernising local government finance, which we published in September 2000, we explained that the banding system makes tax bills predictable and stable. A number of respondents to the Green Paper proposed that changes should be made to the structure of the council tax bands. We are considering what they had to say in the context of preparing a White Paper on local government finance which we intend to publish later this year.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the average Band D council tax was in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Scotland in (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 2000–01. [153916]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The average band D council tax for England was £688 in 1997–98 and £847 in 2000–01. Council tax levels for Wales and Scotland are a matter for the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive respectively.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's capping powers in relation to local government expenditure and budgets. [153769]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have powers to protect local people from excessive council tax increases. These powers are more discriminating than the previous system of crude and universal capping and enable us to look at councils' budget increases over several years. They are also more flexible: in addition to in-year capping the Secretary of State may set a national budget requirement to be used for future comparisons or he may cap the following year's budget.

When we have information on all local authority budgets and council taxes for 2001–02, we shall need to consider carefully whether any of them are excessive, and what action we might take as a result.

Concessionary Bus Fares

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he has put in place to reduce the financial pressure on local authorities arising from implementing the Government's initiative relating to concessionary bus fares. [154139]

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he has put in place to ease the financial pressure on local authorities implementing the Government's initiative relating to concessionary bus fares. [153846]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), on 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 537W.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason district councils have been excluded from the local public service agreements pilot schemes; and what plans he has to include district councils in the public service agreements scheme. [154141]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The local PSA pilot was taken forward with top-tier authorities rather than district councils because the majority of the national PSA targets that relate to local authority services relate to the services of top-tier authorities. The Local Government Association is working with a group of district councils on how the PSA approach might be applied to districts, and we will consider any proposals they make.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason district councils have been excluded from the local public service agreements pilot scheme; and if he will review this decision. [153844]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The local PSA pilot was taken forward with top-tier authorities rather than district councils because the majority of the national PSA targets that relate to local authority services relate to the services of top-tier authorities. We will indeed review this decision in the future. The Local Government Association are working with a group of district councils on how the PSA approach might be applied to districts, and we will consider any proposals they make.

Airline Seating

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding the spacing of seats in economy sections of passenger airlines; if he proposes to introduce minimum space requirements; and if he will make a statement. [154130]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Secretary of State has received a limited number of letters from members of the public about the spacing of seats in economy class. There have been statutory requirements for minimum seat pitch on UK-registered aircraft since 1989, introduced for safety reasons related to the evacuation of an aircraft in an emergency.

In their response to the recent House of Lords Select Committee inquiry into air travel and health, the Government referred to CAA-funded research into seat size and spacing. The study, carried out on behalf of the JAA, is considering the relationship between aircraft seat dimensions and passenger sizes. The work looks at the changing size of the European population but also includes a review of recent DVT research. The report

indicates additional areas where further work may be necessary. The study (and any subsequent follow-on study) will provide the Government with the information necessary to review current regulations on seat spacing. In the light of the study DETR and the CAA will also consider the scope for developing unambiguous definitions for seat dimensions for use in informing passengers of the seat size and space available on a flight.

Contaminated Land (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the amount of contaminated land in Lancashire. [154205]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: My Department has made no estimates of the amount of contaminated land in particular parts of the country.

Commercial Property Leases

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the working party reviewing the voluntary code of practice on commercial property leases is due to report to him; and what procedure is in place to review its recommendations. [154225]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning has asked the Commercial Leases Group to let him have its final proposals by the end of March. We shall then be looking closely at the proposals to see that they will result in tenants having more choice and better information about leasing options. We will consider the way forward in the light of the Group's final proposals.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the working party reviewing the voluntary code of practice on commercial property leases covers all categories of commercial tenant. [154226]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Commercial Leases Group, which is reviewing the property industry's 1995 Code of Practice, consists of most of the organisations which drew up the original Code, together with additional bodies representing occupiers and small businesses. These bodies embrace all categories of commercial tenant in the main property sectors.

Railway Rolling Stock

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with the *(a)* Strategic Rail Authority, *(b)* Railtrack and *(c)* the train operating companies on new rolling stock. [153911]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Deputy Prime Minister recently met Sir Alastair Morton, the Chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority, and rolling stock manufacturers to discuss the delivery and reliability of new rolling stock.

Cycling

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 7 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 253W, on cycling, when the Government expect to meet their interim target under the National Cycling Strategy for doubling the number of cyclists from 1996 levels. [154411]

Mr. Hill: Progress will depend on a number of factors. However, given the greatly increased funding which the Government have made available for local transport, the encouragement to cycling which we have given in our guidance on Local Transport Plans, and the generally positive response to this guidance by local authorities, I am hopeful that cycle trips in England will double from their 1996 level by 2005 or 2006.

Airport Operators Association Environmental Guidance Manual

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will circulate the Airport Operators Association environmental guidance manual to airports in the UK. [154526]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Airport Operators Association (AOA) environmental guidance manual is a private publication. Circulation is a matter for the AOA. I understand that AOA members have been sent copies of the manual.

Aviation Personnel (Drug Tests)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce alcohol and drug testing for aviation personnel; and if he will make a statement. [154540]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Queen's speech on 6 December announced the Government's intention to draft a Safety Bill. We will use this opportunity to introduce a prescribed blood/alcohol limit for safety critical personnel in aviation, and to take permissive powers to allow testing for drugs.

We propose to set a 20 milligram per 100 millilitre blood/alcohol limit for aircraft crew, air traffic controllers and aircraft maintenance engineers, while also granting to the police the necessary powers to test suspected offenders. This limit is in line with an agreed Joint Aviation Requirement for aircrew and will apply equally to safety critical aviation personnel in the commercial and leisure sectors, and to those people flying or working with aircraft in their free time. It also reflects the positive responses to a Government consultation paper issued in July 1996, which proposed this limit.

It will continue to be a criminal offence to be engaged in an aviation related activity while unfit though the influence of alcohol or drugs. It is our belief that these proposals will further enhance safety in our skies.

Housing Renewal Grants

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to take forward reform of the private sector housing renewal grants regime. [154541]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has today published a consultation paper outlining how we propose to proceed with our reforms of the legislation governing housing renewal by local authorities.

The reforms will replace many of the detailed restrictions that govern local authorities' activity, with a general power which will be subject to only limited constraints. In doing so, we aim to enable authorities to take a more strategic approach to housing renewal, respond more effectively to the housing and market conditions in their areas and to reinforce homeowners' own responsibilities towards the upkeep of their homes. Homeowners and disabled people will benefit from a wider choice of support to carry out essential repairs and adaptations to their homes.

Responses are invited by 29 June 2001. Subject to the outcome of the consultation and the approval of the Regulatory Reform Bill now before Parliament, we plan to implement the reforms through a Regulatory Reform Order.

Green Policies

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department's Greening Operations Annual report for 1999–2000 will be published. [154771]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have today published the DETR Green Minister's Annual Report 2000. This incorporates Greening Operations data for the year 1999–2000 but also covers other aspects of my responsibilities for greening government and promoting sustainable development within the Department. The Report has been independently verified.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out his proposals for making the United Kingdom a showcase for environmental protection and environmental technologies. [154197]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply

The Government's aim is for the UK to become a leading player in the new markets for green energy and products, waste minimisation, recycling and re-use. The Prime Minister's speeches in October and March, the White Paper "Opportunity for all" and Budget 2001 further develop and take forward this new approach through a range of existing and new measures to boost UK industrial and research capabilities and capacity in cutting-edge sustainable technologies and know-how. Recent announcements include:

A total of over £250 million over the next three years for investment in renewable energy and renewables R&D to help industry meet our target of 10 per cent. of our electricity to come from renewable energy sources by 2010. Moreover, with the introduction of the Renewables Obligation, the Government will be aiming to provide an assured market for renewable energy over the next 25 years. Business can also take advantage of the levy exemptions, which apply to electricity sourced from new renewable sources or from quality assured combined heat and power plants.

The ground breaking 'Carbon Trust' which brings together—for the first time in Europe—a fully integrated programme of incentives worth up to £150 million annually on low carbon technology and business energy efficiency

The Budget measures following the Government's 'Green Fuel Challenge', including the 20p per litre reduction in fuel duty on bio-diesel; the 9p per kilo reduction for road fuel gases; and the pilot projects and duty reductions or exemptions for bio-ethanol, methanol and bio-gas

A proposal to consult on setting up a 'Green Technology Challenge (GTC)', with the intention of offering enhanced first-year capital allowances for further environmental objectives and new technologies. The GTC will also be designed to complement the steps being taken as a result of the 'Green Fuels Challenge'.

This investment represents a significant commitment to a sustainable future, and will help open up substantial commercial opportunities for Britain.

M25

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what basis sites were selected for the roadshow presentations on the London Orbital Study. [153960]

Mr. Hill: Sites for the Orbit study mobile exhibitions were identified by the study consultants and approved by the Steering Group for the study. The consultants were asked to identify ten sites which would provide broad coverage of the M25 transport corridor, be accessible to people living in the corridor, and enable M25 users to visit with ease. The final list of sites was influenced by availability and by the ease of obtaining necessary permissions.

Woodland

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional action he has taken to provide specific funds in the last 12 months for *(a)* woodland creation and *(b)* to reverse the fragmentation of ancient woodland. [153682]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

In the past 12 months, we have announced that, through the England rural development programme, we will provide about £70 million in planting grants under the woodland grant scheme to encourage the creation of new woodland over the next seven years and about £77 million in payments under the farm woodland premium scheme. In addition, we have given the commission an additional £9.4 million from the capital modernisation fund to create 1,000 hectares of new woodland in the community forests.

We also launched the JIGSAW challenge last year, a £5 million initiative which offers grants to encourage landowners to establish new woodland which will connect isolated areas of ancient semi-natural woodland. Reversing the fragmentation of existing native woodland is one of the aims of our England forestry strategy.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has through the felling licence system to restrict further the removal of young trees, shrubs and undergrowth from areas of ancient woodland; and if he will make a statement. [153681]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

We have no plans to change the felling licence regulations to restrict the removal of young trees, shrubs and undergrowth from areas of ancient woodland. Protecting and enhancing these woodlands is, however, a key aim of the England forestry strategy. The forestry forum, which I set up to oversee the implementation of the strategy, has recently made several recommendations

for improving the protection of ancient woodland, and we are currently considering what further action needs to be taken.

TREASURY

Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how much revenue CCTA have raised through commissions paid on sales facilitated by *(a)* G-cat and *(b)* S-cat in each of the last five financial years; [151535]

(2) what proportion of orders placed through *(a)* G-cat and *(b)* S-cat have exceeded £200,000 in the last year for which figures are available. [151534]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answers 27 February 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Bob Assirati to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 15 March 2001:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply to your two recent Parliamentary Questions (Ref: 151534, 151535) about GCat and S-CAT. The information you have requested is given below.

For the year up to 31 December 2000, approximately 0.25% of GCat orders (1 in every 400) exceeded £200k in value. The equivalent figure for S-CAT was 3.5% (1 in 33).

The revenues received by CCTA on sales through these schemes for each of the last 5 years is as follows:

£000

Financial year	*GCat*	*S-CAT*
2000–01 (up to 31/12/2000)	855.8	1,471
1999–2000	1,248	1,285.5
1998–99	990.7	563
1997–98	561.8	20.3
1996–97	244.8	0

As a self-funding executive agency it is a requirement that the total costs of procurement and contract management are recovered in full. The term revenue in this context relates to the charges levied to contractors to cover these expenses.

Due to the recent variations in volume of business, a revenue review of GCat and S-CAT is being conducted.

General information about income and expenditure related to the services provided by CCTA, including catalogue services, was set out in their last Annual Report and Accounts for 1999–2000, copies of which can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the largest contract is that has been placed through *(a)* G-cat and *(b)* S-cat; and if he will make a statement; [151578]

(2) what assessment he has made of the benefits that Government Departments realise through the use of G-cat and S-cat; [151579]

(3) what assessment he has made of the compliance of G-cat and S-cat with EC tendering legislation. [151580]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Bob Assirati to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 15 March 2001:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply to your 3 Parliamentary Questions about GCat and S-CAT (Ref: 151578, 151579, 151580). The information you have requested is given below.

You asked what assessment has been made of the compliance of GCat and S-CAT with EC tendering legislation. An assessment of compliance with the EC procurement rules was made by CCTA before the GCat and S-CAT framework contracts were awarded. Following the establishment of the Office of Government Commerce (with effect from 1 April 2000) further reviews have confirmed the view that both GCat and S-CAT are compliant with the EC rules.

You also asked what the largest contracts are which have been placed through GCat and S-CAT respectively and if a statement can be made. It is a feature of these schemes that customer organisations contract direct with their selected prime contractors. It is not therefore appropriate for CCTA to give details regarding individual contracts to which we are not party as there may be commercial or contractual sensitivities of which we are unaware. However, in terms of contractual value, the largest individual customer orders placed so far through GCat and S-CAT are valued at £2.5 million and £17.8 million respectively.

Finally you asked what assessments have been made of the benefits that Government departments realise through the use of GCat and S-CAT. In general the benefits gained from these framework contracts are:

Compliance with EC procurement procedures

Reduced procurement timescales and costs

Economy-of-scale pricing

Simplified ordering with e-procurement facilities

Sound contractual protection

The quantification and aggregation of these benefits is not a straightforward process as different customers derive differing degrees of benefit according to their own circumstances. However CCTA have estimated that savings during the first 5 years from GCat and S-CAT are approximately £30 million and £3.5 million respectively. The 1999 NAO Report on Modernising Procurement contains further detailed analysis of the CGat efficiency savings.

Debt

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans the UK joint ministerial committee on poverty has to consider debt. [153075]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Tackling financial exclusion is an essential part of the Government's strategy to tackle social exclusion. Details of the Government's progress with the agenda to reduce financial exclusion are set out in the "National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: Policy Action Team Audit report", which was published in January. A copy of this document can be found in the Library.

The Government are also keen that individuals do not take on debts that they cannot afford to repay. That is why the DTI has set up an industry taskforce specifically to address concerns about increasing levels of debt.

The joint ministerial committee on poverty was established to consider joint or co-ordinated action by the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to tackle poverty and social exclusion and to facilitate exchanging information and sharing best practice.

As with all ministerial committees and as laid out in the memorandum of understanding and supplementary agreements on the joint ministerial committee, the proceedings of the joint ministerial committee and its sub-committees are confidential.

Bingo Industry

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was received by his Department in tax duty and VAT in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1999 and *(c)* 2000 from the bingo industry. [153766]

Mr. Timms: Duty receipts from bingo can be found in the HM Customs and Excise statistical bulletin "Receipts from Betting, Gaming and Lottery Duties", a copy of which is in the House of Commons Library. Details of the amount of VAT received from the bingo industry are not readily available.

ECOFIN Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the outcome of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 12 March was; what the Government's voting record at the Council was; and if he will make a statement. [153815]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I attended the meeting of the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers.

The Council discussed the wise men's report on regulation of European securities markets. The UK shares the analysis of the benefits of a competing single market in securities and the desire to speed up and prioritise completion of a single market in financial services. Welcoming the report, ECOFIN commissioned further work with the aim of sending conclusions to the Stockholm European Council.

The Council agreed a joint Council-Commission report on "The Contribution of Public Finances to Growth and Employment", which will be submitted to the Stockholm European Council. A short list of 12 structural performance indicators was also adopted from the list of 35 that the Council and the Commission agreed should be used in the synthesis report. Indicators enable member states to measure progress on structural reform, and the short list will give extra focus and momentum to the exercise.

The Council also agreed to forward to the Stockholm European Council: the Commission synthesis report; the Economic Policy Committee's annual report on structural reform; a report by the European Investment bank on the Innovation 2000 initiative; the presidency key issues paper for the broad economic policy guidelines (BEPGs); and the Commission report on the implementation on the BEPGs.

The Council recommended that the European Parliament give discharge to the Commission in respect of its implementation of the 1999 budget, and welcomed the Commission's proposal for an annual action plan to reduce errors.

The Council agreed priorities for the 2002 budget, with emphasis on compliance with the budgetary ceilings agreed at the Berlin European Council.

The Council discussed the Galileo project to inform further discussion at the April Transport Council.

The Council examined and agreed opinions on stability reports for Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain and Portugal.

The Commission was asked to speed up its consideration of venture capital projects such as the UK regional venture capital schemes.

No votes were taken during the course of the meeting.

Church Building Work (VAT)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will introduce the lower level of value added tax for church building work; and if he will make a statement. [154007]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government announced in the Budget that they would be introducing a UK-wide grant scheme to help congregations with the cost of repairs and maintenance to listed buildings that are used as places of worship. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport will be consulting on the details but the effect will be to reduce VAT costs to 5 per cent. on new work undertaken from 1 April 2001.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if his proposals for a lower level of value added tax will apply to all buildings designated as places of worship irrespective of denomination and religion; and if he will make a statement. [154006]

Dawn Primarolo: The new grant scheme announced in the Budget for listed buildings that are used as places of worship will help all denominations and religions with the cost of VAT on repairs and maintenance.

Child Care Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the level of fraud in the Child Care Tax Credit element of the Working Families Tax Credit. [154216]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 March 2001]*: There is as yet no statistically valid data available from which a meaningful estimate of the level of fraud in the recently introduced Child Care Tax Credit element of the Working Families Tax Credit can be made.

Applicants are required to supply evidence of child care costs from their provider in order to receive Child Care Tax Credit. The Inland Revenue carry out risk assessments of applications based on their experience of fraudulent claims, and can impose financial penalties where fraud is found to have taken place. These checks and sanctions apply to the child care tax credit in the same way as other elements of the Working Families Tax Credit.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what checks are in place to ensure that the child care expenditure covered by the Child Care Tax Credit has actually been incurred by the claimant and continues to be incurred for the duration of the claim. [154217]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 March 2001]*: Applications for the Working Families and Disabled Person's Tax Credits are subject to risk assessments based on accumulated Inland Revenue and DSS experience.

Specialist staff may inquire formally into applications identified as requiring further investigation. Child care providers confirm the level of charges they have agreed with parents and provide information as part of the application that can confirm that the service they provide is eligible for support through the Child Care Tax Credit component of the Working Families and Disabled Person's Tax Credits. WFTC and DPTC awards are based on the information supplied in the application and normally continue for the full 26 weeks of the award. As with other changes in circumstances, changes in child care arrangements will not normally alter awards.

Benefits (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claimants of family credit there were in South Shields constituency in 1997; what the average benefit for a *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time worker was; how many claimants of Working Families Tax Credit there are; and what the average benefit is for a (i) full-time and (ii) part-time worker. [154441]

Dawn Primarolo: At May 1997 there were an estimated 1,200 families receiving Family Credit in the South Shields constituency.

For the other parts of his question, I refer my right hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 552W. There are too few cases in the 5 per cent. sample used for the analyses of these awards to yield reliable separate estimates of average awards for South Shields; and for the same reason care should be taken when making comparisons over time in estimates of the number of awards.

Departmental Policies (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154433]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 785, or 22 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 65 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 65 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,589 young people in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency gain valuable skills and experience—791 (50 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,300 families in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 16,900 in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,100 in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East.

VAT (Motorcycle Helmets)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will extend VAT exemption to motorcycle helmets. [154428]

Dawn Primarolo: Approved motorcycle helmets are already zero-rated.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what evaluation he has carried out of the impact of the Working Families Tax Credit. [154275]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to him on 18 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 846W.

Over 1.1 million families are currently claiming Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), nearly 300,000 more than Family Credit at its peak. These families are now receiving on average £30 a week more than under Family Credit, rising to £35 after the Budget 2001 measures have taken effect.

As a result of the introduction of the WFTC and other personal tax and benefit changes over this Parliament, by October 2001 a single-earner family on half average earnings and with two young children will be £3,000 a year better off than under the 1997 system of tax and benefits.

Minimum Wage (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female workers in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency receive the national minimum wage; and how many workers in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency will benefit from the forthcoming uprating of the national minimum wage. [154434]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Dr. Ashok Kumar, dated 19 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of male workers and female workers in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland constituency who receive the national minimum wage (NMW) and the number who will benefit from the uprating of the NMW (154434). I am replying in his absence.

The Office for National Statistics has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than specific hourly pay thresholds for all workers in the United Kingdom for Spring 2000, disaggregated by gender. These estimates are based on an improved methodology

using data from the New Earnings Survey (NES) and Labour Force Survey (LFS). This methodology provides the best estimates for the number of jobs in the UK paid below low hourly rate thresholds. These estimates are posted on the National Statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour_market/nmw_lowpay_tables.asp.

The new methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NES and LFS, in measuring low pay. Estimates based on this methodology are not available for the area requested.

Overseas Earnings

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the UK's overseas earnings from direct and equity was generated from *(a)* the United States of America and *(b)* the EU in the latest year for which figures are available. [153985]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Denzil Davies, dated 19 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on the percentage of the UK's overseas earnings from direct and equity that was generated from (a) the United States of America and (b) the EU in the latest year for which figures are available (153985). I am replying in his absence.

Percentage of net earnings from direct investment overseas by UK companies are shown below for 1999 (the latest year for which figures are available), for the United States of America and the European Union.

	Percentage
United States of America	30.7
European Union	34.6

Separate estimates for income from UK holdings of foreign equity by country of issue are not available.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the introduction of joint claims for Jobseeker's Allowance. [154774]

Ms Jowell: Regulations have been approved by Parliament to introduce joint claims for Jobseeker's Allowance from 19 March 2001.

Under the new provisions, couples without dependent children wishing to claim Jobseeker's Allowance will have to make a joint claim from 19 March 2001. This will apply where one member or both members of the couple were born after 19 March 1976, covering couples where at least one member is aged 18 to 24 years when the requirement is introduced. Each member of the couple will be required to meet Jobseeker's Allowance conditions and will be required to be available for and actively seek work. They will both receive help to obtain work and will be directed to training programmes or New Deal assistance as appropriate.

About 10,000 existing claimants and 27,000 new claims will be covered during the first year.

A key aim of joint claims for Jobseeker's Allowance is to help tackle the problem of workless households. Joint claims will ensure that both members of unemployed couples without dependants are directly involved in the labour market and do not become dependent on benefits from an early age when they are in a position to find and take work.

Publications

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost of the printing and production of *(a)* "From Strength to Strength" and *(b)* "Schools: Building on Success" was; how many copies of each were produced; and to whom they were distributed. [153277]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 12 March 2001]: (a)* "From Strength to Strength: Re-building the community through voluntary action"

Printing and production—£5,147

Quantity—5,000 copies

Distribution—Voluntary sector organisations; other Government Departments.

Available to the public on request.

(b) "Building on Success" (main document and summary)

Printing and production—£119,830

Quantity—60,000 copies (main document)
500,000 copies (summary version)

Distribution—The main document was sent to schools, chairs of governors and local education authorities. In addition it was distributed to a total of 243 other organisations. These include examination bodies; careers organisations; adult, further, higher education and teacher training institutions; national training organisations; curriculum/subject associations; governor and parent associations; independent and foundation school associations; religious/denominational bodies, trade unions; special education bodies; and others.

The summary document is available to the public on request.

Programme Grants

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools are in receipt of funds in addition to standard spending assessment from *(a)* education action zones, *(b)* Excellence in Cities and *(c)* specialist school status, broken down by local education authority. [154160]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The number of schools in receipt of funds in addition to Standard Spending Assessment from Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, and Specialist School Status are shown in the table. Some individual schools benefit of course from inclusion in more than one category. From September 2001 the number of secondary schools benefiting under EiC will increase to some 1,000 schools as the programme is implemented in 10 new authorities and within 11 new Excellence Clusters.

Numbers 1 of schools in local education authorities in England by Education Action Zones, Specialist School Status and Excellence in Cities

Local education authority	*Education Action Zone schools*[1]	*Specialist Schools*	*Excellence in Cities*	
			All secondary schools[2]	*Primary schools in pilot*
Barking and Dagenham	0	2	8	0
Barnet	0	3	0	0
Barnsley	22	1	0	0
Bath and North East Somerset	0	5	0	0
Bedfordshire	16	1	0	0
Bexley	0	1	0	0
Birmingham	77	22	77	133
Blackburn and Darwen	22	3	0	0
Blackpool	0	2	0	0
Bolton	18	3	0	0
Bournemouth	0	2	0	0
Bracknell Forest	0	0	0	0
Bradford	34	5	27	53
Brent	0	3	13	0
Brighton and Hove	9	2	0	0
Bristol, City of	17	2	20	0
Bromley	10	4	0	0
Buckinghamshire	0	5	0	0
Bury	0	0	0	0
Calderdale	28	0	0	0
Cambridgeshire	0	7	0	0
Camden	7	4	10	16
Cheshire	19	5	0	0
City of London	0	0	0	1
Cornwall	30	9	0	0
Coventry	17	5	0	0
Croydon	9	1	7	0
Cumbria	18	6	3	0
Darlington	0	3	0	0
Derby	23	2	0	0
Derbyshire	19	4	0	0
Devon	0	6	0	0
Doncaster	0	0	0	0
Dorset	0	6	0	0
Dudley	20	1	0	0
Durham	42	12	0	0
Ealing	0	3	13	0
East Riding of Yorkshire	13	4	0	0
East Sussex	25	4	0	0
Enfield	0	0	0	0
Essex	62	16	0	0
Gateshead	14	4	10	0
Gloucestershire	24	11	0	0
Greenwich	32	5	14	17
Hackney	16	4	9	20
Halton	0	1	9	0
Hammersmith and Fulham	4	1	8	12
Hampshire	16	6	0	0
Haringey	11	1	11	27
Harrow	0	0	0	0
Hartlepool	0	2	6	0
Havering	0	1	0	0
Herefordshire	22	2	0	0
Hertfordshire	0	8	0	0
Hillingdon	0	3	0	0
Hounslow	0	2	0	0
Isle of Wight	0	2	0	0
Isle of Scilly	0	0	0	0
Islington	33	2	9	17
Kensington and Chelsea	0	0	4	9
Kent	18	10	6	0
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	18	1	16	0
Kingston upon Thames	0	0	0	0
Kirklees	0	6	5	0
Knowsley	7	2	11	33
Lambeth	28	3	10	23
Lancashire	16	15	5	0
Leeds	27	6	43	243
Leicester	16	3	16	0
Leicestershire	0	8	0	0
Lewisham	32	0	13	66

Numbers 1 of schools in local education authorities in England by Education Action Zones, Specialist School Status and Excellence in Cities

Local education authority	*Education Action Zone schools*[1]	*Specialist Schools*	*Excellence in Cities*	
			All secondary schools[2]	*Primary schools in pilot*
Lincolnshire	0	8	0	0
Liverpool	72	6	33	60
Luton	0	2	0	0
Manchester	42	7	2	56
Medway	17	3	0	0
Merton	0	0	0	0
Middlesborough	19	0	11	0
Milton Keynes	0	4	0	0
Newcastle upon Tyne	19	7	21	0
Newham	27	3	15	58
Norfolk	42	10	0	0
North East Lincolnshire	15	3	0	0
North Lincolnshire	0	2	0	0
North Somerset	24	4	0	0
North Tyneside	0	3	20	0
North Yorkshire	0	6	0	0
Northamptonshire	25	12	0	0
Northumberland	21	7	0	0
Nottingham	10	2	20	0
Nottinghamshire	0	3	0	0
Oldham	0	2	0	0
Oxfordshire	14	7	0	0
Peterborough	0	1	0	0
Plymouth	21	6	0	0
Poole	0	0	0	0
Portsmouth	0	0	3	0
Reading	0	1	0	0
Redbridge	0	3	0	0
Redcar and Cleveland	17	1	13	0
Richmond upon Thames	0	0	0	0
Rochdale	0	3	14	0
Rotherham	23	2	17	47
Rutland	0	1	0	0
Salford	17	2	16	32
Sandwell	15	3	0	0
Sefton	0	3	7	0
Sheffield	61	4	27	61
Shropshire	21	1	0	0
Slough	23	1	0	0
Solihull	0	2	3	0
Somerset	21	7	0	0
South Gloucestershire	0	3	0	0
South Tyneside	18	2	11	0
Southampton	0	0	0	0
Southend-on-Sea	17	1	0	0
Southwark	24	0	13	23
St. Helens	0	2	12	0
Staffordshire	0	2	0	0
Stockport	0	2	0	0
Stockton-on-Tees	18	5	13	0
Stoke-on-Trent	17	1	17	0
Suffolk	0	8	0	0
Sunderland	21	3	17	0
Surrey	0	10	0	0
Sutton	0	1	0	0
Swindon	0	2	0	0
Tameside	0	2	0	0
Telford and Wrekin	26	2	0	0
Thurrock	0	0	0	0
Torbay	0	1	0	0
Tower Hamlets	12	3	15	35
Trafford	8	3	0	0
Wakefield	15	3	0	0
Walsall	0	2	7	0
Waltham Forest	21	2	16	16
Wandsworth	8	5	9	26
Warrington	0	3	0	0
Warwickshire	0	5	0	0
West Berkshire	0	5	0	0
West Sussex	0	8	0	0
Westminister	27	1	8	15

Numbers [1] of schools in local education authorities in England by Education Action Zones, Specialist School Status and Excellence in Cities

Local education authority	*Education Action Zone schools* [1]	*Specialist Schools*	*Excellence in Cities*	
			All secondary schools [2]	*Primary schools in pilot*
Wigan	26	7	0	0
Wiltshire	0	8	0	0
Windsor and Maidenhead	0	0	0	0
Wirral	0	3	23	0
Wokingham	0	1	0	0
Wolverhampton	17	6	0	0
Worcestershire	0	5	0	0
York	0	4	0	0
Total	1,732	536	787	1,099

[1] Includes both small and large zones
[2] This is the total number of maintained secondary schools in the area. The benefit received from EiC will vary from school to school
Note:
The primary schools identified in the table under EiC primary pilot are those benefiting. Not all primary schools in pilot authorities are included in the programme.

Lytham St. Anne's High Technology College

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the outcomes of his Department's latest visit to the Lytham St. Anne's High Technology College. [153710]

Jacqui Smith: The position is being evaluated and I will write to the right hon. Member once a full response is ready.

Disabled People (Employment)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many registered disabled people have found full-time employment in each of the last three years. [153758]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 19 March 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply direct to your question concerning how many registered disabled people have found full time employment in each of the last three years. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on his behalf.

Since December 1996, there has not been a Register of Disabled Persons. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, introduced from December 1996, replaced some previous legislation including the Register of Disabled Persons.

This Act provides disabled people with wider protection against unlawful discrimination in employment and in the provision of goods and services. It covers all people with a disability which is substantial and long term and affects normal day to day activities.

The Employment Service has helped 271,730 people with disabilities to find work, both full and part time, since April 1998. The details for each year are set out below.

Year	*Number of job entries for people with disabilities*
April 1998 to March 1999	99,562
April 1999 to March 2000	96,996
April 2000 to December 2000	75,172

I hope this is helpful.

Extension SATs

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils, in how many schools, *(a)* took and *(b)* passed the extension SATs papers for more able pupils in (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1997–98, (iii) 1998–99 and (iv) 1999–2000 at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, broken down by (A) private and (B) state schools. [152544]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The available information for 1997, 1999 and 2000 for England is shown in the table. Due to problems with National Data Collection in 1998, we are unable to provide statistics on the number of extension paper results for that year.

	Key Stage 2				*Key Stage 3*			
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Number of pupils taking extension tests								
English								
Maintained	23,637	—	18,185	20,727	33,461	—	38,483	39,953
Independent	2,889	—	2,903	3,104	844	—	1,067	1,035
Mathematics								
Maintained	20,803	—	20,765	25,736	2,411	—	3,159	3,661
Independent	2,653	—	2,957	3,378	263	—	187	162
Science								
Maintained	7,373	—	8,349	12,124	13,078	—	21,053	24,961
Independent	1,383	—	1,964	2,512	352	—	517	588

	Key Stage 2				Key Stage 3			
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Number of pupils passing extension tests								
English								
Maintained	387	—	336	306	3,984	—	4,189	4,458
Independent	101	—	44	63	183	—	178	184
Mathematics								
Maintained	702	—	1,414	1,662	6,621	—	179	173
Independent	134	—	235	239	579	—	11	7
Science								
Maintained	304	—	274	411	2,589	—	2,427	4,243
Independent	74	—	99	165	73	—	67	134
Number of pupils achieving level 5								
English								
Maintained	86,951	—	129,437	167,071	—	—	—	—
Independent	5,987	—	9,533	11,838	—	—	—	—
Mathematics								
Maintained	99,633	—	138,676	142,975	—	—	—	—
Independent	6,410	—	9,647	9,543	—	—	—	—
Science								
Maintained	103,997	—	161,733	202,871	—	—	—	—
Independent	4,841	—	8,757	10,944	—	—	—	—
Number of schools with pupils taking extension tests								
English								
Maintained	4,193	—	3,541	3,992	1,433	—	1,636	1,743
Independent	379	—	373	398	79	—	72	91
Mathematics								
Maintained	4,076	—	4,463	5,221	354	—	409	473
Independent	388	—	393	448	2o	—	25	22
Science								
Maintained	1,428	—	1,497	2,014	821	—	1,200	1,376
Independent	202	—	244	285	37	—	47	59
Number of schools with pupils passing extension tests								
English								
Maintained	311	—	300	255	957	—	1,037	1,052
Independent	53	—	34	47	46	—	40	53
Mathematics								
Maintained	511	—	1,055	1,232	1,412	—	102	95
Independent	82	—	118	139	92	—	7	7
Science								
Maintained	154	—	171	279	580	—	686	967
Independent	43	—	45	76	26	—	19	37

LEAs

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assumption he made in setting the education standard spending assessment for each local education authority about the cost of the servicing and provision of school organisation committees in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [154150]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The increases in Education Standard Spending for 2000–01 and 2001–02 were 5.4 per cent. and 4.8 per cent. respectively: these increases took account of the range of pressures that local education authorities and schools face, including the introduction of school organisation committees. The distribution of these increases among LEAs depends on the factors in the Standard Spending Assessment formula, such as pupil numbers, additional educational needs, and area costs. It is for each local education authority to decide how much of its increase it spends on school organisation committees, taking account of local needs and circumstances.

The increases in Education Standard Spending are part of the substantial extra resources that the Government have been able to direct to local authorities. In the three years from 1997, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 per pupil in real terms. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the Year 2000 Spending Review and recent budget announcement: a further £420 per pupil over the three year period, taking the total increase to nearly £750 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of local education authorities which will meet their target allocation of advanced skills teachers. [154162]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* It is predominantly schools which are the driving force behind creating Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) posts, and which make AST appointments. All local education authorities have been offered funding to meet the target numbers of AST posts in their areas in full. The

Government remain confident that over time ASTs will represent between 3 per cent. and 5 per cent. of the teaching workforce.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the public service agreements made with local education authorities and list the factors which each local education authority has identified as inhibiting the achievement of educational targets. [154157]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Local Public Service Agreements have now been concluded with 14 authorities and copies will be placed in the Library of the House as soon as possible. The agreements set out the additional flexibilities we have agreed with the authorities to help them achieve their enhanced education targets. Negotiations are continuing with the six remaining authorities taking part in the pilot scheme of local Public Service Agreements. We expect to conclude agreements with these authorities soon.

Class Sizes

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what average class sizes were in *(a)* East Sussex and *(b)* Eastbourne for (i) secondary and (ii) primary schools, in May 1997 and on the most recent date for which figures are available. [153775]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available data are shown in the following table.

Average class size in maintained primary and secondary schools in East Sussex local education authority and Eastbourne parliamentary constituency

	1998	*2000*
East Sussex local education authority		
Maintained primary	28.3	28.2
Maintained primary key stage 1	27.3	26.1
Maintained secondary	21.4	22.1
Eastbourne parliamentary constituency		
Maintained primary	29.9	29.8
Maintained primary key stage 1	29.2	27.0
Maintained secondary	23.4	24.3

January 2000 saw a fall in the size of the average junior class in England; and a continuing fall in the size of the average primary class, after rising for a decade. The size of the average secondary class nationally, at 22, is still five below the average primary class. In 2001–02 secondary headteachers will receive an average of £70,000 and primary headteachers £24,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose, including on reducing class sizes if that is their priority.

By September 2000 there were only 316 infants in classes over 30 in East Sussex compared to 6,433 in January 1998. East Sussex has benefited from over £5 million in grant to enable it to reduce infant class sizes to this extent. In Eastbourne there were 33 infants in classes over 30 in September 2000 compared to 1,637 in January 1998.

Vacant Teacher Posts

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many vacant teacher posts there were in schools run by Lancashire education authority in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [153157]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in table 42 of Statistics of Education, Teachers, England and Wales, 2000 edition, which is available in the House of Commons Library. Lancashire was split into three local authorities from 1 April 1998: Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool.

Information on vacancies in 2001 is not yet available.

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools in England increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of more than 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total cost to public funds to date of education action zones. [154151]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The total amount spent so far on the 73 large zones since the first Education Action Zones began operation in September 1998 is £89.7 million. This works out to approximately £100 per pupil per year for every full year a zone has been in operation.

This funding has led to improvements in the standards of education. In the 25 first round zones which have been running the longest, the proportion of 7-year-olds reaching level 2 in reading, writing and maths has increased by 7, 6 and 8 percentage points respectively since 1998, compared with national increases of 4, 4 and 6 percentage points over the same period. The proportion of 11-year-olds achieving level 4 in English, maths and science has increased by 12, 16 and 20 percentage points respectively, compared with 10, 14 and 16 percentage points nationally.

Early Retirement

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers, in each local education authority in England and Wales, in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 took early retirement on (i) medical grounds and (ii) as a result of voluntary early retirement schemes. [153294]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* There were 14,300 ill-health and premature retirements in 1995–96. This figure rose to 16,100 in 1996–97, was 16,300 in 1997–98 before declining to 5,100 in 1998–99 and was 5,400 in 1999–2000. The high level of retirements in 1996–97 and 1997–98 were due to teachers anticipating changes that were made to the Teachers Pension Scheme in 1997, which resulted in the decline from 1998–99 onwards.

Figures of local authority ill-health and premature retirements from the maintained schools sector are contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

New Deal (18 to 24-year-olds)

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have started *(a)* the employment option, *(b)* the environmental task force option, *(c)* the voluntary sector option and *(d)* the full-time education and training option of the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds since implementation, by unit of delivery; and how many left for (i) unsubsidised employment, (ii) other benefits, (iii) other known destinations and (iv) unknown destinations at the latest date for which figures are available. [151573]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 February 2001]*: Starts to each of the New Deal options by Unit of Delivery for the period ending December 2000 and, for the same period, destinations on leaving New Deal either directly from an option or after a period on Follow Through, are contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Of those who have left the New Deal having taken part in an option (including leavers from the follow through stage of the programme), 31 per cent. are recorded as having found work. We know that many others will have left the programme for employment without telling the Employment Service—these people are not included in this figure. The most recent Government survey into unknown destinations, published in January 2001, concluded that the known destinations were representative of unknown destinations. Using this evidence we calculate that 46 per cent. of option participants entered work on leaving New Deal. Work is ongoing to improve the recording of option outcomes so that the raw data better reflect true performance. The cumulative figures mask the fact that all Option performance has steadily improved over the last year.

Qualified Teachers

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice he gives to LEAs about the employment of teachers qualified in *(a)* EU and *(b)* non-EU countries, with particular respect to qualified teacher status; and if he will make a statement. [154311]

Ms Estelle Morris: Local education authorities and schools should normally employ teachers who hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Overseas trained teachers without QTS may work for up to four months in any one post and up to two years in total without gaining QTS. Teachers from other EEA countries can apply for QTS under EC mutual recognition arrangements, while teachers from non-EEA countries are only able to gain QTS though the employment based Graduate Teacher Programme. My Department is consulting on proposals to allow overseas trained teachers to teach in one school for up to four years without gaining QTS, and to create a tailored Graduate Teacher Programme which meets their needs.

Absentee Cover

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) on what basis the cost of hiring supply staff will be deducted from the salaries of teachers who do not cover for absent colleagues; [154023]

(2) what guidance he has issued on proposals from the employers' organisation relating to financial penalties incurred by teachers not willing to provide cover for absent colleagues. [154024]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]*: These are matters for local decision, and the National Employers Organisation for School Teachers has issued guidance to local education authorities. My right hon. Friend has nothing to add and has not issued further guidance.

Specialist Schools

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of increasing the number of specialist schools to 1,000 by 2004; and if this cost will be met from currently planned expenditure. [154149]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]*: Planned provision for 1000 specialist schools by September 2004 is: £93 million in 2001–02, £106 million in 2002–03 and £127 million in 2003–04. The Green Paper proposes 1000 specialist schools by September 2003. For this the estimated additional cost is £20 million in 2003–04 if all the additional schools by 2003 are designated in that year.

Selection

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children currently in secondary education have been selected by *(a)* ability and *(b)* aptitude (i) in total and (ii) in each local education authority. [154159]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]*: The Department does not hold centrally information on the number of children who are subject to tests of ability or aptitude for admission to secondary school.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the impact of the climate change levy on school budgets for 2001–02. [154152]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]*: The climate change levy is broadly revenue neutral. Revenue raised through the levy will finance reductions in employers' National Insurance Contributions and expenditure on energy efficiency measures. The impact of the levy on any sector or business will depend on a number of factors such as employment levels, energy efficiency and the extent to which exempt energy is used. I would expect that as large employers the majority of local authorities will be net gainers from the levy.

Where particular categories of maintained school are entitled to relief from the levy by virtue of their charitable status, local education authorities are free to reflect this in their school funding formulae if they so wish.

Failing Schools

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the maintained schools in England designated as *(a)* failing schools, *(b)* requiring

special measures and *(c)* having serious weaknesses indicating for each school (i) the parliamentary constituency in which it is situated, (ii) the local education authority in which it is situated and (iii) the number of pupils on roll at the school. [153293]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Schools which have been found by Ofsted to be failing or likely to fail to provide an acceptable standard of education for their pupils require special measures. Schools come in and out of special measures and serious weaknesses on a daily basis. Details are in inspection reports published by the schools themselves and by Ofsted on its website. I shall place a list of schools currently on special measures showing their local education authority and parliamentary constituency in the Library. The Department does not hold a list of schools having serious weaknesses.

More schools on special measures are being turned around and schools are on special measures for a shorter period. Twenty-seven schools were removed from special measures between September 1993 and May 1997 and 684 schools have been turned around since May 1997. The time taken to turn around schools has fallen from 25 months to 18 months.

School Performance Targets

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of maintained schools is in which the headteacher has agreed performance targets with the governing body. [149801]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Education (School Teacher Appraisal) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2000 require the governing body to agree objectives with the headteacher by 6 April 2001.

Our latest information is that 20,923 headteachers in 91 per cent. of maintained schools have or will have agreed objectives with their governing body by 6 April 2001.

Nursery Provision (Sefton)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on nursery provision in each year since 1996 in the Borough of Sefton. [151332]

Ms Hodge: Table 1 shows the amount of funding available through the Nursery Education Grant, Childcare Grant, European Social Fund and the 0–5 sub-block of the Education Standard Spending Assessment to Sefton local education authority in each year since April 1996.

Table 2 shows the number of early education places created through Nursery Education Grant and other local education authority resources (including the 0–5 sub-block of Education Standard Spending Assessment). This table also shows the number of new places created using the Childcare Grant.

From September 1998, all four year olds have been able to access a free, part-time, early education place. From April 2001, Sefton will be able to offer every three year old a nursery education place funded through either Nursery Education Grant or the LEA's own resources.

From September 2004, all three year olds in England will be entitled to a free early education place.

Table 1

	Early years and childcare funding (£)
1996–97	5,570,000
1997–98	5,320,124
1998–99	7,033,820
1999–2000	7,828,881
2000–01	8,621,138
2001–02	9,215,520

Table 2

	Early years places	*New childcare places created*
1996–97	5,414	—
1997–98	5,607	—
1998–99	5,319	—
1999–2000	5,575	323 (number of children = 612)
2000–01	6,027	[1] 425 (number of children = 731)

[1] As at December 2000.

Early Excellence Centre

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to develop the Early Excellence Centre programme. [153778]

Ms Hodge: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on 15 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 729W.

Retired People (Employment)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his policies are for encouraging retired people aged 60 years and over into employment. [153757]

Ms Hodge: We are seeking to maximise employment opportunities for all whatever their age and circumstances. Our Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment encourages employers to support an age diverse workforce. Government programmes of training and support to individuals such as New Deal 50+, Work Based Learning for Adults are open to those over 60.

Wildcat Corporation

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 299W, on New Deal, what departmental *(a)* funds, *(b)* resources and *(c)* staff have been made available to Wildcat (i) directly and (ii) via New Deal Task Force. [153685]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* No Departmental funds, resources, or staff have been made directly available to Wildcat Corporation. The New Deal Task Force is a non-departmental public body. Of Task Force's funds, resources and staff, 20 per cent. of one member of staff's time was allocated to Wildcat Corporation for liaison. The New Deal Task Force have paid just over £10,200 to Wildcat from their own resources for consultancy fees and have also met some incidental expenses associated with Wildcat visits. Wildcat staff have also made use of New Deal Task Force

office facilities on an informal basis during their visits when needed to support their work. It is not possible to cost these marginal expenses.

Sure Start (Birkenhead)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children have benefited from the Sure Start programme in Birkenhead; how many children he expects to benefit over the duration of the Sure Start programme in Birkenhead; and what the Government expenditure on the Sure Start programme in Birkenhead will be in each year of its operation. [154403]

Yvette Cooper: All the 732 children aged under four currently living in the area covered by the North Birkenhead Sure Start programme will benefit from Sure Start. In addition, every new baby born in the area and every family with children under four who moves into the area will also be covered by the programme. Over time, the lessons learned from Sure Start programmes will influence the wider development of services for all children and families, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas.

The programme was awarded £2.4 million over three years. Annual grants allocated for the first three years are as follows:

£

	Capital	*Revenue*
2000–01	266,500	394,500
2001–02	421,000	665,400
2002–03	8,000	690,700

Grants for future years will be agreed at a later stage of the programme.A further Sure Start programme in Birkenhead, in the Rock Ferry and New Ferry area, is now in the early planning stages, and is likely to start work in autumn 2001.

Child Care (Slough)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what targets have been set for the provision of extra child care places in Slough; how many extra places have been provided since May 1997; and how many more are planned. [151900]

Ms Hodge: We are unable to show statistics on child care places by local authority prior to April 1999.

Slough Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) set themselves a target to create 795 new child care places in the two years between 1999–2001. Between April 1999 and September 2000, Slough EYDCP has reported the creation of 243 new child care places, providing care for 464 children.

In addition to the creation of new child care places, from September 1998, all 4-year-olds in Slough have been able to access a free, part-time, early education place. From autumn 2000, Slough has been allocated 340 early education places for 3-year-olds funded through Nursery Education Grant. This increases to 378 places from summer 2001. By September 2004, all 3-year-olds including those living in Slough will have access to a free early education place, some of which will by funded be the local education authority.

Slough EYDCP will be proposing targets for the creation of child care places between 2001–04 in the EYDCP plan due to be received by 31 March. We will write again when this has been received.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Policies (Staffordshire, Moorlands)

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency, the effects on Staffordshire, Moorlands of his Department's policies and actions *(a)* since 2 May 1997 and *(b)* in the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997. [149192]

Mr. Chris Smith: Staffordshire, Moorlands has received £4,240,057 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997, and in the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997 received £935,767.

In addition, two grants totalling over £56,000 have been made from the new opportunities fund out of school hours child care programme to schools in Staffordshire, Moorlands. The first grant for £6,570 was awarded to Westwood first school to provide for 16 integrated before-school and eight integrated after-school places, for children aged 4 to 9 years old in Leek. The second grant of £50,000 was awarded to Buckingham Nursery School Ltd. This will enable the creation of 48 before-school, 48 after-school and 48 holiday club places, for children aged 5 to 14 years old. Eight schools in the area will benefit.

Eighteen millennium award winners have been identified from Staffordshire, Moorlands and between them they have received grants totalling £45,672.

Since 2 May 1997, English Heritage has awarded the following grants: £2,744 for consolidation works at Dieu la Cres Abbey; £15,288 for repair and archaeological investigation at Throwley Old Hall; £11,107 for structural repairs to the Church of St. John the Baptist, Elkstones. In the 12 months ending on 1 May 1997, English Heritage awarded the following grants; £12,046 for structural repairs to St. Bartholomew's Church, Blore Ray.

Staffordshire, Moorlands district council began a three-year partnership development funding agreement with West Midlands Arts in 1999–2000. They received £17,000 this financial year 2000–01 plus £3,000 development funding towards a review of their arts strategy. In the year 2001–02, they will be awarded £17,500.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Staffordshire and the West Midlands which may have an effect on the Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency. These are:

Under the Space for Sport and the Arts (SSA) scheme, a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the 3rd Round of the New Opportunities Fund, Stoke on Trent LEA has been allocated £2.2 million towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community. Birmingham, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall

LEAs have also been allocated SSA funding which means a potential inward investment of up to £10.5 million in the West Midlands region for sports and arts facilities in primary schools under this programme.

Staffordshire, Moorlands constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund cancer programme. Across the whole of the West Midlands NHS Region, over £11 million will fund seven linear accelerators; five MRI scanners; five trailers for breast screening equipment; nine ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 31 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

By December 2000, over 3,400 teachers (over half) in the Staffordshire LEA had signed up for training as part of the New Opportunities Fund ICT Training for Teachers scheme.

The West Midlands Arts Board has received an additional £382,643 from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Staffordshire Library Authority received an award of £49,000 from the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund's 1998–99 programme to support ICT projects in libraries. It is not possible to say precisely what proportion of this funding was spent in the Staffordshire, Moorlands constituency. 1997–98 was the Challenge Fund's first year, no funding was available from this source before 1997.

Information on the Lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department by lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Policies (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [149123]

Mr. Chris Smith: Morecambe and Lunesdale has received £3,023,777 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997.

In addition, a grant worth over £12,000 has been made from the new opportunities fund out of school hours child care programme. The recipient project, the Bentham community association, will provide for 16 after-school places, and 16 holiday club places for children aged 5 to 11-years-old. The places will be in two primary schools in High Bentham, Lancaster.

Sixteen millennium award winners have been identified from Morecambe and Lunesdale and between them they have received grants totalling £42,103.

English Heritage awarded a grant of £5,000 to Lancaster city council towards a development appraisal for the Victoria Pavilion (formerly the Winter Gardens), Morecambe. This is towards a total cost of £14,795 excluding VAT. The final report is awaited and is expected to provide a strategy for future use and development.

More Music in Morecambe has received three awards from the National Foundation for Youth Music. This was £8,500 for Singing Challenge, £184,000 to repair musical instruments donated to the organisation as part of Youth Music's instrument amnesty and £145,000 for the North Lancashire youth music action zone. The zone will provide a range of music opportunities to young people throughout the north-west.

The creative industries have impacted on the area and this is exemplified through the development of initiatives to support professional artists living and working in Morecambe and Lunesdale. There is now an active network of artists within Lunesdale who have benefited from support through Leader II funding in partnership with neighbouring authorities.

Lancashire Library Authority (which includes Morecambe and Lunesdale libraries) was part of a consortium which received an award of £215,992 from the DCMS/Wolfson public libraries challenge fund's 2000–01 programme to support reader development work in libraries. There were 18 partners in the consortium—North West Libraries Book Promotion Partnership—it is not possible to say what proportion of funding is being spent in the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Lancashire which may have an effect on the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency. These are:

Under the Space for Sport the Arts (SSA) scheme, a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the third round of the New Opportunities Fund, Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen LEAs have been allocated £1.75 million and £1.25 million respectively towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community.

Liverpool, Manchester, Cumbria, Knowsley, Salford, Rochdale, Trafford, Wirral and St. Helens LEAs have also been allocated SSA funding which means a potential inward investment of up to £22 million in the north-west region for sport and arts facilities in primary schools under this programme.

Morecambe and Lunesdale constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund cancer programme. Across the whole of the North West NHS Region, over £10 million will fund: nine linear accelerators; four MRI scanners; five trailers for breast screening equipment; six ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 27 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

By December 2000, over 2,000 teachers (approximately one in five) in the Lancashire LEA had signed up for training as part of the New Opportunities Fund ICT Training for Teachers scheme.

The North West Arts Board has received an additional £493,877 from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Creative industries projects involve a collaborative venture between Lancaster and neighbouring Objective II designated areas to establish support services and networking opportunities for creative industries SMEs.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department by lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Policies (Tooting)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Tooting parliamentary constituency, the effect of his Department's policies and actions since 1 May 1997. [149861]

Mr. Chris Smith: Tooting constituency has received £5,214,274 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997. This includes one award from the millennium festival totalling £40,000.

In addition, the new opportunities fund out of school hours child care programme have made the following grants:

£283,784 to the Trojans scheme—to create a total of 48 breakfast, 274 after school and 299 holiday places for children aged 4–15 years in the Lambeth, Wandsworth and Kingston area. Nine local schools will benefit. A further grant of £34,750 to the Trojans Scheme—to create a new centre combining the Telferscot and Henry Cavendish primary school sites. The project would provide 80 new, integrated after school and holiday places for children aged 5–11 and those in reception class. The schools served would be Telferscot Primary and Henry Cavendish Primary.

£23,945 to the Brocklebank Nursery—to create 24 holiday, 24 breakfast and 20 after-school places, for children aged 3–11 in Wandsworth.

£14,115 to the A&R after school club—this applicant is a voluntary organisation which currently provides an after school and homework club. It employs four part-time staff. The grant will extend the current scheme to 30 places and set up 15 breakfast places and 30 holiday places. Ten of these places will be for integrated child care and learning. The project will cater for children aged 3–11 in the Streatham area. The schools benefiting are Franciscan, Furzedown, Penworthy Street, Leonard's and St. Anselm's RC Primaries.

The new opportunities fund has also awarded £900,100 to the Tooting healthy living initiative—this is a new project that has six distinct activity areas aimed at targeting health inequalities in the area with a particular focus on the health of ethnic minorities. The fund's out of school hours learning programme has awarded £11,000 to the Wandle primary school—this will make a study centre available to all students to help them complete their homework as well as offering a programme of activities.

Twenty five millennium award winners have been identified from Tooting and between them they have received grants totalling £93,278.

Music for Youth, Wandsworth has received £25,350 from the National Foundation for Youth Music Awards Scheme. This grant will enable those young people outside mainstream education to get involved in the national festival in rock and pop music by bringing teachers, students, organisations and musicians together to work towards creating a validated programme of learning in this sector of music. As part of the national festival of music for youth in July 2001, a rock and pop forum will be created, including workshops and performances. Groups will be selected from throughout the UK.

Wandsworth Library Authority (which includes Tooting libraries) received an award of £50,000 from the DCMS/Wolfson public libraries challenge fund's 1997–98 programme to support ICT projects in libraries. It is not possible to say precisely what proportion of funding was spent in the Tooting constituency.

From 1 April 1999, Tooting residents under 16 were able to benefit from free admission to the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Imperial War Museum, HMS Belfast, the Cabinet War Rooms, the Natural Maritime Museum and the Museum of London. From 1 April 2000, Tooting residents over 60 were able to gain free admission to most of those.

Ernest Bevin school in Tooting was awarded specialist sport college status jointly with Southfield community college—both in Wandsworth local education authority.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Greater London which may have an effect on the Tooting constituency. These include:

Under the Space for Sport and Arts (SSA) scheme, a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the third Round of New Opportunities Fund, a number of local education authorities in Greater London have been allocated funding towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community. There is therefore a potential inward investment of up £16.75 million in the London region under this programme.

Tooting residents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund Cancer programme. Across the whole of the London region, over £12 million will fund: 11 linear accelerators; four MRI scanners; ten trailers for breast screening equipment; three ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 30 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

London Arts has received an additional £981,583 from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department by the lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Initiatives (Pendle)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Pendle; and if he will make a statement. [149911]

Mr. Chris Smith: A number of initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Pendle.

35 lottery awards have been made totalling £1,716,879 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997. This includes one award from the millennium festival totalling £25,000.

In addition, the new opportunities fund cancer care programme awarded £220,605 to the hospice care for Burnley and Pendle—this project will build on current services for cancer patients by providing a 24-hour homecare service. It aims to give carers in Burnley and Pendle support during the night. The fund's out of school hours child-care programme has awarded £27,000 to the Lakeview children's nursery—this grant will create 30 before and 30 after-school places, creating a total of 60 places for children aged 5–14 in a rural area of Lancashire. Ten primary schools within a five-mile radius will benefit from the scheme.

Seventeen millennium award winners have been identified from Pendle and between them they have received grants totalling £25,218.

English Heritage grants offered since 1 May 1997 for the Pendle constituency are:

	£000
Heritage Economic Regeneration Schemes Round 1	
Barrowford/Higherford	40
Primet Bridge	40
Round 2	
St Mary's Nelson	68

Lancashire Library Authority (which includes Pendle libraries) was part of a consortium which received an award of £215,992 from the DCMS/Wolfson public libraries challenge fund's 2000–01 programme to support reader development work in libraries. There were 18 partners in the consortium—North West Libraries Book Promotion Partnership—and it is not possible to say precisely what proportion of funding is being spent in the Pendle constituency.

Creative industries development is also featuring in the borough championed by North West Heritage Trust, based in Barrowford, who have secured ERDF Objective 2 funds to investigate the feasibility of creating artists studios, an exhibition outlet and support services within the Higherford Mill development. This is a partnership venture together with North West Arts Board and Lancashire county council arts unit. With the SRB programme based in Brierfield there is a further example of cross agency work with a cultural development worker facilitating a programme of arts work managed by the borough, the local community and the Mid Pennine Arts development agency. This programme has recently been awarded national new audiences scheme money, one of only two to the north-west to explore evaluation methods around the arts and social inclusion.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Lancashire that may benefit Pendle. These are:

Under the Space for Sport and the Arts (SSA scheme), a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the 3rd Round of the New Opportunities Fund, Lancashire LEA has been allocated £1.75 million towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community.

Liverpool, Manchester, Cumbria, Knowsley, Salford, Rochdale, Trafford, Wirral, St. Helens and Blackburn with Darwen LEAs have also been allocated SSA funding which means a potential inward investment of up to £22 million in the North West region for sports and arts facilities in primary schools under this programme.

Pendle constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the new opportunities fund cancer programme. Across the whole of the north-west NHS Region over £10 million will fund nine linear accelerators; four MRI scanners, five trailers for breast screening equipment; six ultrasound machines for breast screening and 27 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

The North West Arts Board has received an additional £493,877 from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department by the lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Policies (Bristol, East)

Jean Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bristol, East constituency, the effects on Bristol of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150552]

Mr. Chris Smith: Bristol, East has received £7,989,112 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997. This includes one award from the millennium festival totalling £140,000.

In addition, three grants, totalling £36,882 have been made from the New Opportunities Fund out-of-school-hours child care programme. These are:

£25,252 awarded to the Whitehall school Out of School Club. The grant will provide for 24 after-school places and 24 holiday places, for children aged 4 to 11 years old.

£7,480 to the Dhek Bhal project—this will enable the creation of 10 holiday club places for children in two local primary schools.

£4,150 to the Brislington neighbourhood centre for 16 holiday places for children in Broomhill infant and junior school.

32 millennium award winners have been identified from Bristol, East and between them they have received grants totalling £83,930.

Since 2 May 1997, English Heritage has offered the following grants: £49,000 to the Arnos Vale cemetery for repairs and £190,000 to Temple Meads old station (Clock Tower Yard) for completion of restoration.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Bristol which may have an effect on the Bristol, East constituency. These are:

Under the Space for Sport and the Arts (SSA) scheme, a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the third round of the New Opportunities Fund, Bristol LEA has been allocated up to £1.75 million towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community. Cornwall, Plymouth, North Somerset and Somerset have also been allocated funding under this programme which means a potential inward investment of up to £9.1 million in the South West region under this programme.

Bristol, East constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund cancer programme. Across the whole of the South West NHS region over £9 million will fund seven linear accelerators; five MRI scanners; four trailers for breast screening equipment; four ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 22 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

Funding for the ICT (Information and Communications Technology) Training for Teachers and School Librarians programme is allocated to all schools in a local education authority area. For City of Bristol LEA the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £1,188,926 under this programme.

Funding for the ICT Training for Public Librarians is allocated to local authorities. For Bristol library authority the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £117,925 under this programme.

Bristol library authority was part of a consortium of 11 partners which received an award of £149,645 from the DCMS/Wolfson Fund in 2000–01 for a project to promote reading. It is not practicable to say what proportion of this funding is being spent in the Bristol, East constituency.

Bristol library authority also received an award of £24,000 from the Wolfson British History Programme (the part of the DCMS/Wolfson Fund sponsored by The Wolfson Foundation) for a project to enhance history collections and their presentation in 26 libraries. It is not practicable to say what proportion of the funding is being spent in the Bristol, East constituency.

Bristol Museums and Art Galleries has received £140,000 from the Designated Museums Challenge Fund towards research, storage and documentation projects.

My Department has also been encouraging additional collaboration between the national museums and galleries sponsored by my Department and their regional counterparts. Complementary to this is the recent exhibition agreement entered into between Bristol Museums and the National Gallery.

National Foundation for Youth Music have made four awards in the Bristol area totalling £53,972.

The South West Arts Board has received an additional £1,778 million from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department by the lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Policies (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood)

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, including statistical information, the effect on the Blackpool, North and Fleetwood constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150714]

Mr. Chris Smith: Blackpool, North and Fleetwood has received £1,341,025 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997. This includes one award from the millennium festival totalling £30,000.

In addition, three grants totalling £44,231 have been made from the new opportunities fund out of school hours child care programme. These are:

£13,057 to the Kincraig After-School Club—this will provide for 30 after-school places, for children aged 3 to 11-years-old.

£16,989 to the Holy Family Holiday Playscheme—this will enable the creation of 30 new places for children in three local primary schools.

£14,185 to the North Shore After-School Club—for 30 after school places for children aged 4 to 14. Three schools in an urban area will be served.

A grant worth £4,400 has been awarded to the Claremont community school from the fund's out of school hours learning programme. The project will teach children to play imaginative games and encourage learning through art and creativity.

Residents of Blackpool, North and Fleetwood will benefit from a grant worth £124,437 which has been awarded to Trinity palliative care services under the fund's living with cancer programme. This project will improve the availability of information to carers of cancer patients.

Two millennium award winners have been identified from Blackpool, North and Fleetwood and between them they have received grants totalling £5,007.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Blackpool which may have an effect on the Blackpool, North and Fleetwood constituency. These are:

The Space for Sport and the Art (SSA) scheme is making available £130 million, made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the 3rd Round of the New Opportunities Fund, towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community. Liverpool, Manchester, Cumbria, Knowsley, Salford, Lancashire, Rochdale, Trafford, Wirral, St. Helens and Blackburn with Darwen have been allocated funding under this programme which means a potential inward investment of up to £22 million in the north-west region.

Blackpool, North and Fleetwood constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund cancer programme. Across the whole of the North West NHS Region over £10 million will fund nine linear accelerators; four MRI scanners; five trailers for breast screening equipment; six ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 27 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

Blackpool Funding for the ICT (Information and Communications Technology) Training for Teachers and School Librarians is allocated to all schools in a local education authority area. For Blackpool LEA the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £441,228 under this programme.

Funding for the ICT Training for Public Librarians is allocated to local authorities. For Blackpool Library Authority the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £37,490 under this programme.

Blackpool Library Authority was awarded £52,000 from the DCMS/Wolfson Fund in 1998–99, and as part of a consortium with other authorities, £215,992 in 2000–01. It is not practicable to say what part of this funding benefits the Blackpool, North and Fleetwood constituency.

The North West Arts Board has received an additional £493,877 from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

The National Theatre Review of major producing theatres will impact on Blackpool Grand Theatre which has been named as a recipient of additional new funding made available by my Department. The allocation to the North West of the £25 million available nationally will be known in March. This is likely to lead to a significant increase in core funding for the theatre.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Policies (North-East Derbyshire)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North-East Derbyshire constituency, the effect on North-East Derbyshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150882]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* North-East Derbyshire has received £3,489,224 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997.

In addition, the new opportunities fund has made the following grants:

A grant worth £4,617 has been made to Holmesdale kids club from the fund's out of school hours child care programme. The grant will provide for eight before-school, eight after-school and eight holiday places, for children aged 5 to 11-years-old. Three schools in a rural area will benefit.

A grant worth £21,652 has been made to Dronfield junior school from the fund's out of school hours learning programme. The project will include arts activities ranging from screen-printing and pottery to drama and community music.

Residents of North-East Derbyshire will benefit from a grant worth £184,114 which has been awarded to a 24-hour crisis prevention and support service under the living with cancer programme. The project will include 24-hour home support services, ensuring speedy patient assessment and support for carers.

Six millennium award winners have been identified from North-East Derbyshire and between them they have received grants totalling £38,866.

English Heritage have continued to fund existing commitments in North-East Derbyshire. These are:

1996–97 to 1998–99 contributed 50 per cent. of salary costs for a Conservation Officer post in North-East Derbyshire district council (£34,500 over three years).

Fleet Arts, Belper has been awarded £10,249 from the National Foundation for Youth Music—this project is a new departure for the Nail it Down project, extending it from rock and pop to include new technology, samba and the fusion of the two. Opportunities will be created for performance, running recording sessions and workshops which are informal, focused on the individual and encourage the writing of original music and lyrics.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Derbyshire which may have an effect on the North-East Derbyshire constituency. These are:

Under the Space for Sport and the Arts (SSA) scheme, a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the third round of the New Opportunities Fund, Derbyshire LEA has been allocated up to £2.2 million towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community.

Leicester City, the City of Nottingham, Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire and the City of Derby have also been allocated funding under this programme which means a potential investment of up to £13.4 million in the East Midlands Region.

North-East Derbyshire constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund Cancer programme. Across the whole of the Trent NHS Region over £10 million will fund six linear accelerators; five MRI scanners; five trailers for breast screening equipment; five ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 24 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

Derbyshire funding for the ICT (Information and Communications Technology) Training for Teachers and School Librarians is allocated to all schools in a local education authority area. For Derbyshire LEA the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £2,467,164 under this programme.

Funding for ICT Training for Public Librarians is allocated to local authorities. For Derbyshire Library Authority the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £230,510 under this programme.

Derbyshire Library Authority was awarded £90,100 from the DCMS/Wolfson Fund in 1997–98, £101,099 in 1998–99, and £95,000 in 1999–2000. It is not practicable to say what part of this funding benefits the North-East Derbyshire constituency.

East Midlands Arts has received an additional £1,592,000 from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department from the lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Departmental Policies (Norwich, North)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Norwich, North constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [151146]

Mr. Chris Smith: Norwich, North has received £1,377,917 from the national lottery since 2 May 1997. This includes £31,569,000 for the Norfolk and Norwich millennium project and one award from the millennium festival totalling £20,000.

In addition, the new opportunities fund has made the following grants:

Two grants, totalling £16,906 have been made from the fund's out of school hours child care programme. The first was awarded to Barneybees. £8,603 will be used to provide 16 before school and 16 holiday places for children aged 5–7 years old. The schools served will be Angel road first and middle schools. An award of £8,303 to the George White out of school club will enable the creation of 24 after school places for children in the George White middle school.

Twenty two millennium award winners have been identified from Norwich, North and between them they have received grants totalling £46,401.

Thorpe St. Andrew School in Norwich, North was awarded specialist sport college status.

There are of course other initiatives in the wider context of Norwich which may have an effect on the Norwich, North constituency. These are:

Under the Space for Sport and the Art scheme, a £130 million capital programme made up of £75 million from the Capital Modernisation Fund and £55 million from Sport England, the Arts Council of England and the 3rd Round of the New Opportunities Fund, Norfolk LEA has been allocated up to £2.2 million towards providing improved facilities for sport and arts in primary schools which can also be used by the wider community. Essex, Luton and Bedfordshire have also been allocated funding under this programme which means a potential inward investment of up to £7.4 million in the Eastern Region under this programme.

The Norwich Castle Museum has been allocated £208,000 from the Designated Museums Challenge Fund towards a major documentation project.

My Department has also been encouraging additional collaboration between the national museums and galleries sponsored by the Department and their regional counterparts. Complementary to this has been the Tate Gallery's formation of strategic relationships with five regional museums and galleries including the Norwich Castle Museum. Supplementing the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, DCMS will be providing the Tate with an additional £300,000 a year from 2001–02 towards the maintenance of these relationships.

Norfolk Library Authority was awarded £234,068 from the DCMS/Wolfson Fund in 1999–2000, and, as part of a consortium with other authorities, £149,045 in 2000–01. It is not practicable to say what part of this funding benefits the Norwich, North constituency.

Funding for the ICT (Information and Communications Technology) Training for Teachers and school librarians is allocated to all schools in a local education authority area. For Norfolk LEA the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £2,636,358 under this programme.

Funding for ICT Training for Public Librarians is allocated to local authorities. For Norfolk Library Authority the New Opportunities Fund have allocated £202,030 under this programme.

People's Network programme aims to link every public library in the UK to the internet and the National grid for Learning by 2002. The New Opportunities Fund has allocated £720,935 to Norfolk Library Service under this programme.

Norwich, North constituents will benefit from equipment to be purchased by the New Opportunities Fund Cancer programme. Across the whole of the Eastern NHS Region over £9 million will fund six linear accelerators; three MRI scanners; nine trailers for breast screening equipment; five ultrasound machines for breast screening; and 23 pieces of x-ray breast screening equipment.

The National Foundation for Youth Music has awarded £500,000 to the Norfolk Youth Music Action Zone, Keswick Hall Choir.

East England Arts Board has received an additional £1.225 million from the Arts Council this year to support arts and cultural activity across the region.

Grants offered by English Heritage in the Norwich area are:

Churches:

St. Stephen's Rampant Horse Street, Norwich £244,155
St. Peter's, The Street, Matlake £22,100
All Saints, Marsham £41,100
St. Peter and St Paul, Oulton £26,170
Cathedral £227,000

Secular

Deanery, The Close, Norwich £11,234
St. Augustines, St. Augustines Street, Norwich £5,000
Great Hospital, Bishopsgate, Norwich £45,000
St. Clement, Colgate, Norwich £11,000
St. Martin Palace, Norwich £20,100
St. Margaret de Westwick, St. Benedicts Street, Norwich £43,600
5 Tombland, Norwich £4,470
15 Elm Hill, Norwich £1,620
20 Golden Dog Lane, Norwich £1,865
3–5 Magdalen Street, Norwich £3,365.

Information on the national lottery is in accordance with the information supplied to the Department from the lottery distributors for the national lottery awards database.

Ecclesiastical Heritage

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what contribution his Department makes to the preservation of Britain's ecclesiastical heritage. [153777]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Department fully recognises the importance of this country's ecclesiastical heritage, and contributes to its preservation in England through grant in aid to English Heritage, which funds conservation work for places of worship listed Grade I and II. The Heritage lottery fund, too, has contributed substantial sums from the national lottery to repairs and new facilities for historic churches throughout the country. The Department further supports the Churches Conservation Trust's work in caring for historic churches no longer in use for regular worship. We will shortly be introducing a new UK-wide grant scheme for listed places of worship which will substantially increase the amount of public support for repairs to our heritage of fine ecclesiastical buildings.

Channel 4

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the role of Channel 4 in a multi-channel broadcasting environment. [153915]

Janet Anderson: As the Government made clear in the White Paper "A New Future For Communications", published last December, we will maintain Channel 4 as a public service broadcaster in the multi-channel environment with a remit which complements and provides competition to the BBC and the ITV companies. We will also ensure that Channel 4 continues to provide distinctive and innovative programming.

Royal Parks Agency

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what payments the Royal Parks Agency has received from the London marathon in each of the last five years. [153962]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of this question has been delegated to the Royal Parks Agency under its chief executive, William Weston. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from William Weston to Mr. Gareth R. Thomas, dated March 2001:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the amount the Royal Parks Agency has received from the London Marathon as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible.

The Royal Parks Agency has received the following payments from the London Marathon over the last five years.

£

	Event fee	*Police costs*
1996	36,225	n/a
1997	46,808.51	n/a
1998	85,106.38	n/a
1999	140,000	7,019.57
2000	142,800	7,320

In addition, in 2000 the Agency received £1,672.35 in respect of reinstatement costs.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the budgeted figure was for the proceeds of the auction of the content of the millennium dome; and what figure was achieved. [154235]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) budgeted £2 million after commission but before auctioneer's fees from the sale of the dome's surplus content. Subject to final reconciliation, the auction realised £3.2 million after commission but before fees.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much Millennium Commission funding remains to be drawn down by the New Millennium Experience Company; and if he will make a statement. [154238]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has so far drawn down £10 million of the £47 million grant from the Millennium Commission. £37 million remains.

Canals (Foot and Mouth Disease)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of the closure of British Waterways' canal network on the long-term viability of canal-based tourism operators. [154218]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The decision to close access to all its waterways located in affected and restricted areas from the beginning of the month to help limit the spread of foot and mouth disease was made by British Waterways.

The Government have established a taskforce chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to consider the implications of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease for the rural economy. The implications for the canal network (and other waterways) will be within the ambit of this group, which will be considering actions to help those caught up in the crisis and measures to help the rural economy once the outbreak has been eradicated.

Culture and Creativity

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to widen access to culture and to support the creative talent of people of all ages. [154772]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am tomorrow publishing a Green Paper entitled "Culture and Creativity: The Next Ten Years". The paper looks forward to a future in which individual creative talent is given the support it needs from childhood to flourish; in which artists and cultural institutions are freed from bureaucratic controls; and in which freedom to explore and enjoy creativity and culture is available to all.

The Green Paper sets out how the Government seek to secure that future, both through cultural policy initiatives—such as creative partnerships between schools and cultural institutions and free access to national museums and galleries—and through the key role culture and creativity play in the Government's educational and industrial policies.

Copies of the Green Paper have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pigs Directive

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to persuade the Commission of the EU to enforce the Pigs Directive (91/630/EEC) in respect of countries that have failed to take action in accordance with it. [154020]

Mr. Morley: Where we have hard evidence of a failure to enforce EU welfare rules, we do not hesitate to bring the matter to the attention of the EU Commission. However, while allegations of this kind are made from time to time, the evidence is not usually provided.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 330W, on animal welfare, if a date and agenda have now been set for the next meeting of the interdepartmental group on animal welfare. [154245]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The next meeting of the interdepartmental group on animal welfare is scheduled for early April. The agenda is likely to include items on the Protection of Animals (Amendment) Act 2000, WTO and animal welfare and the Review of the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the senior civil service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152796]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The headline pay settlement for Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff was 2.5 per cent. on the pay bill and, together with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received performance-related increases averaging 4.5 per cent.

2001 Census

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the result was of his review of ethnic minority origin categories for the 2001 census; and what measures he will take to include the Irish in Britain among the categories used for monitoring recruitment and other activities that may benefit from equal opportunities best practice. [153808]

Mr. Wilson: There was no review of ethnic minority origin categories for the 2001 census. My Department follows Cabinet Office guidance with respect to the use of ethnic minority origin categories for monitoring purposes. New guidance is expected shortly which will include the Irish in British category. Our ethnic monitoring questionnaire will be updated over the next year and the new categories will be used from April 2002, in line with Cabinet Office guidance.

Plutonium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the expanded plutonium disposition planning group. [154204]

Mr. Wilson: There has been no formal expansion of the G8 plutonium disposition planning group (PDPG). However, on 9 March in Brussels, the Russian and US co-chairs of the PDPG gave a briefing on the state of the plutonium disposition programme to other interested Governments and industry representatives.

Russia and the US gave presentations on the development of the programme so far, and took questions.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 12 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 47W, if the paper on fuel leasing to which the United Kingdom is committed under the action points agreed in the meeting of the Plutonium Disposition Planning Group held in Rome on 6 and 7 February has been produced; and if he will place a copy in the Library once it is ready. [154230]

Mr. Wilson: A provisional version of the paper on fuel leasing has been produced and is awaiting comments from the rest of the G8. The UK will then revise the paper in the light of these comments.

It is a document communicated in confidence between Governments.

Peter Bleach

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has received a reply to the representations he made to the Indian Government about the imprisonment of Peter Bleach; and if he will make a statement. [153976]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary has not yet received a reply to his letter of 4 December 2000 to the Indian Government asking for Peter Bleach to be released on the grounds of fair and equal treatment with his co-convicted, who already have been released. He sent a reminder on 29 January. The British High Commissioner in New Delhi has followed up the Foreign Secretary's request with key players in the Indian Government. Baroness Scotland called in the Indian High Commissioner on 7 March to remind him of the Foreign Secretary's request.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent contacts have taken place between Ministers and the President of Syria; and if he will make a statement on the outcome of such contacts. [154330]

Mr. Wilson: The Prime Minister had a telephone conversation with the Syrian President on 10 October. The Foreign Secretary has met the Syrian President twice during the past year, on 12 October and 13 June. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), while Northern Ireland Secretary, was invited by the Syrian President to a private meeting on 4 January 2001.

The UK has good relations with Syria. Contacts with the Syrian President have focused on improving bilateral co-operation and on moving forward the middle east peace process.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is in respect of meetings between Ministers and arms dealers. [154329]

Mr. Wilson: Meetings between Ministers and people outside government are conducted in accordance with the ministerial code.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in respect of the recent visit by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) to Syria *(a)* whether the visit was initiated by his Department, *(b)* what briefing arrangements were put in place to ensure discussions held in Syria presented Her Majesty's Government's policy, *(c)* what the nature was of information obtained during the visit which was passed back to his Department, *(d)* if the visit was paid for solely out of public funds, *(e)* what discussions took place prior to the visit involving Lord Levy and *(f)* if he will list the persons met by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool during his visit. [154405]

Mr. Wilson: The recent visit to Syria by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was a private visit made with the knowledge and approval of the Foreign Office. A full briefing was not requested or provided. My right hon. Friend received travel advice from the FCO and spoke to our ambassador in Damascus prior to travelling. In turn, he briefed our ambassador in Damascus on the discussion he had with the Syrian President at a private meeting arranged at short notice. The visit was not paid for from public funds. There were no discussions involving Lord Levy prior to the visit.

Arms Exports

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 735–36W, on arms exports, on what dates in 1998, at which locations, and at what levels contacts were made between his Department and MINURSO; which department of the UN told his Department that refurbishment could be considered as neutral; if this decision was confirmed in correspondence; and what specific role MINURSO was understood to play in the monitoring and the refurbishment of guns. [154488]

Mr. Wilson: Foreign and Commonwealth Office and MINURSO officials had regular contacts, at all levels, in the region to discuss Western Sahara during 1998. As a result of contacts between FCO and United Nations officials, FCO officials came to a preliminary view that refurbishment of the guns would not breach the existing ceasefire.

The United Nations Department of Peace-Keeping Operations in New York told us that refurbishment of the guns could be viewed as neutral. This was not the subject of written correspondence between FCO and United Nations officials. The FCO understood that, in accordance with existing military arrangements between MINURSO and the two parties, MINURSO would be in a position to monitor the procedure of the refurbishment of the Moroccan guns on the ground.

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions took place between his Department and *(a)* the United Nations and *(b)* MINURSO regarding the legality of permitting the refurbishment of Moroccan 105 mm guns situated in Western Sahara; on what dates these discussion took place; with which UN Department; at what grades; and in which location. [154489]

Mr. Wilson: Foreign and Commonwealth Office and United Nations officials discussed whether or not refurbishment of the Moroccan guns in Western Sahara would be in breach of the UN-sponsored ceasefire. The United Nations Department of Peace-Keeping Operations in New York confirmed to the FCO that refurbishment of the guns would not be in breach of the existing military arrangements between MINURSO and the two parties.

FCO officials have regular discussions with the United Nations officials on a wide range of issues on Western Sahara and the region. Discussions about the possible refurbishment of Moroccan guns in Western Sahara formed part of these wider discussions during 1998 and 1999. Discussions were between officials at a variety of grades and took place in the region with MINURSO officials and in New York with Department of Peace-Keeping Operations officials.

President Mugabe (Legal Proceedings)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has

made to President Bush regarding the possible immunity from legal proceedings in New York for President Mugabe; and if he will make a statement. [154322]

Mr. Wilson: We have made no representations to the US Government on this issue. However, we have regular discussions with the Americans about Zimbabwe. They share our concerns about the situation there.

Sierra Leone (Select Committee Report)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if written material was prepared for use in briefing *(a)* the Press and *(b)* officials, arising from the copy of the draft Foreign Affairs Select Committee report on Sierra Leone handed over by the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross); [154333]

(2) if the Deputy Head of his Department's News Department annotated a version of the copy of the draft Foreign Affairs Select Committee report on Sierra Leone handed over by the hon. Member for Dundee, West; [154325]

(3) if *(a)* the Permanent Under-Secretary and *(b)* the Head of his Department's News Department saw written briefing material for use in briefing (i) the Press and (ii) officials, arising from the copy of the draft Foreign Affairs Select Committee Report on Sierra Leone handed over by the hon. Member for Dundee, West; [154326]

(4) if *(a)* the Permanent Under-Secretary at his Department and *(b)* the Head of his Department's News Department, *(c)* the Deputy Head of his Department's News Department and *(d)* the Head of his Department's Africa Department (Equatorial) were briefed on the contents of the draft Foreign Affairs Select Committee report on Sierra Leone handed over by the hon. Member for Dundee, West. [154327]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 775W.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action Dr. Goldstein took in relation to the 'Zola Budd' manuscript note written on the letter concerning G. P. Hinduja. [154320]

Mr. Straw: None. I assume that the right hon. Member is referring to the letter written by Mr. G. P. Hinduja to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) about Mr. Prakash Hinduja.

Sir Anthony Hammond concluded that this letter was dealt with entirely properly (Cmnd HC287 6.23).

Asylum Procedures

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which recommendations of the vantagepoint report on asylum procedures *(a)* have been implemented and *(b)* are yet to be implemented; which will not be implemented; and if he will make a statement. [151748]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave her on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 209W, which in turn referred to the answer my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffat) on 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, 255W.

The background to the radical overhaul of the asylum decision-making process undertaken by this Government was set out by my right hon. Friend. It was explained that the asylum process project/vantagepoint report was part of the overhaul, but it was never intended that it be viewed in isolation. Indeed, many changes had already been introduced before the report was completed, as part of our strategy to streamline asylum processing as a whole. Thus many improvements had already been made.

Improvement continues. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate made over 100,000 initial decisions in 2000. The backlog has fallen for 12 consecutive months and we expect this to continue. We remain on course to make further substantial reductions by April 2001.

Gaming Industry

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to deregulate the gaming industry. [154562]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am today publishing a consultation document which sets out proposals for an order under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994—or, if it is enacted, the Government's Regulatory Reform Bill—to change certain aspects of the gaming machine industry. Our consultation document makes three specific proposals that would alter the law contained in the Gaming Act 1968 Act on jackpot and higher-value amusement with prizes machines.

First, we propose to allow players to use bank notes and electronic smart cards in these machines. Secondly, we propose to allow winnings to be stored in these machines to be used for further plays without the player having to reinsert money into the machine. Finally, we propose to allow these machines to be set so as to pay out winnings in cash (notes or coins), by printing a cheque, by adding credit to the player's smart card, or by means of a credit note or token redeemable by the operator.

The Government believe that these reforms will benefit both the industry and its customers. The consultation document asks for comment by 15 June 2001. I am placing copies in the Library.

Essex Constabulary

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the absentee rates among police officers for *(a)* training and *(b)* sickness in the Essex constabulary in each year from March 1997 to the latest date for which figures are available. [154483]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No central collection is made of information about absentee rates for training and Essex police have advised me that they are unable to provide this information.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) collect data from forces on police sickness absence. The annual rates of sickness for Essex police from 1996–97 to 1999–2000 are as follows:

	Number of working days lost through sickness per police officer
1996–97	10
1997–98	11.6
1998–99	13.4
1999–2000	14.6

Court Visits

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 390W, on court visits, (1) if he will list improprieties he witnessed by members of the legal profession during his visits; [153834]

(2) if he will give details of the criminal proceedings he observed during the court visits. [153835]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* I have observed a wide range of proceedings dealt with by criminal courts. However, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the detail of individual cases.

Electoral Registers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the policy of his Department is on commercial selling of electoral registers to private and commercial organisations; and if he will make a statement. [154454]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 9 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 allows regulations to be made restricting the sale and supply of the full electoral register. Section 9 gives effect to a recommendation of the working party on electoral procedures that each individual registered elector should have the option of deciding whether the details that they have provided should be included in the commercially available register by using an opt out box on the registration form. We hope to publish draft regulations for consultation by Easter.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Child Abduction

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will place a copy of the Central Authority for England and Wales' working paper submitted to the Permanent Bureau for the forthcoming Special Commission to review the operation of the Hague Convention on child abduction in the Library. [154318]

Jane Kennedy: Working papers produced in consultation with the entire United Kingdom delegation will be placed in the Library early next week, when the texts have been finalised.

Magistrates (Stoke-on-Trent)

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on the selection criteria operated by the Advisory Committee on Justices of the Peace for Stoke-on-Trent in relation to recruiting magistrates, with specific reference to applications from Labour party supporters. [153797]

Jane Kennedy: All advisory committees in England and Wales operate the criteria set out in my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor's directions for advisory committees on justices of the peace, copies of which are available in the Libraries. The pre-eminent requirement is that a candidate must be personally suitable for appointment, possessing the six key qualities required in a magistrate (good character; understanding and communication; social awareness; maturity and sound temperament; sound judgment; commitment and reliability). As a secondary consideration, in common with his predecessors, the Lord Chancellor requires that each magistrates bench should broadly reflect the community it serves in terms of gender, ethnic origin, geographical spread, occupation and political affiliation.

Political affiliation has been used by successive Lord Chancellors as a proxy for social balance in the lay magistracy and has been endorsed by two Royal Commissions. The Department, by letters dated 7 August 1995 and 17 July 1996, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, referred to the concern of the then Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, that the political balance in Stoke-on-Trent was not good, with the Labour vote under reflected, and encouraged measures to seek our more Labour voters to become magistrates.

My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor personally favours the abandonment of using political balance as a proxy for achieving social balance. With this in mind he issued a consultation paper in 1998 "Political Balance in the Lay Magistracy" seeking views. While most respondents favoured removing political affiliation as a balancing factor, no viable alternative was suggested. The Lord Chancellor therefore reluctantly decided in 1999 that political balance would have to remain for the time being, but instructed officials to continue to work on an alternative.

Later this year pilots will be conducted to ascertain whether or not a combination of social and occupational groupings would be a practical alternative to political balance.

SOCIAL SECURITY

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 7 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 233–34W, on national insurance numbers, how many spouses of those deceased persons with national insurance numbers are still alive. [153803]

Mr. Rooker: This information is not available.

Benefits (Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of children in *(a)* South Tyneside and *(b)* South Shields constituency who were receiving Child Benefit in (i) 1997 and

(ii) 2001; what the rates of benefit were; and what the average annual income from Child Benefit was in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 2001 for those areas. [154437]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

	South Tyneside	*South Shields*
August 1999		
Number of children	19,810	10,475
Average weekly amount per family (£)	21.17	21.35
November 2000		
Number of children	19,474	10,358
Average weekly amount per family (£)	22.56	22.67

Notes:

1. Figures are from a 100 per cent. extract of the Child Benefit Centre Computer System.
2. Information from before 1999 is not available on this basis.
3. The average annual income from Child Benefit is not available.
4. Average weekly amounts are based on Child Benefit, Guardians Allowance and Child Benefit (Lone Parent). We are not able to split them into the individual components.
5. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the relevant (ie 1999 or 2000 versions 1 or 2) of the ONS Postcode Directory. Constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.

The rates of Child Benefit were as follows:

April 1999—£14.40 eldest child and £9.60 subsequent children.

April 2000—£15.00 eldest child and £10.00 subsequent children.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Jobseeker's Allowance claimants there are in *(a)* South Tyneside MBC and *(b)* South Shields constituency; how many there were in May 1997; and how many such claimants were continuous claimants of more than two years. [154442]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) recipients in South Shields constituency and South Tyneside metropolitan borough council area by duration—May 1997 and November 2000

Thousand

	South Shields Central parliamentary constituency	*South Tyneside metropolitan borough council*
May 1997		
All cases	4.7	7.3
Duration two years or more	1.2	1.8
November 2000		
All cases	3.4	5.4
Duration two years or more	0.5	0.8

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Figures include cases receiving Income-based or Contribution-based JSA and those receiving no benefit and signing for National Insurance Credits only.
4. As JSA was only introduced in October 1996 the duration figures for May 1997 include those on Unemployment Benefit or Income Support for the unemployed prior to October 1996.

Source:

Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1997 and November 2000

Pensioners (Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in *(a)* South Tyneside and *(b)* South Shields constituency were receiving Income Support in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 2000–01; and what their average benefit and average income were. [154439]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables.

Compared to when this Government came to office in 1997, the average incomes of pensioners in these constituencies have risen by around £15 weekly. Over 40 per cent. of this increase can be attributed directly to help through the Minimum Income Guarantee. From this April, with the alignment of weekly Minimum Income Guarantee rates at the highest rate, no pensioner need live on less than £92.15 a week.

Income Support pensioners average weekly income and average weekly amount of Income Support as November 1997

	Number of claimants	*Average weekly amount of income (£)*	*Average weekly amount of Income Support (£)*
South Tyneside local authority	6,700	75.51	32.73
South Shields parliamentary constituency	3,800	76.10	31.99

Minimum Income Guarantee pensioners average weekly income and average weekly amount of MIG as at November 2000

	Number of claimants	*Average weekly amount of income (£)*	*Average weekly amount of Income Support (£)*
South Tyneside local authority	6,800	90.14	38.03
South Shields parliamentary constituency	3,700	90.09	37.20

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and are expressed in thousands.
3. Parliamentary constituencies and local authorities have been allocated by matching postcodes against the relevant ONS postcode directory for each quarter, and represent constituency boundaries as at May 1997.
4. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 and over.
5. Income is defined as all income and benefits (excluding IS), including income from Partners and dependants, taken into account and disregarded for Income Support purposes.
6. The average weekly amounts of income quoted in the tables exclude help provided through Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, November 1997 and 2000

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners receiving the state pension there are in *(a)* South Tyneside and *(b)* South Shields constituency; how many there were in May 1997; and how many of those were aged over 75 years. [154440]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

We will increase basic state pension from April 2001 by £5 for a single person and £8 per couple. The overall costs for Great Britain as a whole will be 1.3 billion. This will benefit over 10 million British pensioners. Among them an estimated 30,400 reside in the South Tyneside local authority and an estimated 16,500 reside in the constituency of South Shields.

Retirement pensioners in receipt of state pension resident in South Tyneside local authority, South Shields constituency and Great Britain at 30 September 2000

	Total recipients	*75 and under*	*Over 75*
Great Britain	10,185,400	6,363,400	3,822,000
South Tyneside	30,400	20,200	10,300
South Shields	16,500	10,900	5,600
Great Britain (March 1997)	9,838,700	6,181,700	3,656,900

Notes:
1. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency and district authority by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 of the Postcode Directory supplied by ONS.
2. Great Britain data exclude Overseas and Channel Island pensioners.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.
4. Data by local authority or parliamentary constituency are not available prior to September 1999.

Source:
Based on a 5 per cent. sample taken from the Pension Strategy Computer System at 31 March 2000 and 31 March 1997.

Pensions

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if Guaranteed Minimum Pensions are payable to women beneficiaries at age 60 years. [154490]

Mr. Rooker: Yes. Guaranteed Minimum Pensions (GMPs) are payable to women, in their own right, at age 60, but they may be payable earlier to a widow who qualifies for half of her late husband's GMP. In some cases GMPs may be paid later because occupational pension schemes can have a rule which enables payment of the GMP to be postponed, beyond age 60, while an individual remains in employment.

Departmental Advertising

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what major advertising campaigns his Department is carrying out; and what the cost and duration of each is. [154262]

Mr. Rooker: The following campaigns are on-going: Pensions Education, Targeting Fraud and New Deal for Lone Parents. The costs of these are £6.5 million, £4.7 million and £2.5 million, in this financial year.

Departmental Policies (Paisley, South)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Paisley, South constituency, the effects on Paisley, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153762]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Paisley, South since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive child benefit, and in Paisley, South 8,436 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Paisley, South the number has reduced from 2,400 to 1,600. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Paisley, South from 1,800 to 1,500.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 13,800 older people in Paisley, South have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 13,100 pensioners in Paisley, South will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic state pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 4,900 in Paisley, South. 2,700 pensioner families in Paisley, South are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Don Valley)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Don Valley constituency, the effects on Doncaster of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153526]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Don Valley since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive child benefit, and in Don Valley 11,339 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Don Valley the number has reduced from 2,800 to 1,600. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Don Valley from 1,700 to 1,600.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 17,000 older people in Don Valley have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 16,000 pensioners in Don Valley will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,600 in Don Valley. 2,200 pensioner families in Don Valley are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Jarrow of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [153563]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Jarrow since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive child benefit, and in Jarrow 10,439 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Jarrow the number has reduced from 2,900 to 2,200. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Jarrow from 1,600 to 1,500.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 17,000 older people in Jarrow have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 15,600 pensioners in Jarrow will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,700 in Jarrow. 3,600 pensioner families in Jarrow are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Walthamstow constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154175]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all reports". Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Walthamstow since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Walthamstow 11,980 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Walthamstow the number has reduced from 4,800 to 2,700. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Walthamstow from 2,800 to 2,200.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 11,900 older people in Walthamstow have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 11,000 pensioners in Walthamstow will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic state pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,200 in Walthamstow. 3,500 pensioner families in Walthamstow are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she takes to ensure that replies to letters from hon. Members are given within a reasonable period of time; and which Departments have taken over nine months to reply to letters in the last three years. [153967]

Marjorie Mowlam: All Departments are working hard to improve their handling of hon. Members' correspondence. For our part, the Cabinet Office has issued new guidance to Departments and is currently working hard on identifying and sharing examples of good practice in handling Members' correspondence.

The annual Cabinet Office report to Parliament provides information on the total number of late replies sent by Departments (i.e. the number of replies which are not sent within the target time set by Departments). We do not hold information centrally on late replies in any other format. The report for the 2000 calendar year is due to be published before Easter.

DEFENCE

Defence Budget

17. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the defence budget, expressed as a percentage of GDP, was in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 1996–97 in (i) the UK, (ii) France, (iii) Germany and (iv) Belgium. [152714]

Mr. Spellar: The defence budgets of the countries stated, expressed as a percentage of their GDP, are:

UK—2.5 per cent. in 2000–01, and 2.9 per cent. in 1996–97;

France—2.7 per cent. in 2000–01, and 3.0 per cent. in 1996–97;

Germany—1.5 per cent. in 2000–01, and 1.6 per cent. in 1996–97;

Belgium—1.4 per cent. in 2000–01, and 1.6 per cent. in 1996–97.

It should be noted that the figure of 2.5 per cent. for the UK this year reflects the increase in the Defence budget as a result of the Supplementary Estimate laid last month. The previously reported figure was 2.4 per cent.

30. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the level of the defence budget expressed as a percentage of GDP in each of the last four financial years for which figures are available. [152727]

Mr. Spellar: The defence budget as a percentage of the GDP for the last four completed financial years is as follows:

1996–97: 2.9 per cent.

1997–98: 2.7 per cent.

1998–99: 2.6 per cent.

1999–2000: 2.6 per cent.

Sierra Leone

18. **Ms Bridget Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the deployment of British armed forces in Sierra Leone. [152715]

Mr. Hoon: British troops are in Sierra Leone to assist the democratically elected Government to establish effective and accountable armed forces. We have between 550 and 600 troops on the ground in Sierra Leone at any time. These are divided into the UK contribution to the international military advisory and training team, soldiers providing the short-term training teams, and a brigade headquarters. In January we deployed a field surgical team to cover the gap in medical cover due to the roulement of UN medical facilities.

32. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last visited Sierra Leone to inspect the British troops there; and if he will make a statement. [152729]

Mr. Hoon: I last visited Sierra Leone on 31 January, accompanied by my hon. Friend, among others. We were both able to see the excellent work of the UK armed forces who were training the Sierra Leone Army. Our forces have made a significant difference to the capability and confidence of the Sierra Leone Army units that have so far gone through the training package.

Whale Island

19. **Mr. Rapson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his plans for HMS Excellent and Whale Island. [152716]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Navy has conducted a comprehensive study of its training estate to identify the estate necessary for training beyond 2010. HMS Excellent, the training establishment based at Whale Island, is part of that study, but no decision on its future has yet been made.

Whale Island is also under consideration as a potential site for the relocation of the major part of Commander in Chief Fleet's Headquarters from Northwood.

Armed Forces (Numbers)

20. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the Army to reach its full manning strength. [152717]

Mr. Spellar: The Army remains committed to achieving full manning by 2005. We recognise this is a challenging target and work is in hand to identify how best to achieve it.

Procurement (Job Creation)

22. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of jobs that have been *(a)* created and *(b)* sustained as a result of procurement decisions announced since May 1997. [152719]

33. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the number of jobs *(a)* created and *(b)* sustained as a result of procurement decisions announced since May 1997. [152730]

Dr. Moonie: Over 60,000 new contracts are placed each year and the Ministry of Defence does not record the number of jobs created or sustained as a result of each individual procurement decision. It is estimated that the number of UK jobs dependent on defence expenditure and equipment exports is approximately 345,000.

Strategic Defence Review

23. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what changes in defence policy priorities there have been since the publication of the strategic defence review; and if he will make a statement. [152720]

Mr. Hoon: There have been no fundamental changes in defence policy priorities since the strategic defence review. The principles and conclusions of the review have proved to be robust.

But we are not complacent and recognise the need to adapt to a changing world. That is why we recently updated our analysis. The results were published on 7 February in two papers, "Defence Policy 2001" and "Future Strategic Context for Defence".

Ministerial Meetings (Poland)

24. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last met his Polish counterpart to discuss the future of NATO. [152721]

Mr. Hoon: I had a meeting with Mr. Bronislaw Komorowski, the Polish Defence Minister at last October's NATO Informal Ministerial meeting in Birmingham. Mr. Komorowski fell ill prior to my visit to Poland in February. In his absence I discussed a range

of issues, including developments in NATO, with his Deputy Ministers. I met the Polish Foreign Minister, Mr. Wtadystaw Bartoszewski during his visit to the UK on 12 March.

Deployment

25. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the changes in the proportion of the armed forces committed to operations since May 1997. [152722]

Mr. Spellar: As at 1 May 1997, some 26 per cent. of the trained Army were committed to operations. As at 28 February 2001 this had reduced to 22 per cent. Figures for the Naval Service and RAF have been routinely collected only more recently and information for 1997, therefore, is not available. Currently some 10 per cent. of the Naval Service is deployed on operational tasks and some 10 per cent. of the RAF is committed to operations.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British soldiers are deployed abroad, and in which countries. [154313]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Shoeburyness

26. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the defence establishment in Shoeburyness. [152723]

Dr. Moonie: Current plans, as a consequence of the public-private partnership initiative, are that operations at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) range, Shoeburyness, known also as New Ranges, will be carried out by NewDERA under an arrangement which is currently being negotiated. The intention is that NewDERA will have the flexibility to conduct operations on ranges while meeting the needs of the Ministry of Defence and maintaining value for money for the taxpayer. Meanwhile, DERA is continuing to work with SERCo Ltd. to rationalise the New Ranges estate to introduce new businesses which are able to co-exist with continuing range activities. There are currently 10 tenants on the site and this number is expected to increase. Recent new tenants include two from the transport industry. I understand that the hon. Member recently opened the catering training establishment.

Old Ranges at Shoeburyness was sold in March 2000 to Gladedale Homes Ltd. and the Ministry of Defence has no further interest in the site.

Smart Procurement

27. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the type-45 destroyer programme is consistent with the smart procurement programme; and if he will make a statement. [152724]

Dr. Moonie: The type-45 programme is taking full advantage of the principles of the smart procurement initiative now termed smart acquisition. This is amply demonstrated by:

the partnering approach adopted with the Ministry of Defence and a prime contractor in an integrated project team. This is allowing time previously required for serial evaluation and re-evaluation of work to be removed from the programme and ensures continuous design and development, resulting in a faster completion of work;

a robust use of requirements management to ensure affordability with cost of ownership a major factor in equipment selection. The design and manufacture contract contains incentives to reduce costs and the construction method adopted will facilitate competition later in the programme. All these factors will result in cheaper procurement.

A deliberate choice was made to include significant growth margins in the design, as well as better accommodation for the crew. This means that the ship can be modified to meet emerging future requirements more readily and cheaply.

Warship Building

28. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on warship building in the UK. [152725]

Dr. Moonie: The strategic defence review announced the largest warship-building programme for many years amounting to over 30 major vessels. It remains Government policy that all warships for the Royal Navy will continue to be built in the UK. This commitment, together with the size of our forward programme, offers a platform for UK Industry to plan ahead and modernise. This in turn will allow them to improve their competitiveness for naval export orders, and in competing for the commercial opportunities that are essential if the existing capacity is to be maintained or enhanced.

In the last nine months, this Government have placed orders for two survey vessels with Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Ltd. and announced the company as the preferred bidder for the provision of three offshore patrol vessels; a prime contract for the design and build of the first three type-45 destroyers was placed with BAE Systems Electronics; and we have ordered the design and build of two alternative landing ships logistic from Swan Hunter (Tyneside) Ltd. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has also announced that, subject to satisfactory terms and conditions being negotiated, the BAE Systems Marine yard at Govan will receive an order for an additional two alternative landing ships logistic. These orders and announcements will create or secure several thousand jobs in UK shipyards and their ancillary industries throughout this country.

Over the next few years, orders will be placed for the follow-on batches of Astute class submarines and type-45 destroyers, and also for the detailed design and build of the future aircraft carriers. Our longer-term plans include the future surface combatant programme to replace the current type-22 and type-23 frigates and a variety of other vessels.

Iraq (Civilian Casualties)

29. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of civilian casualties in Iraq following NATO air strikes since 1 January. [152726]

Mr. Hoon: There have been no NATO strikes on Iraq. British and American aircraft enforce the Iraqi no-fly

zones under national auspices with the support of regional partners. The patrols are justified in international law as a legitimate response to prevent a grave humanitarian crisis.

If Saddam Hussein's air defence units attack our aircraft, coalition aircrew are authorised to respond in self-defence. They do so entirely in accordance with international law, attacking those Iraqi military facilities that pose an immediate and serious threat to their safety. All responses are proportionate to the threat. The risk of civilian casualties is always a major consideration during the very careful target selection process and only precision guided weapons are used where there is any risk of civilian casualties.

As the Ministry of Defence has no objective means of verifying Iraqi claims of civilian casualties I am not in a position to provide the information requested.

Saddam Hussein routinely claims that civilian casualties have been caused as a result of coalition activity over the no-fly zones. It is in his interests to do so and we have learned not to give too much credence to these allegations. We conduct careful battle damage assessment after every incident; this analysis demonstrates in the majority of cases that coalition weapons have hit their intended military target. The Iraqis regularly claim that there have been civilian casualties on days when the coalition has not even patrolled, let alone dropped any ordnance, and they routinely claim that civilians have been killed when the casualties were actually military personnel. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein has claimed the coalition was responsible for casualties that were in fact caused by Iraqi air defence weapons.

European Security and Defence Policy

31. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations he has received concerning the European security and defence policy. [152728]

Mr. Hoon: I have received a number of recent representations from hon. Members concerning the European security and defence policy. I have also received representations from members of the public.

Chinook Software

34. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what revisions have been made to Chinook MKII FADEC software since June 1994. [152731]

Mr. Spellar: As I explained in my letter of 21 August 1999 to the hon. Member, the only revisions to the Chinook FADEC software since 1994 were the nine software changes introduced as part of the block 1 upgrade later in that year. Two of these changes were potentially the most significant. The first of these was the introduction of a discrete memory to store the position of the engine condition lever (ECL) which was designed to prevent an engine shut down. The second was the fitting of a software filter to screen the speed values of the engine compressor and power turbines, which was designed to prevent an engine run-up.

However, we know that an engine shut down or run up was not a factor in the Mull of Kintyre accident. Examination of the wreckage showed that both engines were working normally right up until impact, and thus faulty FADEC could not have caused this accident. Indeed, the Air Accident Investigation Branch (AAIB) concluded that there was no evidence of any technical malfunction that could possibly have caused the crash.

Defence Medical Services

35. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the establishment is for consultants in general surgery, orthopaedic surgery, general medicine and anaesthetics in Defence Medical Services; and what percentage of these posts are filled. [152732]

Dr. Moonie: The number of consultants against the operational and retained task requirement and the percentage of posts filled as at 1 January 2001, is shown in the table.

Consultants	*Operational and retained task requirement*	*Current manning—Consultants including those command and staff posts*	*Percentage posts filled including consultants in command and staff appointments*
General Surgeons	44	20	45
Orthopaedic Surgeons	28	11	39
General Physicians	51	22	43
Anaesthetists	120	28	23

National Missile Defence

36. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other EU countries on the planned US National Missile Defence. [152733]

Mr. Hoon: I regularly discuss the subject with European counterparts.

Multinational Defence Co-operation

37. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in multinational defence co-operation. [152734]

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress with multinational defence co-operation. [152708]

Mr. Hoon: Multinational defence co-operation is any arrangement where two or more nations work together to enhance military capability. A Ministry of Defence policy paper on multinational defence co-operation was published on 21 February, outlining the very good progress we are making in this important area of defence business. This document is available in the Library of the House.

RAF Pilots

38. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects fast jet pilot numbers in the RAF to reach establishment. [152735]

Mr. Spellar: Based on current forecasts, it will take some years for pilot numbers in the RAF to be in balance with the requirement. A range of measures have been taken to achieve this but these will inevitably take time to have an effect.

European Rapid Reaction Force

39. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the command structure of the European rapid reaction force. [152736]

Mr. Hoon: There is no standing European rapid reaction force. There is no plan for the EU to have a permanent military command structure.

Community Involvement (Armed Forces)

40. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for increasing the Army's role in the community. [152737]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner), *Official Report*, columns 1–2.

Helicopter Squadrons

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future disposition of helicopter squadrons in UK bases. [152709]

Mr. Spellar: The only firm plan to change the location of helicopter squadrons in the UK is the relocation of some of the Royal Navy Sea King Anti-Submarine Warfare helicopters from Royal Naval Air Station Prestwick to Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose by April 2002.

Further changes may take place in the location of Joint Helicopter Command helicopter squadrons as a result of a strategic estate rationalisation study, which is due to report in autumn 2001. Until the study reports, it would be inappropriate for me to speculate on the outcome.

Ministerial Meetings (Turkey)

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent meetings he has had with his Turkish counterpart to discuss European security. [152718]

Mr. Hoon: I last had a meeting with my Turkish counterpart, Mr. Cakmakoğlu, at the NATO Informal Defence Ministers meeting in Birmingham in October last year, and our discussions included European security. Additionally, I expect to visit Turkey next week and to call on Mr. Cakmakoğlu to discuss a range of defence issues.

Meteor Missile Programme

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Meteor missile programme indicating how many missiles each meteor partner is committed to purchase; what estimate his Department has made of the development costs; and if the timetable and supply of test aircraft has been agreed by all the partner nations. [154163]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Subject to conclusion of a memorandum of understanding with our partner nations, and of satisfactory contractual terms and conditions with Matra BAe Dynamics (MBD) as prime contractor, we hope to be able to place a demonstration and manufacture contract for Meteor in the summer. The total cost of Meteor demonstration is estimated in the region of £600 million.

I am withholding information on missile numbers under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Missile numbers of our partner nations are also classified, and withheld under the same exemption.

Time scales of the Meteor trials programme and the provision of the test aircraft to support the programme are currently being negotiated with MBD. The final programme, once agreed with MBD, will be subject to approval by the partner nations.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about military aid to the civil community in respect of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [153994]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Management of the current outbreak of foot and mouth disease is a matter for the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I would therefore refer the hon. Gentleman to the statement made by my right hon. Friend in the House on 15 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 1199–1226.

Eurofighter

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the effect of a reduction of 40 planes in the German order of Eurofighter on *(a)* the unit cost and *(b)* the in-service date of the aircraft in the UK. [154165]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Germany has not announced any reduction in its commitment to Eurofighter. The memoranda of understanding that underpin the programme contain the principle that any costs resulting from a reduction in quantity by one of the nations shall be met by that nation. The aircraft to meet the in-service date are already in production.

HEALTH

Patient Representation

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library an organisation chart showing the lines of accountability, appointment, communication and authority between the NHS bodies overview and scrutiny committees, patient forums, PALS, independent local advisory forums and the Secretary of State, as set out in clauses 7 to 15 of the Health and Social Care Bill. [148533]

Mr. Denham: The final form of the new system of patient representation, empowerment and scrutiny will not be detailed until the Bill has completed its passage through both Houses.

MMR Vaccine

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department received the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation's review of the abstract presented to the American Association of Immunologists and Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology meeting in San Francisco in 1998 by Dr. V. K. Singh on autism and the MMR vaccine; and what the conclusions of this review were. [149343]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* The abstract by Dr. V. K. Singh entitled "Positive titers of measles and measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) antibody are related to myelin basic protein autoantibody in autism", which he had forwarded to the annual meeting of the American Association of Immunologists/Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology held in San Francisco on 22 April 1998, was considered by the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation (JCVI) at its meeting held in October 1998.

The JCVI concluded that the abstract did not provide any information to alter its views on the safety of MMR vaccine.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what seroconversion rates occur with MMR in relation to *(a)* measles, *(b)* mumps and *(c)* rubella after (i) the first (ii) the second dose. [153674]

Yvette Cooper: Taking seroconversion to mean the percentage of children with detectable antibodies against that infection shortly after vaccination, the usual proportion of individuals with detectable antibodies after the first dose of measles mumps rubella (MMR) vaccine is as follows:

Measles 95–99 per cent.

Mumps 90–95 per cent.

Rubella nearly 100 per cent.

However, the proportion of children with detectable antibodies against infection declines over time so that just before the age of school entry the proportions are lower. The proportion of children with detectable antibodies some years after MMR correlates much better with the actual efficacy of the vaccines (that is the ability to protect against the disease) and is as follows:

Measles around 90 per cent.

Mumps around 85 per cent.

Rubella around 99 per cent.

The second dose of MMR vaccine, given just before school entry, boosts the proportions of children with detectable antibody for each of the three diseases to around 99 per cent. for measles and mumps and virtually 100 per cent. for rubella. Although antibody levels do decline after the second dose of MMR vaccine, the vaccine's clinical efficacy against each of the diseases after the second dose is 99–100 per cent. This shows the importance of children receiving both doses of MMR vaccine.

Bed Numbers

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital beds in NHS hospitals there were in each year since 1979; and if he will make a statement. [151522]

Mr. Denham: *[holding answer 27 February 2001]:* The average daily number of available beds in wards open overnight (ie 24 hours) in National Health Service hospitals in England in each year since 1979 is given in the table.

Year	*Total Number of available beds*
1979	361,670
1980	355,978
1981	351,669
1982	348,104
1983	343,091
1984	334,513
1985	325,487
1986	315,715
1987–88	297,341
1988–89	282,895
1989–90	270,309
1990–91	255,479
1991–92	242,677
1992–93	232,201
1993–94	219,476
1994–95	211,812
1995–96	206,136
1996–97	198,848
1997–98	193,625
1998–99	190,006

Source:
SH3/KH03 Department of Health.

Information on the numbers of available beds in NHS hospitals is published annually in "Bed Availability and Occupancy—England", which is in the Library. The latest published figures are for the financial year 1999–2000.

The number of available beds in NHS hospitals has been declining for the past 40 years. However, a special bed census, set up to inform the winter planning process, counted the number of available general and acute and critical care beds on 1 December 1999 and 1 December 2000. A table showing the number of beds in these categories is available in the Library. These figures show an increase of 1,788 in the number of general and acute beds, in the year to December 2000, which indicates that the downward trend in bed numbers in these categories has started to be reversed. As a result of the NHS plan, there will be an extra 7,000 beds, including 2,100 general and acute beds and 5,000 intermediate care beds, by 2003–04.

Refugee Doctors

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made following the launch of initiatives designed to speed up the process through which refugee doctors find work in the UK. [151839]

Mr. Denham: We have already approved the use of funds available within HRD to support initial work on obtaining data on numbers, geographic distribution and training career history of refugee doctors and dentists in the UK.

The initiative has been extended to cover refugee nurses and other trained health professionals. A Department of Health Steering Group has been charged with managing, co-ordinating and promoting all aspects of the programme. Working with the many organisations in the field they will ensure that counselling, advice and training is made available to refugee health professionals wishing to use their skills within the National Health Service.

Dame Lesley Southgate, President of the Royal College of General Practitioners, has agreed to chair the implementation group; £0.5 million has been allocated to fund the programme.

As a first step in taking the initiative forward, we have commissioned the Refugee Council to set up a database on which details of medically and dentally qualified refugees can be collected.

We have provided funding to set up a training centre specifically for refugee doctors. This centre is run by a GP in north London who originally came here himself as a refugee from Afghanistan.

We are discussing with the Jewish Council for Racial Equality (JCORE) the possibility of hosting their Refugee Doctor's Guide on the Department of Health web-page.

The Steering Group will consider all other bids and initiatives as part of an overall strategy designed to ensure that the NHS benefits from the services of as many trained health professionals as possible.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the average length of time it takes refugee doctors to find work in the UK. [151840]

Mr. Denham: Information about refugee doctors is not collected centrally. We do not know, at the moment, how many refugee doctors are in the United Kingdom. As part of the refugee health professional initiative, we have commissioned a database to collect information. Funding of £10,000 has been provided to the voluntary sector for this work, and more is available for its extension to nurses and other trained health professionals.

Cataract Operations

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will publish the advice given to health authorities in respect of procedures to be followed for the compilation of waiting list figures for cataract operations. [151934]

(2) if, in the case of a second eye needing a cataract operation, the second eye is listed as a separate event in the compilation of waiting list figures. [151935]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Waiting list information for cataract operations is compiled in the same way as for other types of inpatient hospital treatment. Guidance on compiling waiting list and waiting time figures is contained in the national health service data manual and the NHS data dictionary which are distributed to all NHS trusts and health authorities.

Where a patient needs to have two separate but linked operations, for example to have cataracts removed from both eyes, they should be treated as a planned admission for the second procedure. Planned admissions are, and have always been, excluded from published waiting list statistics.

We are aware that some patients are waiting too long for cataract operations and we have made £30 million capital available over two years to tackle this. Hospitals receiving shares of this money will ensure that by 2003 patients will have to wait no longer than six months from referral to hospital to surgery.

Physical Activity

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if his Department will take the lead in developing a cross-departmental strategy to promote the health benefits of physical activity; [152525]

(2) if he will set joint targets with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for the promotion of physical activity; [152534]

(3) what plans he has to appoint a Joint Special Adviser between his Department and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport; [152524]

(4) what plans he has to *(a)* encourage physical activity in society and *(b)* tackle increasing levels of obesity among young people; [152530]

(5) what plans he has for greater co-operation between his Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on issues relating to *(a)* public health and *(b)* physical activity. [152523]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The NHS Plan emphasises that health is a key priority for Government. We are taking action to step up the cross-governmental focus on inequalities and public health. This includes close working between the Department and that of my right hon. Friend in areas such as physical activity and obesity. The importance of physical activity is emphasised in the national service framework for coronary heart disease which requires that by April 2001 all national health service bodies working closely with local authorities will have agreed and be contributing to the delivery of the local programme of effective policies on increasing physical activity.

The Department of Health and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport work closely together on the public health elements of the new opportunities fund's healthy living centre initiative. Last year the fund provided over £6 million to the Countryside Agency and the British Heart Foundation to run the "Walking, the Way to Health" initiative.

As part of our on-going collaboration, this Department and that of my right hon. Friend will consider the potential for developing joint targets and joint appointments. The inter-ministerial group to improve children's diet and activity, set up by the Minister for Public Health will also consider cross-departmental action to promote the health benefits of exercise, sport and other forms of physical activity and to tackle increasing levels of obesity. The group will assess what is already being done and discuss proposals for future joint working as set out in "A Sporting Future for All: the Government's Plan for Sport".

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in conjunction with the Department for Education and Employment, has developed a number of initiatives to improve opportunities for children to enjoy high quality physical education and sporting activity in schools and the community.

Children's Diet and Activity

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will *(a)* make a statement on the work of the inter-ministerial group to improve children's diet and activity and *(b)* list the initiatives it has undertaken; [152527]

(2) if he will list the members of the inter-ministerial group to improve children's diet and activity. [152526]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The inter-ministerial group to improve children's diet and activity was set up to:

examine the findings of the national diet and nutrition survey in the light of health implications

review current Government activity and policies which influence the diets and physical activity levels of children and young people

consider further opportunities for action to improve the diets and activity patterns of children and young people and improve their short and long-term health.

The group includes the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Employment, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Food Standards Agency and the Health Development Agency. Last year, the group discussed diet and nutrition and, in particular, the low levels of fruit and vegetable consumption among children. This led to the development of the national school fruit scheme whereby all 4 to 6-year-olds will receive a free piece of fruit every school day by 2004. The group has also influenced the development of the healthy schools programme and its increased emphasis on diet and nutrition.

The group will meet shortly to discuss physical activity and sport among children and young people. It will build on existing work on school sport, the national healthy school standard on physical activity and safe routes to school. It will address future opportunities for action in the light of the findings of the Comptroller and Auditor-General in his report "Tackling Obesity in England".

Substance Misuse

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce a national strategy for substance misuse in place of separate strategies for alcohol, drug and tobacco misuse. [152666]

Ms Stuart: Although there are some significant similarities between treatment and prevention strategies for alcohol, drugs and tobacco, there are also very significant differences in terms of the mortality and morbidity associated with each and their impact on society. We believe therefore that it is more effective to have separate strategies to tackle each under the umbrella of the Government's overarching goals of combating social exclusion, reducing health inequalities and tackling criminality.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost to the health services in Australasia of purchasing beta interferon. [152957]

Mr. Denham: The Department has made no such assessment.

Multiple Sclerosis Nurses

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the desirability and cost of making the provision of specialist multiple sclerosis nurses mandatory in all NHS trusts. [153383]

Mr. Denham: No assessment has been made centrally on the desirability and cost of making the provision of specialist multiple sclerosis nurses mandatory in national health service trusts. This is a local matter for NHS commissioners and providers to determine as part of the provision of neurological services.

Aricept/Exelon/Reminyl Prescriptions

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health authorities are prescribing *(a)* Aricept, *(b)* Exelon and *(c)* Reminyl to patients on the basis of need. [153140]

Mr. Denham: We have made no assessment of the prescribing of Aricept (donepezil), Exelon (rivastigmine) and Reminyl (galantamine).

In January this year, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence issued guidance to the National Health Service on the use of these medicines for the treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. Health authorities and NHS trusts will be monitored to ensure they are taking full and proper account of this NICE appraisal.

NHS Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he and his officials have made of the effect on *(a)* patient services, *(b)* procurement costs and *(c)* IT system suppliers of the time taken between submission of the first draft of full business cases for NHS hospital trust computer systems to NHS regional offices and approval of the final version of full business cases by the NHS executive. [153094]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* No assessment has been made of the effect of the time taken between submission of the first drafts of full business cases (FBCs) for National Health Service hospital trust computer systems to NHS executive regional offices and approval of the final versions of those FBCs by the NHS executive. FBCs are approved as quickly as is consistent with the need to ensure that the proposed investment is affordable and represents value for money to the taxpayer.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the average time taken between submission of the first draft of full business cases for NHS hospital trust computer systems to NHS regional offices and approval of the final version of full business cases by the NHS executive. [153093]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The Department has approved eight full business cases (FBC) for hospital computer systems where the first draft of the FBC was submitted to the regional offices of the national health service executive on or after December 1998. On average, each of these FBCs was approved four months after the submission of the first draft of the FBC to the regional office. Details of the schemes concerned are shown in the table.

The regional offices of the NHS executive have a dual role. They are responsible for helping NHS trusts to develop their business cases for investment in computer systems. They are also responsible for approving the business case, working jointly with NHS executive headquarters as necessary. Where several months elapse between submission of the first draft of the FBC and approval of the final version, much of this time is likely to be taken up by the development of the FBC rather than the formal process of approval.

NHS trust	*Type of investment*	*Date of submission of first draft of full business case to the regional office*	*Date of approval by regional office (and NHS Executive Headquarters where appropriate)*	*Time between submission of first draft of FBC and approval of final version*
Morecambe Bay Hospitals NHS Trust	Patient Administration System	December 1998/ January 1999	January 1999	1 month
Royal Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust	Integrated Patient Management System	December 1998/ January 1999	August 1999	8 months
Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Trust	Order Comms/Results Reporting and Departmental systems	January 1999	February 1999	1 month
Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust	Patient Administration System and some departmental systems	October 1999	December 1999	2 months
North Durham Health Care NHS Trust	Picture Archiving and Communication System	April 2000	August 2000	4 months
Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust	Patient Administration System	April 2000	September 2000	5 months
Calderdale Healthcare NHS Trust	Picture Archiving and Communication System	June 2000	November 2000	5 months
Luton and Dunstable Hospital NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	July 2000	December 2000	5 months

Abattoirs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to *(a)* small and *(b)* large abattoirs of inspection charges; and if he will make a statement on the levying of charges on (i) a per head basis and (ii) a per hour basis. [153268]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* We have accepted the recommendation of the Meat Inspection Charges Task Force (the "Maclean Group") that the current method of charging for meat inspections on an hourly basis should be changed and that all abattoirs and cutting plants should instead be charged the standard (headage/throughput) fees laid down in the European Union Charges Directive or their actual inspection costs where these are lower.

The Statutory Instrument (SI) giving effect (in England) to this recommendation—The Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) (Charges) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2001—was laid before Parliament on 9 March 2001 and, subject to parliamentary approval, will come into force on 2 April 2001. (Similar legislation is being made in Wales and Scotland).

The Regulatory Impact Assessment accompanying the SI gives examples of the impact of these changes on the level of meat inspection charges incurred by certain abattoirs. For example, a small plant (100 livestock units per annum) would see its annual inspection charges fall from £3,500 to £200. And a medium-sized plant (16,300 livestock units per annum) plant would see its annual charges fall from £107,200 to £49,200. A number of plants with very large annual throughputs will, however, continue to be charged their actual inspection costs (calculated on a per hour basis) since these will be lower than the charge calculated on a throughput basis.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many abattoirs there were in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the region in which the Lewes constituency is located in every year since 1979. [153266]

Ms Stuart: The table gives the number of licensed red meat and licensed poultry meat abattoirs from 1979 to 2000, where available, in the United Kingdom and the county of East Sussex, which includes the Lewes constituency.

	United Kingdom		*East Sussex*	
	Red meat	*Poultry meat*	*Red meat*	*Poultry meat*
1979	1,159	—	—	—
1980	1,123	—	—	—
1981	1,084	—	—	—
1982	1,005	—	—	—
1983	1,036	[1]115	—	—
1984	1,024	[1]112	—	—
1985	1,013	[1]112	—	—

	United Kingdom		East Sussex	
	Red meat	Poultry meat	Red meat	Poultry meat
1986	973	[1]106	—	—
1987	951	[1]108	—	—
1988	929	[1]108		
1989	825	[2]118	—	—
1990	783	[2]110	—	—
1991	726	119	—	—
1992	671	117	—	—
1993	542	120	2	0
1994	527	165	2	2
1995	500	180	2	3
1996	484	182	2	3
1997	472	171	1	3
1998	451	171	1	3
1999	432	157	1	2
2000	420	144	1	2

[1] England and Wales
[2] Great Britain

Parkinson's Disease

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received about including Parkinson's Disease on the list of conditions which have exemptions from prescription charges; and if he will make a statement. [153499]

Ms Stuart: Over the last 12 months we have received seven letters requesting that Parkinson's disease be included in the list of medical conditions conferring exemption from prescription charges. People suffering from Parkinson's disease are entitled to free prescriptions if they are aged 60 or over, or they (or their partner) are receiving Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or tax credits (with their maximum credit reduced by £70, £71 from 10 April, or less per week). They may also claim for help under the national health service low income scheme. We have no plans to change these arrangements.

Hepatitis A

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost of hepatitis A vaccine per dose is to *(a)* the NHS and *(b)* private sector providers. [153677]

Yvette Cooper: The average net ingredient cost (NIC) per prescription item for hepatitis A vaccines dispensed in the community in England in 1999 was £22.47. The NIC is the basic cost of a drug and does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.

Information is not collected centrally for hepatitis A vaceines dispensed in hospitals or provided by the private sector.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of hepatitis A contracted overseas were reported in each of the last three years in the UK. [153676]

Yvette Cooper: Reports of laboratory diagnoses of hepatitis A infection from 1998 to 2000 are given in the table. Only a small proportion of these reports included information about travel abroad.

Laboratory reports of hepatitis A infection in England and Wales 1998–2000

	Total reports (percentage)	Total reporting travel abroad (percentage)
1998	1,104 (100)	131 (12)
1999	1,391 (100)	96 (7)
2000[1]	1,020 (100)	79 (8)

[1] Provisional data
Source:
Public Health Laboratory Service

UK Transplant

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) from whom UK Transplant obtains it medical advice; [153477]

(2) what plans he has to appoint a medical director for UK Transplant. [153478]

Mr. Denham: Medical advice for UK Transplant is obtained from a number of sources. The authority has a number of long-established advisory groups (one for each organ type) which bring together leading clinicians in the field of transplantation from whom advice is sought as needed.

Additionally, UK Transplant is able to access medical advice from the Department. In the future, the medical director at UK Transplant will be the chief source of advice for the authority, in discussion with colleagues in transplant and related services.

The appointment of a medical director for UK Transplant is a matter for the special health authority. Mr. Chris Rudge has been appointed and will formally take up the post on 30 April 2001.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how he plans to organise his Department's transplant co-ordinator resource; and what role he plans for UK Transplant in this process. [153476]

Mr. Denham: Transplant co-ordinators are employed by individual national health service trusts, not by the Department. One of the key recommendations in the quinquennial review report of United Kingdom transplant support service authority (as it was) published in February 2000 was that the special health authority should be given responsibility, among other things, for co-ordination of transplant co-ordinator services on a national basis. UK Transplant has prepared a business case for taking action forward in this area. The business case is currently under consideration within the Department. In the interim, a transplant co-ordinators advisory group has been established by UK Transplant to begin to deliver the recommendations of the review.

National AIDS Strategy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent progress has been made on the National AIDS Strategy. [153483]

Yvette Cooper: The decision to incorporate the development work on an HIV strategy within a single sexual health and HIV strategy for England was

announced in May 2000. Work on the integrated strategy is well advanced, and should be completed over the next few months.

Health Policy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress has been made by his Department in monitoring the health impact of the health policies of other Government Departments; [153480]

(2) what progress has been made in including health audit statements in documents outlining Government policy. [153481]

Yvette Cooper: As stated in the NHS plan, improving health is a key priority for all Government Departments. Therefore, we are committed to promoting health impact assessment at national, regional and local levels to inform development of policy, strategy, programmes and projects. Methodologies and approaches are being developed, and there is work across Government in a number of areas to support this. A screening checklist has also been developed and has been piloted by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

An inter-departmental group is spearheading these activities, which include a number of specific impact assessments. We are examining ways to extend this type of work to cover other areas of Government policy.

Waiting Lists

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in introducing national guidance for local targets on maximum waiting times for conditions according to their seriousness. [153484]

Mr. Denham: When a patient is admitted for treatment it is a decision that must be made by their hospital consultant and must be based on the patient's clinical need and their priority on the waiting list. Under the NHS plan the maximum waiting time for all elective admissions to hospital will be reduced from 18 months today to six months, by the end of 2005. Under the NHS cancer plan, by the end of 2001 there will be a maximum one month wait from diagnosis to treatment for breast cancer. This will be extended to all cancers by the end of 2005.

Public Health Units

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in promoting co-operation between health and local authorities through public health units. [153482]

Yvette Cooper: The NHS plan gave a commitment to new single integrated public health groups across national health service regional offices and Government offices for the regions by 2002. There is also co-operation through the work of regional public health observatories. The Department is currently considering future roles and structures within the health system in the light of the progressive introduction of primary care trusts. This work is being taken forward in the context of developing relationships between health and local authority partners.

Statutory duties of partnership between health bodies and the promotion of health and wellbeing for local populations have been introduced. In the meantime the promotion of co-operation between health and local authority partners has been underpinned by the work of the health improvement programmes development group. The group has been working to develop and re-position health improvement programmes to ensure they are strategic, best placed to implement the NHS plan, aligned to community strategies and supportive of local strategic partnerships.

Neurological Staff

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received about current numbers of neurological staff; and if he will make a statement; [153570]

(2) what plans he has to increase the number of medical training places for neurologists; and if he will make a statement. [153569]

Mr. Denham: Information and evidence about future demand for consultants in neurology has been gathered annually by the speciality workforce advisory group (SWAG) from the medical profession and national health service management. We will shortly announce our response to SWAG's recommendations for 2001–02.

Nurses

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had recently with representatives of higher education over *(a)* the impact of and *(b)* future implications to Project 2000 for nurse recruitment. [153794]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Project 2000 nurse education and training is currently being phased out and replaced by a new model of nurse education—as outlined in the Government's "Making a Difference" strategy and United Kingdom Central Council Education Commission report, "Fitness for Practice" in 1999. The Department is working with all key stakeholders—and especially higher education, with which it has a long established partnership—to ensure the effective roll-out of the new model of nurse education to support nurse recruitment.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the role of nurse consultants with regard to their preceptor responsibility for newly qualified D grade nurses. [153795]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Guidance issued to the national health service (in Health Service Circular 1999/217) makes it clear that nurse consultants have an important education, training and development role but that this is best targeted to support colleagues who need to develop advanced knowledge and skills. A period of preceptorship for newly qualified D grade nurses is good practice in the NHS and best provided by a more experienced nurse in the same team who has been trained for the role.

Donepezil

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much public money has been spent on the AD2000 study of the effectiveness of donepezil in each of the years

(a) 1998, *(b)* 1999, *(c)* 2000 and *(d)* 2001, broken down by (i) the amount spent by individual health authorities on the trial, (ii) the amount allocated to the trial from regional research and development budgets, (iii) the amount allocated from the national research and development extra treatment costs fund and (iv) other NHS costs incurred as a result of the trial. [154072]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The information is not available in the format requested.

The Department has been sponsoring a trial on the long-term effectiveness of donepezil (ARICEPT). The table shows expenditure from the west midlands regional office of the national health service executive and the excess treatment costs budget for this trial.

£

	West midlands regional office	*Excess treatment costs*
1997–98	5,000	—
1998–99	122,412	—
1999–2000	245,870	—
2000–01	225,723	145,000
2001–02	224,973	'200,000

'Estimate

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what process will be used to appoint non-executive directors to the boards of the new primary care trusts; and if he will make a statement. [153941]

Ms Stuart: Non-officer members of primary care trust boards are currently appointed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Candidates are identified through local recruitment exercises, and from those already serving on other national health service boards. The criteria applied when assessing candidates are listed in the Department of Health Public Appointments Annual Report, a copy of which is in the Library.

Regulations for the NHS Appointments Commission have been laid before Parliament and will come into force on 1 April 2001. The commission will be operational from that date and will be responsible for all chair and non-executive appointments to NHS trusts, health authorities and primary care trusts. The criteria for appointment will still be determined by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the commission will be required to report annually on its performance and progress.

Overseas Recruitment

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* nurses and *(b)* doctors were recruited from overseas to work in the NHS during the last 12 months. [153759]

Mr. Denham: The figures requested are not collected centrally but may be held by individual national health service employers. The United Kingdom Central Council and the General Medical Council (GMC) do, however, collect figures on the number of international nurses and doctors registered in this country.

Between April 1999 and March 2000, 7,383 nurses, midwives and health visitors were admitted to the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting register from abroad, of whom 5,967 were from outside the European Economic Area (EEA).

In 2000, the GMC issued full registration to 1,185 doctors from within the EEA. Full registration was issued to 1,896 doctors from outside the EEA and 1,967 doctors from outside the EEA were issued limited registration. The GMC report that on average, 5,700 doctors who qualified abroad, are undertaking postgraduate training under limited registration.

Ski-related Accidents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many ski-related accidents have been recorded for the last year for which figures are available; and of those how many relate to accidents which occurred outside the UK. [154331]

Yvette Cooper: Figures published by the Department of Trade and Industry show that the number of reported ski-related injuries were 15,413 in 1997, 15,214 in 1998, and 8,249 in 1999. It is not known how many of these injuries were sustained outside the United Kingdom.

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to grant special payments to haemophilia sufferers who have contracted the hepatitis C infection as a result of treatment with the human derived blood product factor 8. [154221]

Mr. Denham: We have reviewed the previous Government's decision not to offer financial assistance to haemophilia patients infected with hepatitis C through blood products. We concluded that an exception could not be made to the general rule that compensation or financial help is only given when the national health service, or individuals working in it, have been at fault.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend the provision of recombinant factor 8 to treat haemophilia patients of all ages. [154220]

Mr. Denham: We are continuing to give careful consideration to this issue and will make an announcement in due course.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the capital projects and their value at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital which have been authorised since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [154487]

Yvette Cooper: Information on all locally managed capital projects is not collected centrally. The trust receives an annual block capital allocation for this purpose. Major capital projects are approved by the

Department through the regional capital programme. Since 1997, the following capital projects for the Royal Shrewsbury hospital have been approved:

	£
Linear Accelerator (2001–02)[1]	1,576,000
Medical Assessment Unit (1999–2000)[2]	1,1000,000

[1] Funded by the new opportunities funding initiative, regional office capital programme, Lingen Davies Cancer Relief and the Royal Shrewsbury trusts.

[2] Funded by the national accident and emergency modernisation initiative. This will enable the establishment of a medical assessment unit at both the Royal Shrewsbury hospital and the Princess Royal hospital, Telford.

Additionally, a strategic outline case to vacate the Copthorne South site at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital was approved by the west midlands regional office of the national health service executive in December 2000. The regional office has allocated £8 million of capital moneys in recognition of the priority to fund the reprovision of the ward accommodation on Copthorne South and for the development of education facilities. This now sets the framework for the health economy to develop detailed plans as part of the outline business case requirements.

MRSA Infections

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the rates of MRSA infection are at *(a)* St. Peter's hospital, Chertsey and *(b)* Ashford (Middlesex) hospital; [153754]

(2) if he will list the hospitals in England that carried out major clean orthopaedic operations, indicating *(a)* the number of such operations carried out, *(b)* the number of those treated who contracted MRSA infection while in hospital, *(c)* the percentage rate of infection and *(d)* the year to which the statistics relate-ranking the hospitals in descending order of infection rate for the last year for which statistics are available for each hospital; [153950]

(3) what were the rates of MRSA infection for major clean orthopaedic operations at *(a)* St. Peter's Hospital, Chertsey and *(b)* Ashford (Middlesex) hospital in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [153949]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* At present the data requested are not available centrally. From April 2001 all acute trusts will be required to collate data on methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus blood stream infections and the information will be published from April 2002. Work is under way to develop a national surveillance system for surgical site infections focusing initially on orthopaedic surgery.

Aggregate data on numbers of incidents of MRSA voluntarily submitted by trusts for specialist microbiological tests and data for the last year are given in the table. These data are routinely available on a regional basis only. Data on *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteraemias (blood infections) showing the proportion resistant to methicillin in England and Wales are published quarterly by the Public Health Laboratory Service in the Communicable Disease Report, copies of which are available in the Library.

Incidents of MRSA—2000

	Number
Eastern	60
London	170
Northern and Yorkshire	70
North West	90
South East	100
South West	10
Trent	30
West Midlands	50
Wales	40
Total	620

Notes:

1. An incident is three or more patients infected or colonised by the same strain of MRSA in the same month from the same hospital.
2. Because of the criteria for reporting incidents to the PHSL these figures cannot be used as a reliable estimate of the total number of cases of MRSA.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 20 March 2001

DEFENCE

Type 45 Destroyer

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the price of the DFM contract for the first three type 45 destroyers awarded to BAE Systems assumes *(a)* the involvement of BAE Systems Marine and Vosper Thornycroft in developing a single design definition for the type 45 destroyer and *(b)* that the first and third ships will be assembled by BAE Systems Marine and the second ship by Vosper Thornycroft; [153706]

(2) if it is his policy that a single design definition for the type 45 destroyer should be developed involving BAE Systems Marine and Vosper Thornycroft and that the first and third ships will be assembled by BAE Systems Marine and the second ship by Vosper Thornycroft; [153705]

(3) if the DFM contract for the first three type 45 destroyers awarded to BAE Systems *(a)* requires BAE Systems to develop a single design definition for the type 45 destroyer involving BAE Systems Marine and Vosper Thornycroft and *(b)* requires the first and third ships to be built by BAE Systems Marine and the second by Vosper Thornycroft. [153707]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 99W. I can confirm that the type 45 DFM contract assumes, and is priced on the basis of, the procurement strategy for this Programme announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 11 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 701–02. Under this, the first ship would be assembled by BAE Systems Marine with a substantial contribution by Vosper Thornycroft (VT), the second by VT and the third by BAE Systems.

Armed Forces (Sierra Leone)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the components are of the welfare package for forces serving in Sierra Leone. [154581]

Mr. Hoon: The components of the Operational Welfare Package (OWP) for Op Silkman are as follows:

Leave

(a) Additional Carry Over of Leave. The right to carry forward annual privilege leave entitlements in excess of the existing 14 days maximum—subject to the proviso that the exigencies of the service may make it impractical for this leave to be taken—is granted for those on tours in excess of six months.

(b) Post Operational Tour Leave (POTL). POTL, which is granted in accordance with single service guidelines.

Family travel concessions

Welfare concessions for families' travel, as follows:

(a) Service Personnel Stationed in the UK. Dependants of married service personnel stationed in the UK but serving in theatre for four months or more are entitled to two extra UK leave warrants, to enable families to visit their next of kin, or parents, children at boarding school or close relatives.

(b) Personnel Stationed Overseas (in north west Europe).

(i) Four-month tours. Dependants of married accompanied personnel who serve in theatre for four months or more are entitled to one return journey at public expense to an address in UK for the purpose of visiting NOK or close relatives.

(ii) Six-month tours. Dependants of married accompanied personnel who are serving in theatre for six months or more are entitled to two return journeys at public expense to an address in the UK for the purposes of visiting NOK or close relatives.

(c) Transfer of entitlement. Any or all of these warrants may be transferred to up to two close relatives for reverse travel from the UK.

Rest and Recuperation (R&R)

Personnel in theatre for more than four months are granted one period of R&R. A second period of R&R is authorised for personnel who have an expectation of serving between seven to 10 months inclusive and a third period for those with an expectation of serving more than 11 months.

Welfare telephones

Twenty minutes of publicly funded telephone calls per week, using welfare telephone facilities provided by Project Welcome.

Forces free aerogrammes (blueys)/concessionary parcel rates

Free "blueys" (aerogrammes) and concessionary parcel rates, authorised in both directions.

Electronic bluey

Free access to an "e-bluey" system.

E-mail/internet

Free access to e-mail and internet facilities.

News media

Forces deployed receive free newspapers and access to BFBS TV and radio facilities.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* e-mail terminals, *(b)* telephones and *(c)* mail drops per week are available for Her Majesty's forces serving in Sierra Leone. [154580]

Mr. Spellar: The Operational Welfare Package (OWP) for Op Silkman includes internet access, telephones and mail drops. The numbers are as follows:

(a) There are currently four e-mail terminals, with a further eight on order. Access to e-mails and the internet is free.

(b) There are 12 welfare telephones provided under Project Welcome. Service personnel are allowed 20 minutes of publicly funded telephone calls per week.

(c) There is one resupply flight a week that brings in and takes out mail. Free 'blueys' (aerogrammes) and concessionary parcel rates are authorised in both directions.

Nuclear Submarines

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 509W, on nuclear submarines, where his Department plans to situate the land storage facility for redundant nuclear submarines. [154494]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 14 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 601–02W, to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed).

Correspondence

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence further to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 536W, on depleted uranium *(a)* when he expects to send his letter and *(b)* what are the reasons for the delay. [152820]

Mr. Spellar: I have replied today to my hon. Friend. The delay in replying was caused by the need to obtain information from sources outside the Ministry of Defence.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will give a substantive reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire on behalf of his constituent Mr. Coakes, following preliminary responses on 22 November 2000 and 6 January 2001. [154724]

Mr. Hoon: In my letters, I explained that research into the issues raised was continuing. This has involved research into records dating back 10 years and contacting key personnel in the unit to which Mr. Coakes was attached. Our inquiries are now complete and I hope to write to the right hon. Member within the next week.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* civil servants and *(b)* other personnel from his Department have attended sessions of the Saville inquiry. [154050]

Mr. Spellar: Sessions of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry have been attended variously by nine Ministry of Defence officials and one Army officer.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many persons, from which divisions and with which specialisms comprise the Bloody Sunday Inquiry Unit in his Department; [154051]

(2) what the composition is of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry Unit in terms of *(a)* perceived community origin and *(b)* gender. [154052]

Mr. Spellar: The Bloody Sunday Inquiry Unit is an integral part of the Ministry of Defence and comprises five officials who are dedicated full-time to supporting the work of the Inquiry. They are all administrators; currently three are men and two are women; none of them come from Northern Ireland.

Service Pensions

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review the pension provision for officers who were in service before their 21st birthdays but whose service before those dates is not counted for service pension purposes. [154295]

Mr. Spellar: The recently published Ministry of Defence Consultation Document on a new Armed Forces Pension Scheme includes the proposal that pension benefits should begin to accrue from the date of entry to the armed forces for both officers and other ranks. This compares with the current scheme under which benefits accrue from age 21 for officers and age 18 for other ranks. In line with usual practice in public sector pension schemes, these changes would not be retrospective.

MOD Police

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what statutory powers he appoints members of the MOD Police Committee. [154579]

Mr. Spellar: Members of the Ministry of Defence Police Committee are appointed in accordance with the provisions of section 1(5) of the Ministry of Defence Police Act 1987.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Meetings

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, how many meetings of the Church Commissioners there were in 2000; and what the attendance record was of each commissioner. [153768]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners' Board of Governors, of which all but six of the 33 Commissioners are members, met five times in 2000. The Annual General Meeting of the Church Commissioners was also held. Average attendance at Board meetings was 70 per cent.

The Church Commissioners' six committees, whose members include Commissioners and others, met throughout the year to transact the business for which they have separate responsibility. Attendance was broadly in the region of 65 per cent. to 80 per cent.

The committees' membership and remit are detailed in the Church Commissioners' annual report and accounts, of which my hon. Friend will have received a copy. It is not the Commissioners' practice to publicise the attendance details of individual members.

WALES

Corus

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent consultations he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on assistance to Corus workers. [154085]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly discuss a wide range of issues with the First Secretary, including the assistance available to help those facing job losses in Corus.

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153410]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* My Department has run no television, newspaper, radio advertising or any other kind of promotional campaign since its creation in July 1999. It has no agencies or departmental public bodies within its responsibilities. Its predecessor Department, the Welsh Office, spent

£1,795,000 in 1996–97, £2,661,000 in 1997–98, and £2,685,000 in 1998–99 on a variety of advertising campaigns and projects.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Rapid Reaction Force

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his Danish counterpart on the exercise of Denmark's automatic opt-out in relation to the EU Rapid Reaction Force under the terms of the Edinburgh agreement. [153502]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the European Security and Defence Policy and Denmark's opt-out when he met his Danish counterpart in London on 17 January 2001.

Treaty of Nice

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers signed the provisional Treaty of Nice on 26 February; and what press statements were released in connection with this event. [153501]

Mr. Vaz: The Treaty of Nice was signed on 26 February by the Foreign Ministers of all 15 member states of the European Union. This event was highlighted in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) daily bulletin of 23 February, available on the website at www.fco.gov.uk. An FCO press release was sent to various national newspapers, and the FCO published a pamphlet setting out the main features of the Nice Treaty.

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to publish the text of the Treaty of Nice as signed on 26 February. [154929]

Mr. Vaz: A Command Paper containing the Treaty of Nice as signed on 26 February was published today as Cm 5090. Copies are available from the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

For the first time in generations, there is a real prospect of uniting Europe. The Treaty of Nice brings this goal closer by reforming the EU's institutions to enable them to operate effectively after the accession of up to 12 new member states.

The Treaty increases the relative weight of Britain's vote in the Council of Ministers and raises the threshold for a qualified majority. The democratic legitimacy of decisions taken by qualified majority voting is assured by the addition of a population threshold, which means that the three largest member states (including the UK) can still block decisions together. In addition a qualified majority must have the support of at least the majority of member states.

The Treaty delivers a reformed Commission, with one Commissioner per member state from 2005 up to a maximum of 27. It proposes more qualified majority voting where this is in Britain's interests, and preserves the veto in areas where the Government said we would.

It allows groups of member states to move ahead faster in some areas where it is clear that not all are ready to, provided that this co-operation meets the conditions we secured to protect the Single Market, prevent discrimination in trade between member states, ensure compatibility with existing agreements, and guarantee that co-operation is open to all.

A Declaration to the Treaty looks forward to a wide public debate about the future of the European Union. A further Intergovernmental Conference will be held in 2004 to make changes arising from this debate. Public consultation was launched on 7 March.

In making the institutional changes necessary for the accession of new member states, the Nice Treaty opens the way for enlargement of the EU. This has been the goal of successive Governments for the sake of the peace, stability, and prosperity of Europe.

The Nice Treaty cannot enter into force until all member states have ratified it in accordance with their national procedures. The Government intend to introduce legislation to enable the UK to ratify the Nice Treaty as soon as it is practically possible.

Shageldy Atakov

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what further representations he will make to the Government of Turkmenistan on behalf of Shageldy Atakov. [153724]

Mr. Vaz: On 23 February the British Government, with EU Partners and the US issued a demarche to the Turkmen Foreign Minister regarding the detention of Shageldy Atakov and called for his release on humanitarian grounds. The Foreign Minister took note, and undertook to pursue the issue. We still await a formal response but will continue to remind the Turkmen authorities of our concern.

Balkans

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the progress made in implementing the Dayton Peace Accords. [154018]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 397W. I also refer him to the letter I sent him on 16 March.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the granting of financial aid to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia conditional upon its Government co-operating with The Hague concerning the tribunal case against Slobodan Milosevic. [154055]

Mr. Vaz: No conditionality relating to the International Criminal Tribunal on the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was attached to the 200 million euro package of humanitarian and emergency assistance to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) agreed by the EU in October 2000, nor to UK bilateral assistance programmes over the winter (amounting to over £13 million).

Future assistance to the FRY will need to take full account where appropriate of the FRY's progress towards political and economic reform and its legal obligation to co-operate with the ICTY.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's position is on the future status of Montenegro. [154019]

Mr. Vaz: The UK and the EU would prefer to see a renegotiation of the relationship between Montenegro and Serbia take place within the framework of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The EU set out this preference in the Conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 22 January. Decisions on status will need to be taken in an open, democratic and consensual manner, taking full account of the need to preserve the internal stability of the FRY and the regional stability of south eastern Europe.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is on the future status of Vojvodina. [154013]

Mr. Vaz: Vojvodina is a province of the Republic of Serbia. We support the efforts of the democratically-elected authorities in Novi Sad and Belgrade to reach political agreement on a redefinition of the autonomous powers of Vojvodina within that framework.

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in southern Serbia and Macedonia. [154930]

Mr. Vaz: The Yugoslav Army (VJ) and ethnic Albanian extremist groups in southern Serbia agreed a ceasefire brokered by NATO on 12 March. The agreement provides for the unconditional cessation of all military activities and use of force by either side. The Commander of KFOR (COMKFOR) retains his authority over the 5 km ground safety zone on the Kosovo/Serbia boundary. On Macedonia the situation remains tense. KFOR is providing support to the Macedonian authorities.

UN Commission on Human Rights

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Minister will attend the UN Commission on human rights in Geneva this month; and for how long. [154014]

Mr. Battle: I will visit Geneva on 20–22 March, and deliver the UK national statement to the plenary session of the Commission on Human Rights on 22 March.

During my stay, I will also meet the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (Mrs. Mary Robinson), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Mr. Rudd Lubbers), the Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (Dr. Peter Piot), and the Director-Generals of the International Labour Organisation (Mr. Juan Somavia), the UN Office at Geneva (Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky), the International Organisation of Migration (Mr. Brunson McKinley) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (Mr. Paul Grossrieder).

Minister for Europe

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the additional responsibilities that have been allocated to the Minister for Europe since 1 May 1997, indicating the dates of, and the reasons for, the changes. [154053]

Mr. Robin Cook: The allocation of responsibilities between Ministers at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is a matter for my discretion.

On 7 May 1997, the Minister for Europe, then my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), was allocated responsibility for Europe, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

On 28 July 1998, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin) was appointed Minister for Europe. The portfolio was not amended.

On 29 July 1999, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) was appointed Minister for Europe. He was allocated responsibility for Europe, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, the Balkans and Defence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) was appointed Minister for Europe on 12 October 1999. He was allocated responsibility for Europe, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, Defence and Entry Clearance.

Gibraltar

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions the enfranchisement of citizens of Gibraltar for European parliamentary elections has been raised at meetings of the European Council in the last two years; and if he will make a statement. [153996]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The enfranchisement of Gibraltar for European parliamentary elections has never been raised at European Council. However it has been raised at General Affairs Council and remains on the agenda of the relevant Council working group.

HMG unequivocally accepts the obligation, arising out of the Matthews judgment, to secure the European parliamentary franchise for Gibraltar. We are carefully considering all possible options for achieving this objective before the 2004 European parliamentary elections.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Spain on the enfranchisement of citizens of Gibraltar for European parliamentary elections. [153995]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Foreign Secretary last raised the issue of the enfranchisement of Gibraltar for European parliamentary elections with the Spanish Foreign Minister, Sr. Pique, in London on 24 January.

Police Service (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what communications he has received from the Holy See concerning discussions with Catholic bishops in Northern Ireland on the future of the Police Service in Northern Ireland. [154076]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have had discussions with the Catholic Bishops about policing arrangements in Northern Ireland and believe that this is consistent with the Good Friday agreement, which calls for new arrangements to be

"unambiguously accepted and actively supported by the whole community".

The Government have, however, received no communication from the Holy See concerning these discussions.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Barriers

13. **Sandra Gidley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on safety standards for road barriers. [152920]

Mr. Prescott: Safety barriers on roads are designed to contain and then deflect along the line of the barrier a typical car colliding with it at a shallow angle. The safety barrier at Great Heck was 42.7 metres long. The minimum standard required is 30 metres at full height. Pending the report of the police into the tragic accident at Great Heck near Selby on 28 February, I have asked the Highways Agency to review the standards for safety barriers.

Cycle Lanes (London)

14. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage the creation of bicycle lanes in central London. [152921]

Mr. Hill: This is now a matter for the Mayor of London and the relevant local highway authorities. My Department allocates an annual transport grant to the Greater London Authority to help maintain and improve transport in London. Over the next three financial years, this grant will amount to some £3.2 billion.

Road Safety

15. **Mr. Andy King:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on road safety. [152922]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Government launched their new road safety strategy for Great Britain, "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone", in March 2000. This included targets to reduce overall deaths and serious injuries by 40 per cent. and to reduce child deaths and serious injuries by 50 per cent. by 2010, compared with the average for 1994 to 1998, together with details of many policies and initiatives that will help to achieve them.

33. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make further funds available to enable the provision of additional traffic calming road safety schemes. [152941]

Mr. Hill: We have made £8.4 billion available for local transport improvements over the next five years with £2.8 billion available for small-scale measures. In 2001–02 the total allocation, from which spending on traffic calming could be made, is £559 million. It is for individual authorities to decide expenditure on traffic calming schemes. I see no reason at present to provide additional funds.

Local Government Finance

16. **Mr. Darvill:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make a statement about his proposals on the reform of local government finance. [152923]

Ms Armstrong: A White Paper setting out our decisions on the way forward will be published later this year.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he will take to reform the local government grant system to reflect the importance of the services provided by local authorities. [153849]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Ensuring the availability of high quality services is a primary objective for local authorities depends in part on the resources each authority receives through the grant system.

Last September's local government finance Green Paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for local authorities fairer. A White Paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward.

Local Transport Plans

17. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on local transport plans. [152924]

Mr. Hill: Authorities submitted their first full Local Transport Plans last July. In December we announced an £8.4 billion package for local transport improvements over the next five years to help deliver what local people want. Authorities will be submitting their first annual progress reports later this year and we shall be closely monitoring the delivery of schemes on the ground.

Shipping Industry

18. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government support for the UK's shipping industry. [152925]

Mr. Hill: We have a tonnage tax option for shipping companies, and a capital allowances measure for those not in tonnage tax.

The Government support seafarer training.

We also pay crew relief cost grant. And seafarers spending more than half the year abroad pay no income tax. We have removed excess regulation.

Neighbourhood Wardens

19. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the introduction of neighbourhood wardens. [152926]

30. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the neighbourhood wardens programme. [152938]

Ms Armstrong: DETR and the Home Office have jointly allocated £18.5 million until 2003–04 towards the Neighbourhood Warden programme. 86 Neighbourhood Warden schemes are receiving funding across England and Wales. Neighbourhood Wardens have a number of different roles depending on local need. Their overall purpose is to tackle anti-social behaviour, racial harassment, litter and graffiti. They will help to reduce crime and the fear of crime and will contribute to environmental and quality of life improvements.

Civil Aviation (Wales)

20. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the future of civil aviation in Wales. [152927]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The study of regional airports and air services in Wales announced in the 1998 Transport White Paper was completed last year. Its findings are currently being reviewed as part of a UK wide Regional Co-ordination Study. This will provide a basis for a series of Regional Air Services Consultation Documents to be published later on this year. One of these documents will cover Wales and will provide a framework for discussion of the future of civil aviation within Wales. Responses will be considered alongside those on "The Future of Aviation" national document, on which we are currently consulting, providing a key input to the Air Transport White Paper.

Transport (Disabled Access)

21. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on measures to improve access for disabled people to transport services. [152928]

Mr. Hill: We have made significant progress over recent years towards a transport system that is accessible to all our citizens, including those who are disabled.

Accessibility regulations for new trains, and more recently, for new buses and coaches used on local and scheduled services have been introduced under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which set technical standards for accessibility, including wheelchair access. Similar regulations for taxis will follow.

Access to public transport infrastructure is also being addressed under Part III of the DDA.

In addition, the 10 Year Transport Plan, published last summer, introduced a new commitment to ensuring that access for disabled people is a condition of all new public investment in transport.

Taken together such initiatives will ensure that in future disabled people, including those who use wheelchairs, have the same opportunities for mobility as everyone else.

Municipal Parks

22. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to provide assistance to improve local municipal parks. [152929]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Since 1997–98, Government grant to local government has gone up by 13.6 per cent. in real terms. Local authority spending on the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services Block which covers spending on parks, will increase each year by an average 1.8 per cent. in real terms up to 2003–04. We are also encouraging more effective use of resources and promoting better practice, by developing more specific Best Value performance indicators and a new Beacon Council theme for 'Improving Urban Green Spaces'

Last November, we published our Urban White Paper—"Our towns and cities: the future", which sets out our comprehensive proposals for improving urban parks, play areas and green spaces. In January we set up the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce, which has begun its work to drive forward the implementation of our commitments. We will set up a Working Group of the Taskforce to examine resource issues and how to make best use of the funding streams that are available.

Council Tax

23. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the operation of the council tax system. [152930]

Ms Armstrong: An assessment of the council tax system was included in our Green Paper on modernising local government finance which we published in September 2000. We have recently published a summary of responses to the Green Paper on the DETR website and will announce our policy intentions for the local government finance system, including council tax, in a White Paper later this year.

24. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in how many local authorities are over 50 per cent. of homes in band A for council tax. [152931]

Ms Beverley Hughes: According to the Valuation List for each local authority on 16 October 2000, 57 billing authorities have over 50 per cent. of their homes in council tax band A.

Asylum Seekers (Housing)

25. **Mr. Lilley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in projecting housing needs, what assumption he has made of the number of asylum seekers who will remain in the UK in each year up to 2016. [152932]

Mr. Raynsford: Household projections, and population projections on which they are based, are one piece of the evidence used to assess housing requirements. In forming projections of population growth the Government Actuary's Department includes projections of asylum seekers allowed to remain per annum based on information from the Home Office.

The UK national 1996-based population projections included a long-term assumption of 5,000 asylum seekers allowed to remain per annum. Figures for England are not available. The latest 1996-based household projections for England were based on these population projections.

More recent information from the Home Office has enabled the Government Actuary's Department to incorporate a higher long-term projection of 20,000 asylum seekers allowed to remain per annum in the latest 1998-based population projections for the UK.

London Underground

27. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will announce the initiation of the public-private partnership for the London underground within two months. [152934]

37. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress made towards a public-private partnership for the London underground. [152946]

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to conclude the public-private partnership arrangements for the London underground. [152933]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced last month that he had agreed to work together with the Commissioner of Transport for London, Bob Kiley, and with London Underground, on developing mutually acceptable modifications to the public-private partnership. Mr. Kiley has said in discussions with the Government that he seeks the unified management control of key Underground operations, mainly through keeping the maintenance of track and signalling within London Underground. The 55-point plan that he is now discussing with us provides for that control within the overall structure of the PPP.

There are inevitably some technical issues still to be worked out but I believe that there is now a real basis for an agreement to allow the PPP competitions to proceed to a satisfactory conclusion. Discussions are being taken forward as quickly as possible so that we can get on with the PPP competitions and the massive investment which the Underground so urgently needs.

Landfill Tax

28. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received about the introduction of the landfill tax. [152936]

Mr. Meacher: The tax was introduced in 1996. Since then we have had comments on the level and coverage of the tax from various individuals and bodies.

Planning

29. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the requirement for impartiality laid on his Department for considering planning applications which have been called in by his Department. [152937]

Mr. Raynsford: General guidance is given to all Ministers in the "Ministerial Code—A Code of Conduct on Procedures for Ministers". The activities of officials in handling planning casework and providing advice to Ministers are governed by the "Civil Service Code" and the "Staff Handbook". There is also specific "Guidance on Propriety Issues in the Handling of Planning Casework in DETR". A copy of the "Guidance" may be found on the Department's website. The guidance which applies to Ministers also applies to Parliamentary Private Secretaries in DETR.

The "Guidance" includes the advice that any Planning Minister should

> "act, and be seen to act, fairly and evenhandedly, by bringing an unbiased, properly directed and independent mind to his consideration of the matter."

The advice in the "Guidance" also applies, where relevant, to officials concerned with planning decisions.

The principles enshrined in the "Guidance" also apply to other decisions of a quasi-judicial nature taken by DETR Ministers.

Waste Incinerators

31. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the number of incinerators which convert waste into energy which are to be built over the next 10 years. [152939]

Mr. Meacher: The Government set out their aims and objectives for sustainable waste management in "Waste Strategy 2000", published in May 2000.

The choice of waste facilities is a matter for local councils to take, in consultation with their local communities. The Government have no plan for any particular number of incinerators, but recognise that the recovery of energy from waste may have a role to play, alongside recycling and composting, in an integrated waste management plan.

BCC Pipeworks, Clay Cross

32. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will re-assess the needs of the North-East Derbyshire district council following the closure of the BCC pipeworks at Clay Cross. [152940]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We continue to work with North-East Derbyshire district council, and other local partners in the BCC Response Group, to assess how best to meet the needs of those affected by the closure and its wider economic impact.

Railtrack

34. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received on the subject of bringing Railtrack back into *(a)* full public ownership and *(b)* part-public ownership; and if he will make a statement. [152943]

Mr. Hill: I have received representations on both issues. The Government have no plans to implement options which entail reorganisation, upheaval and loss of

management focus; and which would divert resources away from the investment programme envisaged in our Ten Year Plan for Transport.

Regional Funding (South-West)

35. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much Government funding has been given to the *(a)* south-west regional development agency and *(b)* Government office of the south-west in the 2000–01 financial year. [152944]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The south-west RDA out-turn allocation for 2000–01 is £81.3 million. The Agency expects to generate income of £20.3 million during 2000–01, leaving net Government funding of £61.0 million. Running costs stand at £8.6 million.

Government office for the south west has funded a wide range of programmes in the 2000–01 year with a total value of £446.8 million. The running cost allocation to Government Office for the south west in 2000–01 totalled £8,721,830.

Mobile Phone Masts

36. **Mr. Oaten:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on planning permission for mobile phone masts. [152945]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 748–51W by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith).

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152658]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The main departmental or agency logo and brand development costs that can be separately identified since 1 May 1997 are £176,690.

This figure covers development of the following logos:

DETR corporate
Maritime and Coastguard Agency corporate
Driving Standards Agency corporate
The Rent Service Agency corporate
Think! Road Safety campaign
Sustainable Development
Beacon Councils
Best Value
National Land Use database
English House Condition Survey
Supporting People (which promotes housing-related services to improve the quality of life for vulnerable people).

Expenditure on departmental logos and branding is sometimes part of advertising and publicity campaigns. In a few cases expenditure cannot easily be separated out. It is, however, included in replies to Parliamentary questions about advertising expenditure, the most recent of which can be found in my answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 222W.

Climate Change Programme (Air Conditioning Equipment)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he takes to ensure that the environmental commitments of Her Majesty's Government through the Kyoto Protocol and the UK Climate Change Programme are reflected in the EU's determination of European standards for air conditioning equipment; and if he will make a statement. [153618]

Mr. Meacher: European Standards (ENs) are determined by the European Committee for Standardization (CEN). The British Standards Institution (BSI) is the United Kingdom member of that Committee and carries out public consultations on draft ENs. In developing any proposal for standards on air conditioning equipment, the Government would expect BSI, CEN and industry to take account of the commitments given by the UK Government and the European Union as a whole to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, responsibility for these standards and resolving any technical issues, ultimately falls to the BSI.

Rail Services

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he has taken since 1997 to improve services for passengers travelling into Euston from Hatch End, Headstone Lane, and Harrow and Wealdstone stations. [153567]

Mr. Hill: On the route between Hatch End, Headstone Lane and Harrow and Wealdstone stations, there have been track renewals and drainage improvements, which helped to improve performance. The SRA are currently considering an extension to the Silverlink franchise, providing it offers tangible improvements for passengers and value for money.

The Government are committed to developing an integrated transport system. We have created the Strategic Rail Authority and announced our Ten Year Transport Plan which provides for long term investment in transport of £180 billion to cut congestion and modernise the nation's transport system. This includes £60 billion for railways.

Regional Governance

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will *(a)* publish green and white papers on regional governance and *(b)* introduce referendums to allow the creation of directly-elected regional assemblies. [153770]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We remain committed to move to directly-elected regional assemblies where there is support as demonstrated in referendums. As a first step, we would expect to undertake a public consultation exercise on the way forward.

Community Initiatives

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers local councils have to establish community initiatives. [153936]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Local authorities have a broad new power which enables them to take action to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area, including establishing and supporting local community initiatives. In deciding how to exercise the power, authorities must have regard to their community strategy, which should reflect local communities' priorities and long-term aspirations. Local authorities must work through local strategic partnerships to develop and implement their community strategies, to integrate the work of the council with that of other public, private, voluntary and community organisations.

Business Rate

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy on restoring the business rate to the control of local councils. [153802]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In our White Paper, "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People" (July 1998), we said that the present system of a national business rate had some advantages and we would therefore retain it. However we said that we would also give local authorities a limited freedom to vary the business rate in their areas. In our Green Paper, Modernising Local Government Finance (September 2000), we sought views on how this might work in detail. A summary of the responses to the Green Paper has been published on the DETR website. We will publish our conclusions in a White Paper later this year.

Council Housing (Staffordshire)

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many council houses for rent were held on 21 April 1991 by each of *(a)* Cannock Chase, *(b)* East Staffordshire, *(c)* Lichfield, *(d)* Newcastle-Under-Lyme, *(e)* South Staffordshire, *(f)* Stafford, *(g)* Staffordshire, Moorlands, *(h)* Stoke-on-Trent and *(i)* Tamworth; and what the current figures are. [154146]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The latest available information provided by local authorities on their annual Housing Investment Programme returns is as follows:

Total local authority stock on 1 April

	1991	*2000*
Cannock Chase	7,743	6,858
East Staffordshire	6,232	5,756
Lichfield	5,686	0
Newcastle-Under-Lyme	10,621	0
South Staffordshire	5,732	0
Stafford	7,441	6,528
Staffordshire Moorlands	3,674	3,168
Stoke-on-Trent	25,412	22,606
Tamworth	6,399	5,634

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many council houses for rent in each of *(a)* Cannock Chase, *(b)* East Staffordshire, *(c)* Lichfield, *(d)* Newcastle-under-Lyme, *(e)* South Staffordshire, *(f)* Stafford, *(g)* Staffordshire, Moorlands, *(h)* Stoke-on-Trent and *(i)* Tamworth local authorities were transferred by a large scale voluntary transfer in each authority before 1 May 1997 and after 1 May 1997. [154145]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The authorities in Staffordshire which have transferred all or part of their housing stock under Large Scale Voluntary Transfer arrangements are as follows:

Authority	*Date*	*Number of dwellings*[1]
Transfers before 1 May 1997		
South Staffordshire	7 March 1997	5,273
Lichfield	19 March 1997	4,921
Transfers after 1 May 1997		
Stoke-on-Trent	31 March 1998	[2]917
Newcastle-under-Lyme	31 January 2000	9,887
Staffordshire, Moorlands	26 February 2001	3,132

[1] The number of dwellings specified in the consent letter includes dwellings held on long leaseholds (eg flats sold under Right to Buy provisions) where the authority had retained the freehold
[2] Partial transfer

In addition, East Staffordshire has sought the Secretary of State's consent to the transfer of its housing stock, which if granted, will enable the transfer of 5,637 homes at or before the end of this month.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of NATS' air traffic controllers are eligible to retire under the early retirement agreement; how many of these are watch supervisors; how many are involved in training for the NERC; how many his Department estimates will exercise their option to retire if Serco is selected as NATS' strategic partner; and what impact this would have on the capacity of the air traffic control system. [153964]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Flexible Retirement Scheme for NATS Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs) was introduced on 1 April 1998. Since the scheme was introduced, 106 Controllers have become eligible to retire early, of whom 25 have exercised their right to do so. Of the remaining 81, 52 remain in employment and could exercise their right to retire. Controllers wishing to retire under the scheme are required to give a minimum of

"12 months notice of intention to retire".

This "notice of intention" was specifically built into the agreement to minimise the impact on the operational service of controllers wishing to retire under the scheme.

Between 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002, a further 56 NATS Controllers become eligible to retire under the scheme, of whom two are watch managers and 18 work on the activity to be transferred to NERC.

It is not possible to estimate whether any more air traffic controllers might opt to retire early as a result of the selection of a Strategic Partner for the NATS PPP.

As regards the impact on capacity, the training programme for the transfer of air traffic operations from West Drayton to Swanwick is in progress and the overall staffing position is currently tight but manageable. If a

significant number of controllers chose to retire early this coming year, there would be a corresponding impact on the capacity of the air traffic control system.

A74

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans to improve the A74 between Carlisle and the Scottish border. [154229]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Eric Martlew, dated 20 March 2001:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent question about plans to improve the A74 between Carlisle and the Scottish border.

The design agents appointed last September are currently assessing route options for a dual three-lane motorway using as much of the existing route as possible. We are aiming to consult the public next summer on the proposals that emerge. Progress thereafter will depend on the outcome of the consultations and how quickly we can then complete the necessary statutory procedures. As with all schemes in the Targeted Programme of Improvements announced in 1998, the aim is to start work within seven years, although we will better that if we can.

If you would like any further information about this matter, you may wish to contact the Agency's Project Sponsor for the scheme, John Hornagold, at Sunley Tower, Piccadilly Plaza, Manchester, M1 4BE (telephone 0161 930 5725).

Aviation Fuels

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has carried out to develop alternative fuels for aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [154008]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: None. We are aware of industry research which has identified several potential alternative fuels. For technical, economic or environmental reasons, singly or in combination, none seems viable at present. The possible exception is hydrogen, which is being examined further.

Environment Ministers Meeting (Trieste)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the meeting of G8 environment ministers in Trieste. [154208]

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased with the outcome of the recent G8 Environment Ministers' meeting, which I attended in Trieste. On Climate Change, all Ministers—including the US—expressed the view that a successful outcome at COP6 bis was necessary to allow early entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol. Ministers also confirmed their support for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) in 2002 and the importance of improving existing environmental governance structures. We also re-affirmed our continued support for the development of common environmental guidelines for Environmental Credit Agencies. Food safety and the links between the environment and health were also discussed. Ministers also agreed unanimously to condemn the destruction of statues and shrines in Afghanistan. I am placing a copy of the Communiqué in the House of Commons Library.

Section 28

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to repeal Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. [154022]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Following the vote by the House of Lords against the repeal of section 28 during the passage of the Local Government Act 2000 last summer, the Government reluctantly concluded that it could not pursue the repeal in that Act without jeopardising the other important reforms it contained.

The Government remain committed to the repeal of this unnecessary and divisive piece of legislation at the earliest opportunity to do so effectively.

EU Structural Funding

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the funding for objective 2 grants for the East of England was received from the EU; and where the money is at present located. [153977]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The European Commission is expected to formally approve the East of England Objective 2 Programme by the end of March and to release the first block of funds in April.

Ministerial Visit (Chelmsford)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will explain the reasons behind, and apologise to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford for, breaching the Ministerial Code of Conduct by failing to give him advance warning of his visit to Chelmsford on Tuesday 13 March. [154323]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Paragraph 79 of the Ministerial Code says that it is the custom for MPs to be informed when a Minister visits their constituency. My office is under strict instructions to inform constituency MPs of all Government or Departmental visits. My visit to Chelmsford was to attend a private Labour Party function and under those circumstances I did not consider it necessary or indeed appropriate to inform the constituency MP.

Bellwin Scheme Payments (Lewes)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make a payment to Lewes district council in respect of the application made under the Bellwin Scheme. [154493]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has received an interim claim dated 28 February 2001 from Lewes district council in respect of costs arising out of flooding between October and December 2000. In accordance with arrangements to which I referred in answers given to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) on 8 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 642W and

12 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 6W, payment was authorised within 15 working days of receipt of the claim.

GNER Timetable

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he receives from Railtrack about its approval of rail company timetables; and if he will make a statement about GNER timetables after 6 April. [154664]

Mr. Hill: None. The passenger railway timetable is agreed between the train operator and Railtrack. I understand from GNER that a nearly normal timetable will be introduced in early April.

Driving Standards Agency

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to what purpose financial surpluses from the Driving Standards Agency are put. [154736]

Mr. Hill: The Driving Standards Agency operates under a trading fund regime and is required to generate a financial surplus equivalent to 6 per cent. of its average net assets in order to cover the cost of the public resources being used by the organisation. This 6 per cent. return is paid to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in the form of dividends plus loan repayments and interest.

Where the Agency makes a financial surplus above the 6 per cent. requirement, this is retained by the Agency as a reserve and may be used to offset future fee increases.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what process the Driving Standards Agency informs test applicants of a vehicle recall. [154737]

Mr. Hill: Motor manufacturers are responsible for advising owners of vehicle recalls. If the Driving Standards Agency becomes aware of a vehicle problem that could affect the safety of the candidate, the examiner and other road users, the Agency would display information on posters in driving test centres and on the Agency's website. The Agency would also tell driving instructors via its newsletter "Despatch".

Prestwick Airport

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if Scottish and North of England en-route services will be provided from the new air traffic control centre at Prestwick; and if Oceanic services for the North East Atlantic will continue to be served from Prestwick; [154717]

(2) what assessment he has made of the capability of the Prestwick air traffic control centre to pick up replica services in the event of a catastrophe at Swanwick. [154722]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The NSC, as part of NATS' two centre strategy for the provision of en route air navigation services endorsed by the Government, is expected to have the capacity to service the Scottish FIR, the Oceanic region and provide a significant contingency in the case of catastrophic failure of the Swanwick or West Drayton centres. The latest review of the two centre strategy, carried out in 1997, proposed the transfer of the services provided by the Manchester Area Control Centre to Swanwick, although the NATS Strategic Partner may wish to review this.

NATS has informed the Government that a New Scottish Centre with around half the number of workstations that Swanwick will have should be able to handle up to about 70 per cent. of normal traffic levels in the event of the Swanwick centre going out of action.

Rail Travellers Survey (C2C)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason passengers from Tilbury Town Station were not invited by the Strategic Rail Authority to complete the UK Rail Travellers Survey on 15 March; in which stations *(a)* in the borough of Thurrock and *(b)* outside Thurrock on the c2c line to Surrey the survey was distributed; and if he will make a statement. [154667]

Mr. Hill: In the latest wave of National Passenger Survey, all but one of C2C's stations, Dagenham Dock, have been or will be covered between 3 March and 23 March. Tilbury Town was covered on 8 March and 13 March.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152979]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The majority of Lincoln constituency lies within the city of Lincoln and the district of North Kesteven. The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to the local authorities between 1997–98 and 2001–02 are shown in the tables. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money Lincolnshire county council and North Kesteven district council have spent on Lincoln constituency. It is for the local authorities to decide where within their boundary these resources are applied. The city of Lincoln lies entirely within the Lincoln constituency.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02 (where known)*
Lincoln city council					
Revenue support grant	5.285	5.048	5.000	4.867	5.208
Income from national non-domestic rates	2.674	2.678	2.861	3.151	3.117
Housing investment programme	1.665	1.642	1.733	5.269	6.914
Housing revenue account subsidy (management and maintenance allowance)	£826.19 per property	£836.63 per property	£866.39 per property	£902.07 per property	£934.72 per property

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02 (where known)
Capital receipts initiative	—	1.128	1.021	—	—
SRB funding[2]	1.128	1.545	2.118	[3]2.318	[3]2.439
Neighbourhood renewal funding	—	—	—	—	0.2
North Kesteven district council					
Revenue support grant	2.040	1.927	1.838	1.612	1.841
Income from national non-domestic rates	2.694	2.779	2.986	3.337	3.394
Standard spending assessment reduction grant	0.057	—	—	—	—
Housing investment programme	0.805	0.614	0.680	1.829	2.686
Housing revenue account subsidy (management and maintenance allowance)	£702.60 per property	£710.46 per property	£735.77 per property	£765.05 per property	£757.40 per property
Capital receipts initiative	—	0.513	0.480	—	—
Lincolnshire county council					
Transport supplementary grant	3.565	1.669	1.966	0.043	—
Transport annual capital guideline	3.565	1.669	1.966	0.043	—
Transport block supplementary credit approval	0.777	0.825	2.140	6.148	16.362
Rural bus challenge grant[4] (from 1999–2000)	—	—	1.220	1.622	0.547
Rural bus subsidy grant (from 1998–99)	—	1.194	1.194	1.194	1.525

[1] Includes major repairs allowance
[2] SRB schemes include a 10 year project led by Lincoln city council and Lincolnshire Development which concentrates on investment and physical regeneration of dereliction in the city centre and on the University of Lincolnshire by Brayford Pool and a 5 year project targeting Abbey and Park wards in Lincoln aiming to develop tourism, improve skills and support communities by tackling barriers to opportunities, capacity building and social regeneration.
[3] Forecast figure
[4] Does not include potential spend from the SRB6 programme as forecast expenditure is not yet available.
[5] Figures are for total project costs and refer to schemes for which approval was announced in the December or January preceding the financial year shown.

Departmental Policies (Newbury)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Newbury constituency, the effects on Newbury and west Berkshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154572]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding this Department has provided to west Berkshire in 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on the Newbury constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of Funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Revenue Support Grant	[2]—	36.023	35.205	33.867	38.760
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	[2]—	33.874	36.819	41.541	40.669
Local Government Reorganisation Supplementary Credit Approval	[3]—	[3]—	2.643	3.740	—
Housing Investment Programme	0.299	0.253	0.269	1.317	0.604
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.087	0.274	0.277	—	—
ERDF Funding	0.895	0.179	—	—	—
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.675	0.234	0.600	—	—
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.675	0.234	0.600	—	—
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	2.481	0.370	0.650	1.819	2.885
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	—	0.033	0.076	0.102	—
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	—	0.233	0.233	0.233	0.297

[1] Where known
[2] Not available
[3] No bid made

Notes:
Revenue Support Grant and Income from National Non-Domestic Rates—figures not available for 1997–98 owing to local government re-organisation.
Local Government Reorganisation Supplementary Credit Approval—ends after 2000–01; the figure for 2000–01 is a bid, which will be assessed August/September this year.
Capital Receipts Initiative—ended 1999–2000.
ERDF Funding—KONVER funding allocated. This is a European scheme to help areas where the local economy depends on military bases—Greenham Common in the Newbury area. Funding provided retrospectively.
Rural Bus Challenge Grant—not available in 1997–98 and no entry for 2001–02 yet as it is calculated retrospectively.
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant—not available in 1997–98.

Local Government Commission

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to transfer the functions of the Local Government Commission for England to the Electoral Commission; what the consequences for the programme of periodic electoral reviews will be; and if he will make a statement. [154900]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), told the House on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 830, we intend, subject to the approval of the House and the other place, to make an Order under section 18 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, transferring the functions of the Local Government Commission for England (LGC) to the Electoral Commission with effect from 1 April 2002. We also intend, as provided for in the 2000 Act, to include provisions in the Order to modify and to transfer to the independent Electoral Commission the Secretary of State's current functions relating to the implementation of the LGC's recommendations on electoral reviews. The proposed modifications are to take account of the constitution of the independent Electoral Commission and its statutory Boundary Committee for England, and to improve the procedures for conducting and implementing reviews, including allowing the Commission's Boundary Committee, after undertaking a review, to undertake a further review of the electoral arrangements of part of the local authority's area.

On this basis, from 1 April 2002, the programme of periodic electoral reviews and their implementation would become the responsibility of the Electoral Commission.

Electoral reviews are implemented, on a normal election day for the council concerned, by the making of an electoral changes order prior to that date. We intend that it will be for the Electoral Commission to make all the electoral change orders for reviews implemented on the normal election day in 2004 and subsequent normal election days. Electoral change orders for reviews to be implemented on the normal election day in 2003 will also be made by the Electoral Commission, except where a review is completed sufficiently prior to April 2002 that it is practicable for the Secretary of State to make the Order to assist the Electoral Commission as it takes on its new functions transferred from the LGC.

This approach means that it will be for the Electoral Commission, on or after 1 April 2002, to decide whether or not to give effect to the LGC's current review recommendations for the counties of Derbyshire, Devon, Durham and Surrey which are due to be implemented on the normal election day in 2005 under the programme of reviews announced to the House on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 356.

Road Charges (Disabled People)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the exemptions or concessions he will prescribe for disabled people from road user charges and the workplace parking levy in England. [154902]

Mr. Hill: The Government are at present reviewing the operation of the Blue Badge scheme for parking concessions for disabled people. As part of the review we will be seeking views on whether there should be a link between that scheme and the exemption or concession arrangements for disabled motorists from road user charges and workplace parking levies. We expect to complete this review by the end of this year, and we then plan to consult on the scope of England-wide exemptions or concessions from road user charges and workplace parking levies.

The aim will be to provide a uniform minimum standard of exemptions and/or concessions throughout England including Greater London, subject to considering whether an exception should be made for the unique circumstances of central London. It will be open to individual charging authorities to give exemptions and/or concessions above the minimum if they wish.

If in due course the Government decide on an England-wide exemption or concession which is greater than one included by a charging authority in a charging scheme, we will give the authority adequate time to bring its scheme into line with the national requirements.

Barford Bypass

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date construction work on the Barford bypass in Warwickshire is expected to start. [154723]

Mr. Hill: The Barford bypass was provisionally accepted for funding in the Local Transport Settlement announced on 14 December 2000. Warwickshire county council are now progressing the £6.9 million scheme with the aim of starting construction in 2003.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much high activity liquid waste is projected to arise from reprocessing at the Thorp plant at Sellafield; and what plans there are to condition this radioactive waste for long-term management. [154198]

Mr. Hain: I have been asked to reply.

The 1998 United Kingdom Radioactive Waste Inventory indicates total arisings of 2,350 m^3 of high level liquid radioactive waste from Thorp.

BNFL currently plans to vitrify these wastes for long-term management, as described in the report the storage of liquid high level waste at BNFL, Sellafield, published by the Health and Safety Executive in February 2000.

HEALTH

Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce routine checks for spongiform encephalopathy in all animals slaughtered for human consumption. [141645]

Ms Stuart: Following discussion by the European Union Council of Ministers, member states agreed to introduce the testing for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) of animals slaughtered at over-30-months old, both those dying on the farm or in transport and those subject to normal slaughter, so that only meat from those animals with a negative test result may enter the human chain. All member states have been required to carry out this testing since 1 January 2001. In the United Kingdom, since we prohibit the sale for human consumption of beef from cattle aged over-30-months at slaughter, this testing requirement only applies to cattle slaughtered aged up to 42 months under the Beef Assurance Scheme, which covers registered herds with very low risk of BSE. Fallen stock is also being tested as required, although these do not go into the food chain. There are no plans routinely to test animals slaughtered at 30 months of age or younger.

Beef Imports

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment the Government have made of the threat to human health posed by the illegal sale of imported over-30-month beef; and when that assessment was made. [144250]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that it assessed, in December 2000, that any illegal sale of imported over-30-month (OTM) old beef from countries where there have been cases of BSE would pose a slightly higher risk than legally sold carcase meat imported from those countries. It should be borne in mind that the OTM rule is only the first defence against BSE and that the most risky parts of the animal, the specified risk material, such as the brain and spinal cord, are removed at slaughter. This greatly reduces the amount of infective material from older cattle.

In addition, from 1 January 2001 cattle aged over-30-months that are slaughtered in the European Union must test negative for BSE before being allowed into the food chain. This provides consumers with some additional protection, though the tests are limited in their sensitivity to pre-clinical infection.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies the Government have conducted of the impact on health of eating French beef products. [144389]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 149–50W.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps have been taken to inform consumers about the inclusion of processed meat products in the ban on sales of imported over-30-months meat. [144492]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* The Food Standards Agency issued a statement advising on imported beef and beef products on 22 December 2000. This is available on the Agency's BSE controls review website, and a copy has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which Ministry has responsibility for preparations to enforce a ban on the import of beef. [146403]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* No such ban is envisaged, for the reasons given in the reply to the hon. Member on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 436W.

Children's Rights Director

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to publish the draft regulations covering the work of the Children's Rights Director; and if he will list the organisations and individuals he intends to consult about them. [146515]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* We plan to publish the draft regulations covering the work of the Children's Rights Director later this year. There will then be a full public consultation.

Food Safety

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many prosecutions there have been in respect of imported food that has been repacked or processed in the UK and sold as British. [150987]

Ms Stuart: Information is not collected in the form requested.

Local authority enforcement data for 1999, collected under Article 14 of the Official Controls of Foodstuffs Directive 89/397/EEC, does not distinguish prosecutions taken in respect of imported food repacked or processed in the UK.

A copy of the full return for 1999, the most recent year for which figures are available, is in the Library.

MMR Vaccine

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those countries in Europe and North America which license the MMR and those which license single vaccinations for mumps, measles and rubella. [149345]

Yvette Cooper: All European Union member states and the United States of America recommend a two dose vaccination schedule with MMR vaccine.

There is no comprehensive list available of measles, mumps and rubella combination vaccines, two-component vaccines or single component vaccines that are currently licensed in Europe and North America. The Medicines Control Agency has obtained the following information from *The European Drug Index* (1997 edition), from national compendia of licensed medicinal products in France, Germany, Switzerland and Sweden (1998 to 2000 editions), from the 2001 edition of the *USA Physician's Desk Reference*, and from two companies. While these references indicate that such products are currently licensed as listed in the named countries, it is not known whether or not they are on the market at the present time.

In the EU and Switzerland

There are combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccines currently licensed in all countries in the EU, including the United Kingdom.

Measles plus rubella vaccines are licensed in at least Italy, Switzerland and the UK.

Measles plus mumps vaccines are licensed in at least Germany, Portugal and Switzerland.

At least one measles single component vaccine is licensed in Italy, Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Greece and the UK.

At least one single component mumps vaccine is licensed in Italy, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Portugal and the UK.

There are numerous single component rubella vaccines licensed across the EU, including the UK.

In the USA

There is one combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccine listed in the 2001 edition of the *USA Physician's Desk Reference*.

Also licensed are a measles plus rubella vaccine, a measles plus mumps vaccine and single component vaccines for each of measles, mumps and rubella.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 430W, on MMR vaccine, which measles and mumps vaccines meet the specifications of the extant licences for those vaccines; and under what circumstances those vaccines can be imported. [149362]

Yvette Cooper: None of the single measles and mumps vaccines licensed in the United Kingdom is manufactured for, or marketed in the UK, and the licence holders advise that the products they manufacture outside the UK for other countries do not fully comply with their UK licences. None of the single measles and mumps vaccines imported into the UK are licensed for use in the UK, or in full compliance with an extant UK product licence. Consequently, as unlicensed vaccines, they may only be imported and supplied to fulfil special needs, in response to the prescription of a doctor, and for use by his/her individual patients on his/her direct personal responsibility.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the unit cost of an injection of *(a)* MMR and *(b)* each of its constituent vaccines if given separately. [150096]

Yvette Cooper: The United Kingdom is supplied by two manufacturers of measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and by one supplier of rubella vaccine. The cost to the Department of purchasing MMR and rubella vaccines is commercially confidential. However, the price of a single dose of MMR vaccine as listed in the British National Formulary is £6.23 for that manufactured by SmithKline Beecham and £10.17 for that manufactured by Aventis Pasteur. The list price for rubella vaccine, manufactured by SmithKline Beecham, is £2.53 per vial.

Children are recommended to receive two doses of MMR vaccine. Rubella vaccine is recommended for non-immune women. No licensed single component mumps or measles vaccines are manufactured for or marketed in the UK.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of children aged between 12 and 15 months who have not received their MMR vaccination in each of the last six months. [150383]

Yvette Cooper: This information is not available in the format requested. At 31 March 2000, the latest date for which figures are available, 87.6 per cent. of children in England aged two had received the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. 12.4 per cent. of children aged two had, therefore, not received the MMR vaccine. This means that approximately 75,000 children aged two at 31 March 2000 had not been immunised with the MMR vaccine by their 2nd birthday.

Public Relations (Expenditure)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure was in his Department for the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and what the planned expenditure and breakdown of expenditure for 2000–01 is on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail. [149265]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* The figures for the total spend on advertising for the Department for the financial years 1996–97 to 2000–01 are shown in the table.

£ million

Financial year	*Advertising expenditure*
1996–97	2.50
1997–98	2.27
1998–99	8.63
1999–2000	14.83
2000–01 (planned)	21.09

Major advertising spend on individual campaigns is shown in the table.

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Ambulance Services	0.40	—	—	—	—
Antibiotics	—	—	—	0.17	—
Blood Donation	0.38	0.60	1.70	0.22	—
Children's Services	—	—	—	—	0.60
Drugs	—	—	—	0.34	—
Flu	—	—	—	—	0.23
Maternity	0.10	—	—	—	—
NHS including Nurse Recruitment	1.43	1.30	4.90	4.21	4.90
NHS Direct	—	0.12	0.78	1.20	1.15
Organ Donation	—	—	0.77	0.47	0.49
Prescription Fraud	—	—	0.38	—	1.40
Sexwise/Teenage Pregnancy	—	—	—	0.39	1.01

£ million

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01[1]
Smoking	—	—	—	[3]6.18	8.66
Travel Safe	0.85	—	—	—	—
Walk-In Centres	—	—	—	—	0.30
Winter	—	—	—	1.07	2.35

[1] Planned
[2] The Department's spend on blood donation advertising reduced in 1999–2000 because most of this activity was funded directly by the National Blood Authority, who took over full responsibility for this expenditure on 1 April 2000.
[3] Prior to 1999–2000 advertising on smoking was undertaken by the Health Education Authority.

Mental Health

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children and adolescents are waiting for treatment for mental health problems in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Gloucestershire; and if he will make a statement. [149675]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 9 February 2001]:* Patients in England receive treatment for mental health problems in a wide range of health care settings, particularly primary care, and we do not collect waiting list information for most of these. We are aware that in some places waiting times for treatment for mental health problems are unacceptably long.

The development of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is an important part of the work we will be taking forward in implementing the National Health Service Plan. The £30 million we have made available for CAMHS in 2000–01, and which will be available again in 2001–02, will help reduce waiting times for these services.

Information for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are matters for the devolved Administrations.

SSA (Stoke-on-Trent)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the standard spending assessment allocation for social services and the expenditure are per head of population in Stoke-on-Trent was for each year from 1996–97 to date. [150182]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is in the table:

Gross current expenditure and personal social services (PSS) standard spending assessment (SSA) per capita for Stoke-on-Trent, 1997–98 to 2000–01[1]

£

	Gross current expenditure per capita	PSS SSA per capita
1997–98	228.52	150.46
1998–99	240.38	163.79
1999–2000[2]	252.39	186.57
2000–01[3]	204.77	195.71

[1] Data for Stoke-on-Trent are not available for 1996–97 as it did not become a unitary authority until 1 April 1997
[2] Gross current expenditure figures are based on provisional outturn
[3] Gross current expenditure figures are not comparable with figures for earlier years as these figures are net of income from client contributions etc

Heart Research

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what proposals he has to match fund charitable funding of *(a)* heart research and *(b)* medical research; [152617]

(2) what *(a)* his Department's and *(b)* charitable organisations' expenditure on heart research was in each of the last 10 years; and what the projected expenditure is in each category over the next three years. [152626]

Yvette Cooper: Government funding for research on heart disease, as for other areas of medical research, is provided through a number of routes:

The research councils, who receive their funding from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)—the Medical Research Council (MRC) is the main Government agency for research into the causes of and treatments for disease; the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council also supports basic research relevant to health.

The Department of Health funds research to support policy and practice in health and social care.

Health Departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also provide support for research on health.

The Higher Education Funding Councils fund the research infrastructure in medical schools and other relevant research groups in higher education institutions. Funding for the Higher Education Funding Council for England is provided by the Department for Education and Employment.

The figures for the Department of Health's annual expenditure on heart research over the last ten years are not available in the form requested. In 1999–2000 the Department of Health spent approximately £49.6 million on research for cardiovascular disease and stroke. The MRC spent approximately £10.5 million on cardiovascular disease in the same year. It is not possible to predict what the future level of Department expenditure will be on specific areas of research as new research is regularly being commissioned.

Figures for annual expenditure by charities on heart disease research are not held centrally. According to their entry in the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) Handbook 2000, the British Heart Foundation, one of the largest charities involved in supporting heart disease research, anticipated research expenditure of £45 million in 1999–2000.

The Department of Health's research funding for cardiovascular disease includes support for the work of research councils and charities that takes place in the National Health Service. The Department is working more closely with relevant charities to improve the support for and co-ordination of research on heart disease. A cardiovascular research funders forum has been established, which aims to bring together the major funding

bodies in this area to address research issues, ranging from basic and clinical research through to epidemiological studies related to prevention, screening, diagnosis and treatment, and to consider areas that would benefit from a co-ordinated approach. The forum will also help to improve information about on-going research, facilitate partnerships between funders and researchers, consider how to accelerate recruitment for clinical trials and how best to exploit the findings from research to develop new approaches to diagnosis and disease. The membership currently consists of the four United Kingdom Health Departments, the MRC and three charities: the Wellcome Trust, the British Heart Foundation and Diabetes UK. The work of the forum will inform the future pattern of Department of Health Research and Development expenditure on cardiovascular disease.

Government expenditure on all medical and health related research is currently estimated at £1 billion per annum. The AMRC estimates that their member charities make a financial contribution to medical research of about £540 million a year. The Government seek to work closely with the medical charities to ensure the best use of all research resources for the benefit of patients.

Dental Charges

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost to public funds of *(a)* reducing the maximum payment for a course of NHS dental charges paid by the patient to 50 per cent., *(b)* reducing the maximum payment for a course of NHS dental treatment to £100, *(c)* reducing the percentage of NHS dental charges paid by the patient to 50 per cent. and reducing the maximum payment for a course of NHS dental treatment to £100, *(d)* extending free dental check-ups to people aged 60 years and over, and *(e)* exempting people aged over 60 years from all dental charges. [153063]

Mr. Hutton: The estimated costs of making changes to the percentage of dental fees paid by charge paying patients and the maximum patient charge for the General Dental Service in England based on 1999–2000 figures are:

£ million

Change in maximum/patient charge	*Annual cost*
(a) reducing the percentage of dental charge paid by the patient for a course of treatment under the National Health Service to 50 per cent. with unchanged maximum patient charge	155
(b) reducing the maximum payment paid by the patient for a course of treatment under the NHS to £100 with unchanged percentage of dental fees paid by charge paying patients	35
(c) reducing the percentage of dental charge paid by the patient for a course of treatment under the NHS to 50 per cent. and reducing the maximum charge to £100	170
(d) extending free dental examinations to people aged 60 and over	19
(e) exempting people aged 60 and over from all dental charges	85

These estimates would be higher if the changes stimulated greater demand for dental examinations and dental treatment.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adult courses of NHS dental treatment cost *(a)* under £100, *(b)* £100 to £199.99, *(c)* £200 to £200.99 and *(d)* £300 or over in the last year for which figures are available. [153064]

Mr. Hutton: The table shows the number of courses of dental treatment for patients aged 18 and over with gross cost in the ranges; under £100, £100 to £199.99, £200 to £299.99 and £300 or more in the General Dental Services for England in 1999–2000. Gross cost is the fee paid to the dentist for the dental treatment and it includes patient charge where applicable.

General Dental Service: number of courses of treatment for patients aged 18 and over by cost of dental treatment for year ending 31 March 2000 in England

Cost of treatment	*Total number of courses of treatment*[1] *(thousand)*
Under £100	24,036.2
£100 to £199.99	1,544.1
£200 to £200.99	306.7
£300 or more	171.4
Total	26,058.4

[1] Numbers include about 140 thousand correction records for resubmitted claims

Orthodontic Treatment

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for changes to regulations relating to charging for orthodontic treatment; and if he will make a statement. [153675]

Mr. Hutton: Reforms to the provision of National Health Service orthodontic treatment and the associated dentists' fee scales were announced in "Modernising NHS Dentistry—Implementing the NHS Plan" which was published in September 2000. Proposals are being discussed with the profession. The aim of the reforms is to ensure that those who need treatment are able to get quality orthodontic care without undue delay. We are aiming to introduce the changes later this year. There are no plans to change the existing arrangements for patients' charges.

Incontinence

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the costs of urinary incontinence products *(a)* to the NHS, including surgery and appliances, and *(b)* to the social services, including cost of carers, in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [153547]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service spent £35.9 million on various continence appliances and products in 1999–2000. We are not able, however, to allocate this expenditure between urinary and faecal incontinence products. Information on the costs of urinary incontinence products in terms of surgery and costs to social services is not collected centrally.

Prescription Pricing Authority

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out the process for appealing a decision of the Prescription Pricing Authority regarding a claim for health costs covered under the NHS low income scheme. [153937]

Ms Stuart: As forms HC1 (claim form) and HC3 (which conveys a decision that a person is not entitled to full help under the National Health Service low income scheme) make clear, anyone who wants the decision reviewed has only to write and request this. That review will be dealt with by the Prescription Pricing Authority's (PPA) independent review section, which is not involved in the day to day calculation of low income scheme entitlement.

If it is clear to the independent review section that an error has been made in the original calculation, this will be corrected. In all cases, an explanation will be given of how the decision has been reached. If the explanation is not acceptable, a detailed commentary on the legal provisions used to calculate entitlement will be provided on request. If, after this, the explanation remains unacceptable, it is open to the person making the claim to seek a judicial review of the PPA's decision.

Suicide

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he has taken to reduce the suicide rates in young males. [153974]

Mr. Hutton: We know that it is young men who are at most risk of suicide. In December 1997 the Department launched the Campaign Against Living Miserably telephone helpline in Manchester. The helpline, aimed at young men, offers advice, guidance, information and counselling at the onset of depression. CALM has been extended to Merseyside and Cumbria and we are looking to make it available in other areas in partnership with local agencies. Ultimately, we hope that the helpline will help to bring down the suicide rate in young men.

Also, as a result of new investment and new services outlined in the National Health Service Plan, we expect that every young person who develops a serious mental illness will benefit from specialist teams who can offer them the help and treatment they require. In addition, work in prisons and improved community crisis resolution services will target the particular needs of high suicide risk areas, as well as making the mental health system more responsive.

Kathleen Smith

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will seek from the Chief Executive of the Central Manchester Healthcare NHS trust an explanation for his failure to reply to the letters sent to him on 5 December 2000 and 15 January and 15 February 2001 by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mrs. Kathleen Smith. [154586]

Ms Stuart: The chief executive of Central Manchester Healthcare National Health Service Trust wrote to the family of the late Kathleen Smith on 5 March 2001. I understand that a copy of that letter was also sent both to my right hon. Friend and to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett).

Nursing Care Homes

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what processes and procedures he is planning to put in place to reimburse care homes for nursing care provided to residents in accordance with the provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill. [152906]

Mr. Hutton: Subject to the passage of the Health and Social Care Bill, the registered nurse input to care in any setting will be the responsibility of the National Health Service. People's need for nursing care will be assessed as part of a single health and social care assessment and the contribution of a registered nurse to their care will be determined.

Where care is received in a care home, the NHS will arrange for the registered nurse input to be provided, either by nursing staff in the home or by NHS staff visiting the home.

We plan to issue detailed guidance on implementation in May.

Patient Representation

Mr. Best: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve arrangements for patient representation within the NHS. [151904]

Ms Stuart: The National Health Service Plan sets out the framework for improvements to patient and public involvement in the NHS and the Health and Social Care Bill continues its passage through Parliament to ensure the necessary legislation. Debates have addressed many issues including those of independence and accountability in the new system. Further discussions will continue in the House of Lords.

Learning Disabilities

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what strategies he has in place to improve services for people with learning disabilities. [154823]

Mr. Hutton: I am today publishing "Valuing People: A New Strategy For Learning Disability For the 21st Century", which sets out cross-Government proposals for improving the life chances of people with learning disabilities. This is the first White Paper on learning disability for 30 years and sets out an ambitious and challenging programme of action for improving services for a particularly vulnerable and socially excluded group in our society. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Our proposals are based on four key principles: civil rights, independence, choice, and inclusion. Valuing People takes a life-long approach, beginning with an integrated approach to services for disabled children and their families and then providing new opportunities for a full and purposeful adult life. It has cross-Government backing and its proposals are intended to result in improvements in education, social services, health, employment, housing, and support for people with learning disabilities and their families and carers.

We are establishing a new Learning Disability Development Fund of up to £50 million a year to support the proposals for adults in the White Paper. Up to £30 million a year of this will be revenue funding and £20 million capital. The fund will be introduced from April 2002 and will be targeted on the priorities set out in the White Paper. We are also setting up an Implementation Support Fund of £2.3 million a year for three years from April 2001 to provide central support for key aspects of the White Paper. Priorities for the Implementation Fund, which includes £300,000 a year from the Home Office Active Community budget, include developing independent advocacy services and establishing a National Learning Disability Information Centre and Helpline in partnership with Mencap.

We will be setting up a Learning Disability Taskforce to take forward the implementation of the White Paper and an Implementation Support Team to promote good practice and share practical experience.

We are also publishing: an accessible version of the White Paper; "Nothing About Us Without Us", a report from the Learning Disability Service Users Advisory Group; "Learning Difficulties and Ethnicity", a report commissioned from the Centre for Research in Primary Care, University of Leeds; and "Family Matters, Counting Families In", a report on the particular needs of family carers. Copies will be placed in the Library.

I should like to pay particular tribute to the people with learning disabilities who helped us develop "Valuing People". This is the first occasion on which people with learning disabilities have taken part in developing Government policy; their contribution has been invaluable and has helped us understand the problems they and their families face every day.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Film Subtitles

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if feature films, to which subtitles for deaf and hard of hearing people have been added, are required to be re-submitted to the British Board of Film Classification prior to being screened in cinemas. [154752]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the cinema licensing regime provided by the Cinemas Act 1985, local authorities have the power to determine whether particular films may be shown in cinemas in their area. I understand that local authorities generally require cinemas to abide by the classification certificate issued by the British Board of Film Classification.

With regard to the issue of separate classification of films for which subtitles have been added, I understand that the Board are currently working with the Industry Disability Working Group on this matter and they have confirmed that they are happy to waive their normal fee for script reading, if the script for sub-titling is supplied to them at the same time as the film.

Police Numbers

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will indicate, for each constabulary in Britain, the number of *(a)* police officers and *(b)* constables per 1,000 of population. [154718]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information for England and Wales is given in the table. The Scottish Executive have responsibility for the police service in Scotland.

Force	*Police strength (all ranks) as at 30 September 2000*	*Police strength (constables) as at 30 September 2000*	*Police officers per 1,000 of population*	*Police constables per 1,000 of population*
Avon and Somerset	2,941	2,293.9	1.96	1.53
Bedfordshire	1,006	783.3	1.79	1.39
Cambridgeshire	1,266	989.2	1.75	1.36
Cheshire	2,000	1,521.5	2.04	1.55
City of London	720	557.3		
Cleveland	1,421	1,129.1	2.56	2.03
Cumbria	1,048	816.6	2.13	1.66
Derbyshire	1,780	1,363.0	1.83	1.4
Devon and Cornwall	2,873	2,261.3	1.83	1.44
Dorset	1,299	999.5	1.88	1.44
Durham	1,581	1,243.7	2.61	2.05
Dyfed-Powys	1,045	779.0	2.17	1.62
Essex	2,780	2,147.4	1.72	1.33
Gloucestershire	1,142	887.3	2.03	1.58
Greater Manchester	6,767	5,284.8	2.63	2.05
Gwent	1,271	980.6	2.28	1.76
Hampshire	3,435	2,663.2	1.93	1.49
Hertfordshire	1,961	1,530.0	1.88	1.47
Humberside	1,905	1,486.1	2.16	1.69
Kent	3,239	2,544.0	2.04	1.60
Lancashire	3,215	2,463.3	2.25	1.73
Leicestershire	2,010	1,613.8	2.15	1.73
Lincolnshire	1,162	888.3	1.85	1.41
Merseyside	4,081	3203.4	2.91	2.28
Metropolitan Police	24,695	18,981.0	3.49	2.68
Norfolk	1,387	1,062.3	1.74	1.33
Northamptonshire	1,166	925.0	1.88	1.49
Northumbria	3,885	3,037.2	2.74	2.14
North Wales	1,393	1,066.0	2.12	1.62

Force	Police strength (all ranks) as at 30 September 2000	Police strength (constables) as at 30 September 2000	Police officers per 1,000 of population	Police constables per 1,000 of population
North Yorkshire	1,293	990.7	1.73	1.32
Nottinghamshire	2,232	1,762.4	2.16	1.71
South Wales	3,029	2,343.0	2.44	1.89
South Yorkshire	3,184	2,420.3	2.44	1.86
Staffordshire	2,157	1,672.3	2.03	1.58
Suffolk	1,115	859.6	1.65	1.27
Surrey	2,113	1,673.0	1.96	1.55
Sussex	2,812	2,118.5	1.86	1.40
Thames Valley	3,748	2,905.5	1.77	1.37
Warwickshire	912	728.1	1.79	1.43
West Mercia	1,906	1,470.7	1.67	1.29
West Midlands	7,350	5,931.4	2.80	2.26
West Yorkshire	4,806	3,792.6	2.27	1.79
Wiltshire	1,099	828.6	1.80	1.36

[1] Figures for City of London and Metropolitan police are combined.

Note:

The figures provided in the table are the police numbers for the 43 forces in England and Wales and do not include secondments. Further information on police numbers at 30 September 2000 can be found in Home Office Statistical Bulletin No 2/01 "Police Service Strength (England and Wales)" which was published on 16 January. A copy is available in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152977]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Lincoln constituency or the immediate locality:

Reducing Burglary Initiative

One scheme in St. Giles Estate, Lincoln was awarded £60,000 under the Reducing Burglary Initiative which will include the employment of a Civilian Crime Reduction Officer. A multi-agency approach (Crime Prevention Officer, Police, Housing Department) will be taken to tackle issues including: anti-social tenants; community policing; targeting unemployment; social exclusion; substance misuse and extending Neighbourhood watch. The scheme will also concentrate on target hardening of houses that have been burgled and intelligence-led policing.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Under round one of the Crime Reduction Programme's CCTV initiative, the Lincoln Crime Reduction Executive was awarded £76,000 for the Shuttleworth House CCTV Initiative. The scheme covers a multi-storey block of flats in the Abbey Ward area of Lincoln. The main aims of the scheme are to combat fear of crime and to directly impact upon the incidence of racist graffiti.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

In response to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, key agencies came together in partnership to initially set up the Youth Offending Service (YOS) in Lincolnshire. This group has now evolved into Lincolnshire in Partnership and oversees the YOS, (Drug Action Team) (DAT), Road Safety Partnership, Domestic Violence Project etc. The group comprises the Chief Officers of Social Services, Health, Education, Police, Probation, Health, Highways and Planning, Director of Community Safety, Chief Crown Prosecutor, Chief Executive of Magistrates Courts Committee and a Chief Executive representing the District Councils. There is a very strong emphasis placed on working in Partnership in Lincolnshire, which is also reflected in the fact that Lincolnshire and Rutland will have one of the first Connexions Services in the country as of April 2000. There are three area YOTs covering the east, south and west of the county. The west YOT covers the City of Lincoln. Each team has representatives from the five key agencies and provides services predominantly to Young People in trouble, their families, the Police and the Courts. Lincoln City Council has a very active Crime Reduction Partnership Group and the YOS are involved in this group and the other six district council groups within the County. A range of new orders are available to the Courts including Reparation Orders, Action Plan Orders, Parenting Orders which the YOS are providing along with other Community sentences. Although it is too early to assess the full impact of the YOTs in Lincolnshire early indications are promising. For example out of a total of 146 young offenders who have received an intervention from the YOS between October and December 2000, 86 per cent. or 130 young people have not been charged or convicted of a further offence.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Lincoln to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Fraud

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what information he collects on the proportion of expenditure spent by the police in relation to fraud *(a)* in total and *(b)* by each police force. [154585]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on expenditure by the police in relation to fraud is not collected centrally.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason G. P. Hinduja's passport application was considered more rapidly than the average. [154319]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* I presume that the right hon. Member is referring to the application for naturalisation made by Mr. G. P. Hinduja.

The full circumstances of the naturalisation application are detailed in Sir Anthony Hammond's Review, which was published on 9 March 2001.

The detail of the priority afforded to the application is given at paragraphs 4.2, 4.9, 5.166 and 5.169 of the Review.

The general guidance for the handling of requests for priority treatment of citizenship applications is given at Annex D of the Review.

Having been granted British citizenship, Mr. Hinduja was then eligible to apply for a British passport.

Departmental Policies (Newbury)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Newbury constituency, the effects on Newbury and west Berkshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154574]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The latest report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Newbury constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

West Berkshire Council was awarded £16,500 under round 1 of the CCTV Initiative for a Mobile Unit. The scheme will assist with specific problems, particularly car crime and anti-social behaviour in rural areas and on various housing estates.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

The West Berkshire YOT offers all young people receiving Final Warnings an assessment and intervention programme. The ASSET assessment tool is used at the beginning and end of all YOT interventions. Work has been done with the victim liaison project to maximise consultation with victims of youth crime and maximise opportunities for direct reparation to victims. A range of parenting groups has been organised across West Berkshire for parents of young people at risk of offending. With the assistance of police and courts targets for timescales from arrest to sentence of young offenders are consistently being met and intensive packages for supervision of young people at most risk of offending are being developed.

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) are currently funding two Intervention Schemes and one Bail Supervision Scheme in Newbury and west Berkshire. The YJB are contributing approximately £41,000 to the West Berkshire Parenting, Education and Support Project. This project works towards developing an effective process to meet the expectations of the Crime and Disorder Act in relation to meeting the needs of the victim. It develops the principles of restorative justice establishing effective participant involvement, preparation, reparation agreements and evaluation. Almost £72,000 is being used to fund another intervention scheme: Developing Skills Accredited Community Service (Education, Training and Employment). This project develops and delivers support to families of children who may be offending or at risk of offending. A Bail Support Scheme to develop systems and interventions to prevent re-offending while on bail has been awarded nearly £44,000. The funding for these schemes runs from April 1999 until March 2002.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Newbury to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Departmental Policies (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the

constituency, the effect on the Walthamstow constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154176]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Walthamstow constituency or the immediate locality:

Youth Offending

The area of Waltham Forest (Chingford Hall) has been involved in the Youth Justice Board Easter and Summer Splash scheme in 2000 and 2001. During school holiday periods in summer 2000, 102 Summer Splash projects were run in England and Wales in disadvantaged neighbourhoods to address offending by young people (especially 13 to 17-year-olds). Each project was awarded up to £25,000. The results have been extremely encouraging. The five areas traditionally associated with youth crime—burglary, motor crime, criminal damage, street robbery and juvenile nuisance—all showed significant reductions compared with the corresponding period in the previous year. The combined drop for these crimes was 14 per cent. and the Home Secretary recently agreed a further £2.1 million from the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme to run 150 Easter and summer school holiday Splash programmes in 2001.

Drug Action Team (DAT)

As of November 2000, Redbridge and Waltham Forest Drug Action Team split into two borough based DATs. Waltham Forest now has its own DAT that met for the first time on 2 March 2001. The DATs have local targets to meet the National Drugs Strategy. Objectives for young people include: to increase drug education and decrease drug-related incidents in Waltham Forest primary and secondary schools; develop service agreements with the local Youth Offending Team regarding drugs education for high risk young people; explore the development of drug referral programmes for first time offenders; co-ordinate and increase the access to treatment services for under-18s. Other interventions for adults include: the establishment of Arrest Referral, which aims to reduce drug-related crime by increasing numbers of arrested problem drug users attending treatment; extend the Redbridge Court Referral project to Waltham Forest; roll-out of Drug Treatment and Testing Orders (DTTOs). Since roll-out of DTTOs in October 2000, seven Orders have been made (six male, one female) and two of these are receiving residential treatment and five participated in a Day Programme based in Walthamstow. Information sharing protocols have been established between police, probation and housing services, and a collaborative approach against raising awareness has been undertaken between Safer Clubbing, Community Drug Awareness Project and treatment services.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Walthamstow to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Shotguns

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultations he has had since 1 October 2000 with the Association of Chief Police Officers and representatives of shooting organisations, on the criteria for having a good reason for possessing shotguns; and if he will make a statement. [153970]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government believe that it is right in principle that a person wishing to own a shotgun should have a good reason for doing so. However, we acknowledge that this is a complex area of law and practice and we would wish to consult widely on this issue.

For this reason I have asked the Firearms Consultative Committee (FCC), the independent statutory body that advises the Government on firearms matters, to consider this matter further and to report back later this year. The FCC itself includes members of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and of the main shooting organisations. The FCC in turn has sought the views of a wide variety of shooting and other organisations and convened a working group to discuss this issue in detail.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Offenders Centre Rules (Northern Ireland)

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what use has been made of the power in Rule 5(1) of the Prison and Young Offenders Centre Rules (Northern Ireland) 1995 to vary the list of prisons set out in the schedule to these Rules. [154822]

Mr. Ingram: The power has been exercised on one occasion to remove Belfast and Maze prisons from the list and to extend the boundaries of Maghaberry Prison to include these two sites. In practice, these sites have been under the control of the Governor of Maghaberry Prison for some time and the variation simply regularises the situation.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152654]

Dr. Reid: The Northern Ireland Office accounts structure does not record expenditure in a way that would allow spending on departmental and agency logos and associated branding to be easily identified.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152107]

Dr. Reid: The Northern Ireland Office does not have a system in place to provide data on the proportion of certified timber purchased.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152148]

Dr. Reid: The key information on timber procurement will be published in the Green Minister's annual report.

SCOTLAND

Further and Higher Education

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what proportion of young people in each constituency in Scotland went on to further and higher education in each year since 1997. [152466]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information is not available in the format requested. The table details for each local authority area in Scotland the number of young people, also shown by proportion, who have entered into vocational further and higher education in 1997–98 to 1998–99. Further and higher education in Scotland have been devolved since July 1999.

Scottish domiciled entrants, aged under 21, to vocational further and higher education in Scotland, 1997–98 to 1998–99[1]

Students at HEIs and FECs	*Total*	*HE*	*FE*	*Population of 16–21 year olds*[2]	*Percentage in HE and FE*
1997–98					
Total	141,091	40,734	100,357	384,009	37
Aberdeenshire	7,327	2,465	4,862	17,257	42
Angus	3,488	1,410	2,078	7,354	47
Argyll and Bute	1,896	780	1,116	6,331	30
City of Aberdeen	5,317	1,797	3,520	17,867	30
City of Dundee	5,120	438	4,682	12,856	40
City of Edinburgh	13,093	2,553	10,540	34,830	38
City of Glasgow	17,097	4,101	12,996	48,122	36
Clackmannanshire	1,680	416	1,264	3,303	51
Dumfries and Galloway	2,700	903	1,797	9,196	29
East Ayrshire	2,444	775	1,669	8,190	30
East Dunbartonshire	2,688	1,352	1,336	8,750	31
East Lothian	2,362	470	1,892	5,784	41
East Renfrewshire	1,709	875	834	6,610	26
Falkirk	4,586	1,088	3,498	9,997	46
Fife	12,372	3,141	9,231	26,753	46
Highland	5,434	1,799	3,635	14,348	38
Inverclyde	2,549	824	1,725	6,220	41
Midlothian	2,652	519	2,133	6,085	44
Moray	2,077	556	1,521	6,389	33
North Ayrshire	3,327	1,217	2,110	10,518	32
North Lanarkshire	6,671	2,265	4,406	25,857	26
Orkney	672	168	504	1,176	57
Perth and Kinross	3,346	1,042	2,304	8,707	38
Renfrewshire	5,913	1,605	4,308	12,862	46
Scottish Borders	3,714	685	3,029	6,482	57
Shetland	474	171	303	1,713	28
South Ayrshire	2,544	979	1,565	8,332	31
South Lanarkshire	5,978	2,681	3,297	23,471	25
Stirling	2,093	692	1,401	7,772	27
West Dunbartonshire	1,403	503	900	7,219	19
West Lothian	5,857	1,043	4,814	11,552	51
Western Isles	1,417	332	1,085	2,106	67
Scotland Unknown	1,091	1,089	2	n/a	n/a

Scottish domiciled entrants, aged under 21, to vocational further and higher education in Scotland, 1997–98 to 1998–99[1]

Students at HEIs and FECs	*Total*	*HE*	*FE*	*Population of 16–21 year olds*[2]	*Percentage in HE and FE*
1998–99					
Total	141,775	41,618	100,157	383,648	37
Aberdeenshire	7,050	2,565	4,485	16,274	43
Angus	3,370	1,602	1,768	7,352	46
Argyll and Bute	1,724	740	984	6,167	28
City of Aberdeen	5,193	1,959	3,234	17,703	29
City of Dundee	4,824	498	4,326	12,478	39
City of Edinburgh	14,059	2,791	11,268	35,689	39
City of Glasgow	18,117	4,427	13,690	50,674	36
Clackmannanshire	1,367	407	960	3,121	44
Dumfries and Galloway	2,869	834	2,035	9,024	32
East Ayrshire	2,351	849	1,502	8,189	29
East Dunbartonshire	2,351	1,265	1,086	8,585	27
East Lothian	2,660	500	2,160	5,854	45
East Renfrewshire	1,883	949	934	6,552	29
Falkirk	3,418	1,047	2,371	10,078	34
Fife	13,779	3,120	10,659	26,462	52
Highland	5,572	1,897	3,675	13,893	40
Inverclyde	2,778	779	1,999	6,228	45
Midlothian	2,895	504	2,391	6,120	47
Moray	2,180	632	1,548	6,309	35
North Ayrshire	3,368	1,227	2,141	10,572	32
North Lanarkshire	6,812	2,521	4,291	25,947	26
Orkney	721	176	545	1,195	60
Perth and Kinross	2,916	1,076	1,840	8,566	34
Renfrewshire	6,372	1,578	4,794	12,669	50
Scottish Borders	3,227	854	2,373	6,323	51
Shetland	457	203	254	1,715	27
South Ayrshire	2,288	969	1,319	8,370	27
South Lanarkshire	5,860	2,696	3,164	23,111	25
Stirling	1,989	701	1,288	7,787	26
West Dunbartonshire	652	386	266	7,383	9
West Lothian	6,838	1,132	5,706	11,385	60
Western Isles	1,448	347	1,101	1,873	77
Scotland Unknown	387	387	0	n/a	n/a

[1] A student may be enrolled on more than one course
[2] Taken from 1996 GRO population projections
[3] Taken from 1998 GRO population estimates

Non-powered Craft

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions she has had with the Scottish Parliament about plans to increase access to water for non-powered craft; and if she will make a statement. [153683]

Mrs. Liddell: I understand that the draft Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, which is currently out to public consultation, contains provisions for creating a right of responsible access to inland waters for non-powered craft.

This is a devolved matter and, while I have seen the Scottish Executive's consultation paper on the draft Bill, this is not a matter within my responsibility.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education Entrants

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of pupils left secondary school to take up university courses in *(a)* 1971, *(b)* 1977, *(c)* 1987, *(d)* 1997, *(e)* 1998, *(f)* 1999 and *(g)* 2000. [152160]

Mr. Wicks: The available data, showing the proportion of under 21-year-olds who enter higher education, are shown in the following table. There was an increase in the index in 1997–98 related partly to changes in the funding arrangements for higher education, with students choosing to enter HE rather than wait until 1998–99. There was a corresponding reduction in 1998–99 before the entry rates started to increase again in 1999–2000. Between 1996–97 and 1999–2000, total HE students in English universities and colleges rose by 76,000.

Age participation index (API)[1]

Academic year	*Percentage*
1971–72	14
1977–78	13
1987–88	15
1997–98	33
1998–99	31
1999–2000	32
2000–01[2]	32–34

[1] The API is defined as the number of home domiciled initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate HE aged under 21, expressed as a percentage of the average number of 18 and 19-year-olds in the population.
[2] Projected: data on initial entrants are not yet available.

Schools Funding

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cash resources to be paid directly to Stroud schools, by sector, in 2001–02 on the basis of proposals in the pre-Budget report; and if he will list the schools to benefit, giving the sum in each case. [152179]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The following table shows the estimated allocations made to schools in the Stroud constituency for additional devolved formula capital in 2000–01, following the pre-Budget report. This funding was made available in 2000–01 rather than 2001–02. Gloucestershire local education authority will be able to confirm the final allocations made to non-Voluntary Aided schools. A total of £4.346 million devolved formula capital has been made available to schools in Gloucestershire in 2000–01.

Schools in Gloucestershire will benefit from over £11.5 million through New Deal for Schools Devolved formula capital over the three years 2001–02 to 2003–04, plus a share of the £300 million of additional funds made available by the Chancellor for the programme in his Budget of 7 March.

Overall, central Government support for capital investment in school buildings in England has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.5 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £8.5 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Additional devolved formula capital announced in the pre-Budget report November 2000. Allocations to schools in Stroud Constituency

School name	*School type*	*Allocation to school (£)*
Thomas Keble School	Non-VA	9,139
Maidenhill School	Non-VA	11,258
Archway School	Non-VA	17,039
Berkeley Vale Community School	Non-VA	7,203
Rednock School	Non-VA	20,924
Parliament Primary School	Non-VA	5,642
Cam Woodfield Infant	Non-VA	4,997
Marling School	Non-VA	13,638
Stroud High School	Non-VA	14,083
Berkeley Primary School	Non-VA	5,415
Eastcombe Primary School	Non-VA	4,116
Chalford Hill Primary School	Non-VA	5,276
Eastington Primary School	Non-VA	4,796
Sharpness Primary School	Non-VA	4,622
Sheepscombe Primary School	Non-VA	4,037
Slimbridge Primary School	Non-VA	4,343
Stroud Valley Community School	Non-VA	6,095
Uplands Community Primary School	Non-VA	4,534
The Thrupp School	Non-VA	4,569
Whiteshill Primary School	Non-VA	4,238
Cashes Green Primary School	Non-VA	4,988
Rodborough Community Primary School	Non-VA	5,310
The Croft School	Non-VA	4,630
Callowell Primary School	Non-VA	5,258
Foxmoor Primary School	Non-VA	5,912
Gastrells Community Primary School	Non-VA	5,119
Cam Everlands Primary School	Non-VA	5,546
Bisley Blue CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,098
Coaley CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,125
Dursley CE Primary School	Non-VA	6,139
Frampton-on-Severn CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,273
Saul CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,404
Stone with Woodford CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,177
Haresfield CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,395
Longley CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,543
Nailsworth CE Primary School	Non-VA	5,685
Randwick CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,142
Uley CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,404
Upton St. Leonards CE Primary School	Non-VA	6,762
Whitminster Endowed CE Primary School	Non-VA	4,194
Minchinhampton School	Non-VA	5,851
King's Stanley CE Infant School	Non-VA	4,212
The Park Infant School	Non-VA	5,476
Park Junior School	Non-VA	6,374
King's Stanley CE Junior School	Non-VA	4,561
The Cam Woodfield Junior School	Non-VA	5,485
The Whitminster Centre	Non-VA	3,933
Cam House Special School	Non-VA	4,927
Amberley Ridge School	Non-VA	5,267
Bownham Park School	Non-VA	5,869
The Shrubberies School	Non-VA	5,267
LEA Liabilities at VA Schools		16,976
Total allocation to Non-VA Schools		328,263
Oakridge Parochial School	VA	3,149
Cam Hopton CE Primary School	VA	4,258
Christ Church CE Primary School	VA	3,115
Bussage CE Primary School	VA	4,139
Cranham CE Primary School	VA	3,066
Hardwicke Parochial Primary School	VA	5,526
Horsley CE Primary School	VA	3,442
Leonard Stanley CE Primary School	VA	3,944
Amberely Parochial School	VA	3,547
Brimscombe CE Primary School	VA	3,372
Miserden CE Primary School	VA	3,219
North Nibley CE Primary School	VA	3,491
Sapperton CE Primary School	VA	3,198
St. Matthew's CE Primary School	VA	4,801
Woodchester Endowed CE Primary School	VA	3,930
St. Dominic's RC Primary School	VA	3,435
St. Joseph's RC Primary School	VA	3,930
The Rosary RC Primary School	VA	4,292
Total allocation to VA Schools		67,854
Total additional allocation to schools		396,117

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the cash resources paid to schools, by phase, in *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district in each financial year since 2 May 1997; and if he will list the schools that benefited and indicate the sum in each case. [153005]

Ms Estelle Morris: The first table shows amounts payable to schools for School Standards Grant and devolved capital allocations in the financial year 2000–01. Neither grant was payable before that year. The amounts payable by phase are as follows:

£

	Nursery	*Primary*	*Secondary*	*Special*	*PRU*
Hemsworth					
School Standards Grant	—	279,000	320,000	30,000	3,000
Devolved capital	—	440,319	296,664	22,052	5,476
Wakefield					
School Standards Grant	15,000	1,005,000	780,000	135,000	6,000
Devolved capital	15,543	1,563,764	720,064	103,054	11,135

The following table shows funding allocations for Wakefield LEA since 1997–98 for Standard Spending Assessment, Standards Fund (including class size grant from 1999–2000) and NDS capital:

£ million

	SSA	Standards Fund	NDS
1997–98	111.5	2.960	0.600
1998–99	122.9	5.045	1.924
1999–2000	129.0	7.503	2.382
2000–01	135.5	12.466	4.422
2001–02	141.0	[1]12.156	[2]1.997

[1] Allocation not finalised and likely to increase
[2] NDS Condition and NDS Devolved Formula; not related to NDS4 in 2000–01

The amounts payable to each school for School Standards Grant and devolved capital are contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

The increase in funding in Wakefield LEA between 1997–98 and 2000–01 is £340 per pupil in real terms.

Lone Parents (Wansbeck)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lone parents in Wansbeck have entered employment through the New Deal for Lone Parents in the last year. [153142]

Ms Hodge: In the year January to December 2000, 45 lone parents in Wansbeck have entered employment through the New Deal for Lone Parents. Since this New Deal was introduced in October 1998, 89 lone parents in Wansbeck have found jobs.

Youth Parliament

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will meet representatives of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss its Youth Manifesto; and if he will make a statement; [153150]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the proceedings of the UK Youth Parliament held in London on 25 February; and if he will make a statement; [153151]

(3) how he plans to develop the relationship between the Home Office and the UK Youth Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [153152]

Mr. Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) on 14 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 614W. I was pleased to attend the first sitting of the UK Youth Parliament; however, no formal assessment of the first sitting has been made by my Department in advance of the publication of the UKYP Youth Manifesto. Relationships between the Home Office and the UK Youth Parliament are properly the business of the Home Office and I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent by the Minister of State, Home Office with responsibilities for young people, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) on 15 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 692W.

ONE Service

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when a decision will be made on the future of the ONE Project. [153223]

Ms Jowell: The 12 existing ONE pilots are due to run until March 2002, and we are investing considerable resources in a thorough evaluation. Clearly, we do not want to prejudge the results of the full evaluation, but the lessons we are learning from the pilots are helping to inform the development of the service to be delivered by the Working Age Agency, which will bring together the services of the Employment Service and working age-related elements of the Benefits Agency. On 14 March of this year, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and the Secretary of State for Social Security, together announced the establishment from October this year of around 50 Pathfinder sites for the Working Age Agency. The Government's commitment to expanding the approach tested in ONE is being taken forward through these Pathfinders, which will deliver a ONE-style service to all working age benefit claimants. This will form the basis for the service we expect the Working Age Agency to deliver, over time, across the country.

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153419]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the replies given on 18 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 330–33W and on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 380W.

Advertising campaigns undertaken by the Employment Service in the past five years are:

1996–97

Just the Job: To advise unemployed people of the range of opportunities available and to encourage them to use Jobcentre services—£700,709

Employer Campaign: To encourage employers to use Jobcentre services to recruit unemployed jobseekers—£1,076,000

1998–99

Launch of Employment Service Direct: To promote the launch of the Agency's new telephone job finding service—£2,500,000

1999–2000

One in a Millennium: To encourage employers and jobseekers to use Jobcentre services—£500,000.

Information on expenditure by Non-Departmental Public Bodies is not held centrally.

Further Education Colleges (Concessionary Fees)

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice he has given to colleges of further education about the age at which men may be offered concessionary fees where women are offered such fees at the age of 60 years. [154056]

Mr. Wicks: Colleges of further education are generally free to vary or waive fees as they wish. The Further Education Funding Council (which is succeeded, from 1 April 2001, by the Learning and Skills Council) will

compensate them where they remit fees to certain groups of individuals, but these groups do not automatically include those aged 60 years and over.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has issued to the Learning and Skills Council regarding the minimum size for a school sixth form to be considered viable. [154156]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend has no plans to issue such guidance. Viability is a matter for schools and local education authorities, not the Learning and Skills Council. The LSC only has a role in respect of sixth forms which fail two consecutive Ofsted inspections.

University Funding

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the funding requirement identified by the final report from the Funding Options Review Group of Universities UK; and what plans he has to meet this requirement. [154026]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Government welcome the report from the Funding Options Review Group of Universities UK as a helpful contribution to the debate about the funding of higher education. The Government are increasing funding to universities and higher education colleges in England by £1.7 billion over the six years to 2003–04; funding per full-time equivalent student will increase in real terms in 2001–02 for the first time in over a decade. The funding shortfall identified in the Universities UK report is for 2003–04. The Government will address the funding needs of the sector from 2003–04 in the next Spending Review.

Science A-levels

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many candidates have entered for A-level *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* physics and *(c)* chemistry in each of the last five years. [154158]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The number of candidates entered for A-level mathematics, physics and chemistry in each of the last five years is given in the following table:

	Mathematics	*Physics*	*Chemistry*	*All subjects*
1995–96	51,862	24,847	29,800	178,328
1996–97	54,000	25,652	31,669	192,425
1997–98	54,980	26,440	32,269	198,479
1998–99	54,111	26,277	31,039	196,969
1999–2000	52,811	25,469	31,385	197,583

The number of candidates entered for the specified subjects expressed as a percentage of all candidates is given in the following table.

Percentage

	Mathematics	*Physics*	*Chemistry*
1995–96	29	14	17
1996–97	28	13	16
1997–98	28	13	16
1998–99	27	13	16
1999–2000	27	13	16

Specialist Schools

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the net change in the number of specialist schools which will arise from the proposals in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill [*Lords*]. [154155]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Government want an inclusive education service to offer excellence and choice. Where parents want a mainstream place for their child everything reasonably possible should be done to provide one. Equally where more specialist provision is what is sought, it is important and right that the wishes of parents are listened to.

There is a continuing and vital role for special schools. As has always been the case there will be changes to provision to reflect local needs and circumstances. While some special schools have closed, others have been enlarged and new special schools have opened. The overall size of the special school sector has remained broadly the same since 1996 and caters for 1.2 per cent. of all pupils. The Government do not envisage this will change dramatically.

Sundorne Secondary School

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the funding of a replacement playground for Sundorne Secondary School in Shrewsbury. [154460]

Jacqui Smith: This is a matter for Shropshire local education authority (LEA) to manage, working with the school. I understand that the school has made representations to the authority to secure funding for this project.

Several possible sources of funding exist for this project. In January this year, we announced New Deal for Schools (NDS) Condition and New Deal for Schools (NDS) Devolved formula funding for the next three years to 2003–04. From that funding, Shropshire LEA and its schools will receive around £4.08 million NDS Condition funding and £5.82 million NDS Devolved formula funding over the period. The NDS Devolved formula allocation will be increased by the extra funding announced in the Chancellor's Budget statement on 7 March. As a result, I estimate that Sundorne Secondary School will receive over £16,000 in total next year under the NDS Devolved capital funding programme, with increased amounts in later years, for it to use on priority capital work.

New Deal for Schools (NDS) Modernisation funding, totalling £555 million for schools in England, will further increase funding available to Shropshire LEA from 2002–03.

Supply Teachers

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* agency teachers and *(b)* teachers on contracts of one term or less are employed in schools in England and Wales. [154153]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* There were 4,800 agency supply teachers on a contract of less than one month in the maintained schools sector in

England working for the whole of the survey date of 20 January 2000. There were a further 11,860 non-agency supply teachers on contracts of less than one month.

At January 2000 there were 750 full-time teachers (including agency teachers) employed on a fixed term contract of one month and less than one term in the maintained nursery, primary and secondary sector in England. Agency teachers on contracts of one month or more are not identified centrally.

Information for Wales is the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

A number of factors may have affected the demand for short term supply teachers in January 2000 including the requirement for schools to give teachers in their induction year a 10 per cent. reduction in timetable, and a flu epidemic that some education authorities reported.

The number of regular teachers (excluding short term supply teachers) in the maintained schools sector in England in January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years, and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of more than 2,300 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in Inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

European Year of Languages

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what financial incentives are being offered, as part of the European Year of Languages, to encourage individuals to improve their linguistic skills. [154482]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* European Year of Languages aims to raise awareness of the benefits of knowing another language, provide information about teaching and learning languages and celebrate other languages and cultures.

No specific financial incentives are being offered as part of the Year. However, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching, which is managing the UK's contribution, has produced a broad and inclusive programme of opportunities for people to participate in a wide range of projects and events. It includes a mixture of roadshows, lectures and concerts to raise awareness of the importance of language learning. A number of specific events like "Adult Learners Week" will also be held.

Teachers' Pensions

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will relax the rules that prevent teachers who have taken retirement on the grounds of ill health from undertaking any employment in teaching, without forfeiting their entitlement to pension benefits. [154668]

Ms Estelle Morris: Ill-health benefits are now granted on the basis that a teacher is permanently unfit to teach, and include compensation in the form of enhancement of service for the loss of future working years. It would therefore be inappropriate to allow teachers in receipt of an ill-health retirement pension to retain that benefit if they are deemed fit to return to the classroom.

The numbers of teachers who retire on ill-health grounds have reduced by 50 per cent. since 1997. Occupational Health Guidance which has been issued recently, as part of the Healthy Schools Programme, outlines the value and importance of a fit and healthy teaching workforce and the subsequent benefits to both teachers and the pupils they teach.

School Achievement Awards

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by education authority those special schools, pupil referral units, very small primary schools and nursery schools which were nominated for achievement awards. [154745]

Ms Estelle Morris: The 921 eligible schools nominated for School Achievement Awards are listed in a table, copies of which have been placed in the Library. The nominations were assessed by independent panels with expert knowledge of the particular type of school. 381 (41 per cent.) of these schools are receiving awards.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list, by category, the schools which have won achievement awards for excellence and the local education authority area in which they are situated; [154748]

(2) if he will list by constituency the number of achievement awards made to schools. [154747]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how the difference between school results in 1997 and 2000 was calculated in assessing eligibility for improvement awards. [154746]

Ms Estelle Morris: Improvement awards were based on the absolute difference between schools' results in 1997 and 2000.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the number of *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools which have received achievement awards. [154742]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

School achievement awards by LEA and type of school

LEA	*Nursery*	*Primary*	*PRU*	*Secondary*	*Special*
Barking and Dagenham	—	19	—	4	1
Barnet	2	36	1	7	—
Barnsley	—	25	—	5	—
Bath and North East Somerset	—	26	—	5	3
Bedfordshire	—	39	—	13	1

School achievement awards by LEA and type of school

LEA	*Nursery*	*Primary*	*PRU*	*Secondary*	*Special*
Bexley	—	23	—	6	—
Birmingham	1	134	—	27	6
Blackburn with Darwen	—	18	—	4	—
Blackpool	—	7	—	2	—
Bolton	—	43	—	4	1
Bournemouth	—	7	—	2	1
Bracknell Forest	—	11	—	1	—
Bradford	1	37	—	6	2
Brent	—	20	1	5	—
Brighton and Hove	—	22	—	4	4
Bristol, City of	4	42	—	3	—
Bromley	—	22	—	5	1
Buckinghamshire	—	46	3	7	—
Bury	1	22	—	1	2
Calderdale	—	29	—	3	1
Cambridgeshire	—	57	—	5	1
Camden	—	13	1	5	—
Cheshire	—	80	—	11	—
City of London	—	1	—	—	—
Cornwall	—	45	—	7	—
Coventry	—	22	—	5	1
Croydon	3	22	1	5	2
Cumbria	—	87	1	17	—
Darlington	—	7	—	4	1
Derby	3	23	—	3	3
Derbyshire	2	94	—	19	—
Devon	—	99	—	10	—
Doncaster	—	33	—	7	—
Dorset	—	31	—	10	1
Dudley	—	26	—	9	—
Durham	3	94	—	8	4
Ealing	—	30	—	9	1
East Riding of Yorkshire	—	30	—	4	1
East Sussex	—	43	—	4	—
Enfield	—	19	—	7	—
Essex	—	139	2	21	3
Gateshead	1	35	—	4	—
Gloucestershire	—	60	—	9	2
Greenwich	—	25	—	5	—
Hackney	—	23	—	3	—
Halton	2	24	—	3	1
Hammersmith and Fulham	2	19		5	3
Hampshire	—	133	2	16	5
Haringey	—	19	—	4	—
Harrow	—	18	—	4	1
Hartlepool	—	7	—	4	1
Havering	—	25	1	10	—
Herefordshire	—	16	—	4	—
Hertfordshire	—	125	1	28	3
Hillingdon	—	23	—	7	—
Hounslow	—	22	—	4	—
Isle of Wight	—	15	—	2	—
Islington	1	15	—	3	—
Kensington and Chelsea	1	19	—	2	—
Kent	—	128	2	28	2
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	—	30	—	5	1
Kingston upon Thames	—	13	1	3	2
Kirklees	—	58	—	8	—
Knowsley	—	25	—	—	—
Lambeth	1	22	—	3	2
Lancashire	7	116	4	32	9
Leeds	—	90	—	7	1
Leicester	—	32	—	1	—
Leicestershire	—	64	—	16	—
Lewisham	1	30	1	6	3
Lincolnshire	—	57	—	27	3
Liverpool	—	57	—	14	3
Luton	—	18	1	3	—
Manchester	—	44	—	6	6
Medway	—	27	—	5	—
Merton	—	20	—	2	1
Middlesbrough	—	19	—	2	2
Milton Keynes	—	22	—	3	—

School achievement awards by LEA and type of school

LEA	*Nursery*	*Primary*	*PRU*	*Secondary*	*Special*
Newcastle upon Tyne	—	34	1	2	1
Newham	—	26	—	7	1
Norfolk	—	105	—	16	—
North East Lincolnshire	—	18	—	4	1
North Lincolnshire	—	16	—	4	—
North Somerset	—	13	—	3	1
North Tyneside	—	31	—	6	—
North Yorkshire	—	73	—	13	—
Northamptonshire	3	62	—	8	1
Northumberland	—	42	—	17	4
Nottingham	2	40	—	7	2
Nottinghamshire	—	84	—	13	2
Oldham	—	31	—	4	1
Oxfordshire	3	49	1	13	4
Peterborough	—	28	—	4	1
Plymouth	—	24	—	5	—
Poole	—	9	—	3	—
Portsmouth	1	18	1	—	5
Reading	1	12	1	5	—
Redbridge	—	21	1	9	—
Redcar and Cleveland	—	20	1	6	2
Richmond upon Thames	1	16	—	3	—
Rochdale	—	17	—	4	3
Rotherham	—	40	—	5	—
Rutland	—	3	—	2	—
Salford	—	29	—	4	3
Sandwell	—	37	—	6	—
Sefton	—	28	—	13	2
Sheffield	2	33	—	6	3
Shropshire	—	36	—	4	—
Slough	—	15	1	6	—
Solihull	—	29	—	4	—
Somerset	—	60	—	9	3
South Gloucestershire	—	20	1	3	—
South Tyneside	4	24	2	3	1
Southampton	—	28	—	3	2
Southend-on-Sea	—	17	—	5	1
Southwark	2	27	—	7	1
St. Helens	1	25	—	2	3
Staffordshire	—	85	1	18	6
Stockport	—	29	—	3	1
Stockton-on-Tees	—	22	—	6	—
Stoke-on-Trent	5	30	1	4	2
Suffolk	—	73	—	19	1
Sunderland	—	31	—	5	4
Surrey	1	105	—	17	—
Sutton	1	12	—	8	—
Swindon	—	13	—	—	—
Tameside	—	30	—	4	2
Telford and Wrekin	—	22	—	5	—
Thurrock	—	19	—	5	2
Torbay	—	13	—	4	—
Tower Hamlets	2	35	1	8	3
Trafford	—	33	—	9	—
Wakefield	—	40	—	6	—
Walsall	—	30	—	7	1
Waltham Forest	1	13	—	6	1
Wandsworth	—	21	—	4	1
Warrington	1	26	—	1	—
Warwickshire	3	59	—	14	4
West Berkshire	—	21	—	2	1
West Sussex	—	73	2	7	3
Westminster	—	21	—	4	—
Wigan	—	35	—	2	2
Wiltshire	—	44	—	11	1
Windsor and Maidenhead	—	16	—	3	—
Wirral	—	44	—	2	4
Wokingham	—	16	—	2	—
Wolverhampton	3	28	—	7	2
Worcestershire	1	60	1	11	1
York	—	14	1	2	2

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the total value of achievement awards made and the percentage of the national total budget which schools in each local education authority received. [154749]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Total value of school achievement awards by LEA

LEA	Value of awards (£)	Percentage of total value[1]
City of London	6,610	0.0
Camden	260,600	0.4
Greenwich	264,010	0.4
Hackney	227,870	0.4
Hammersmith and Fulham	275,780	0.5
Islington	209,820	0.4
Kensington and Chelsea	187,690	0.3
Lambeth	253,750	0.4
Lewisham	433,720	0.7
Southwark	366,440	0.6
Tower Hamlets	543,630	0.9
Wandsworth	310,270	0.5
Westminster	250,170	0.4
Barking and Dagenham	373,310	0.6
Barnet	473,380	0.8
Bexley	358,070	0.6
Brent	379,050	0.6
Bromley	327,390	0.5
Croydon	313,200	0.5
Ealing	603,740	1.0
Enfield	439,770	0.7
Haringey	298,750	0.5
Harrow	252,640	0.4
Havering	399,680	0.7
Hillingdon	387,710	0.6
Hounslow	293,070	0.5
Kingston-upon-Thames	183,130	0.3
Merton	203,590	0.3
Newham	565,390	0.9
Redbridge	472,510	0.8
Richmond-upon-Thames	189,520	0.3
Sutton	302,960	0.5
Waltham Forest	265,680	0.4
Birmingham	2,001,640	3.4
Coventry	328,030	0.5
Dudley	413,510	0.7
Sandwell	430,380	0.7
Solihull	329,610	0.6
Walsall	384,040	0.6
Wolverhampton	398,430	0.7
Knowsley	160,900	0.3
Liverpool	799,370	1.3
St. Helens	273,390	0.5
Sefton	542,430	0.9
Wirral	382,240	0.6
Bolton	437,670	0.7
Bury	165,620	0.3
Manchester	610,510	1.0
Oldham	310,020	0.5
Rochdale	241,340	0.4
Salford	273,730	0.5
Stockport	236,030	0.4
Tameside	296,450	0.5
Trafford	431,790	0.7
Wigan	313,230	0.5
Barnsley	244,590	0.4
Doncaster	430,320	0.7
Rotherham	375,860	0.6
Sheffield	477,760	0.8
Bradford	379,760	0.6
Calderdale	254,900	0.4
Kirklees	566,200	0.9
Leeds	827,610	1.4
Wakefield	384,100	0.6
Gateshead	308,840	0.5
Newcastle upon Tyne	244,260	0.4
North Tyneside	352,990	0.6
South Tyneside	255,360	0.4
Sunderland	440,550	0.7
Bath and North East Somerset	262,970	0.4
Bristol, City of	354,560	0.6
North Somerset	181,660	0.3
South Gloucestershire	219,720	0.4
Hartlepool	187,330	0.3
Middlesbrough	216,830	0.4
Redcar and Cleveland	276,380	0.5
Stockton-on-Tees	321,600	0.5
Kingston upon Hull, City of	347,090	0.6
East Riding of Yorkshire	289,490	0.5
North East Lincolnshire	238,490	0.4
North Lincolnshire	162,240	0.3
North Yorkshire	566,660	0.9
York	126,600	0.2
Bedfordshire	370,370	0.6
Luton	200,230	0.3
Buckinghamshire	382,570	0.6
Milton Keynes	245,380	0.4
Derbyshire	912,250	1.5
Derby	258,240	0.4
Dorset	326,690	0.5
Poole	128,100	0.2
Bournemouth	119,180	0.2
Durham	657,720	1.1
Darlington	134,020	0.2
East Sussex	315,230	0.5
Brighton and Hove	329,970	0.6
Hampshire	1,145,780	1.9
Portsmouth	155,350	0.3
Southampton	273,280	0.5
Leicestershire	626,900	1.1
Leicester	267,780	0.4
Rutland	55,790	0.1
Staffordshire	856,010	1.4
Stoke-on-Trent	322,820	0.5
Wiltshire	419,190	0.7
Swindon	74,190	0.1
Bracknell Forest	81,440	0.1
Windsor and Maidenhead	132,210	0.2
West Berkshire	164,660	0.3
Reading	180,680	0.3
Slough	246,520	0.4
Wokingham	151,110	0.3
Cambridgeshire	448,450	0.8
Peterborough	324,610	0.5
Cheshire	721,700	1.2
Halton	238,600	0.4
Warrington	186,930	0.3
Devon	728,400	1.2
Plymouth	261,320	0.4
Torbay	213,650	0.4
Essex	1,395,330	2.3
Southend-on-Sea	267,630	0.4
Thurrock	263,040	0.4
Herefordshire	118,850	0.2
Worcestershire	548,640	0.9
Kent	1,360,550	2.3
Medway	275,810	0.5

Total value of school achievement awards by LEA

LEA	Value of awards (£)	Percentage of total value[1]
Lancashire	1,364,860	2.3
Blackburn with Darwen	221,530	0.4
Blackpool	92,260	0.2
Nottinghamshire	770,020	1.3
Nottingham	456,390	0.8
Shropshire	223,880	0.4
Telford and Wrekin	234,740	0.4
Cornwall	343,750	0.6
Cumbria	755,410	1.3
Gloucestershire	489,990	0.8
Hertfordshire	1,362,070	2.3
Isle of Wight	83,710	0.1
Lincolnshire	779,450	1.3
Norfolk	907,260	1.5
Northamptonshire	481,520	0.8
Northumberland	425,040	0.7
Oxfordshire	539,420	0.9
Somerset	493,350	0.8
Suffolk	674,160	1.1
Surrey	1,049,370	1.8
Warwickshire	731,920	1.2
West Sussex	594,280	1.0

[1] Total value of awards to schools was £59.7 million

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many different groupings schools have been divided into based on the proportion of pupils eligible for school meals for the purpose of allocating school achievement awards; and if he will list the schools in the Christchurch constituency in each group. [154744]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the tables.

FSM groups[1]

FSM group	Primary	Secondary
1	Up to and including 8 per cent.	Up to and including 5 per cent.
2	More than 8 per cent. and up to 20 per cent.	More than 5 per cent. and up to 9 per cent.
3	More than 20 per cent. and up to 35 per cent.	More than 9 per cent. and up to 13 per cent.
4	More than 35 per cent. and up to 50 per cent.	More than 13 per cent. and up to 21 per cent.
5	More than 50 per cent.	More than 21 per cent. and up to 35 per cent.
6	—	More than 35 per cent. and up to 50 per cent.
7	—	More than 50 per cent.
8	—	Grammar schools
9	—	Secondary moderns and FSM up to and including 13 per cent.
10	—	Secondary moderns and FSM more than 13 per cent. and up to 21 per cent.
11	—	Secondary moderns and FSM more than 21 per cent.

[1] Percentage of pupils 'known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM)' based on information returned to the Department's 2000 Annual Schools' Census

Schools receiving school achievement awards in Christchurch constituency by FSM group

School	FSM group
Ferndown First School	Primary 1
Highcliffe Junior School	Primary 1
Mudeford Junior School	Primary 1
The Priory Church of England Primary School	Primary 1
Three Legged Cross First School	Primary 2

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153418]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The Department and the Royal Parks Agency have incurred no expenditure on television, radio and newspaper advertising and other promotional campaigns in the last five years.

Information on campaigns run by the Department's non-departmental public bodies is not held centrally.

Digital Television (Wales)

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of the efficiency savings he asked the BBC to make on spending by the BBC on provision of digital services in Welsh. [154256]

Janet Anderson: None. Such an assessment would be a matter for the BBC's Board of Governors who are responsible for ensuring that the BBC meets the requirements of its Royal Charter and Agreement and any commitments made by the Corporation, including commitments on services for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the English regions.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the future budgetary needs of S4C to meet the demands of expanding programming required by converting to digital television. [154255]

Janet Anderson: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport last year considered a bid for additional funding for S4C, following the Authority's assessment of its future budgetary needs. Departmental spending limits and competing priorities precluded our meeting the bid, but annual increases in S4C's grant in line with the Retail Prices Index, under the provisions of the Broadcasting Act 1996, are maintaining the real value of the grant. The

1996 Act has also given S4C the power to develop commercial services, enabling it to generate additional revenue to supplement its public service fund.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of foot and mouth on *(a)* the British tourist industry and *(b)* tourism in the South West; and if he will make a statement. [154301]

Janet Anderson: I refer the hon. Member to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the House on 14 March 2001, *Official Report,* columns 1021–36. The overall economic impact on the rural tourism industry in England following the foot and mouth outbreak is running at approximately £100 million a week and could grow. South West Tourism has estimated that the impact to tourism in the South West is currently running at around £17 million a week.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tourism businesses have been directly affected by the issuance of form C notices under the foot and mouth procedures. [154237]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* There are no figures available for the number of tourism businesses directly affected by the issuance of Form C notices under the provisions of the Foot and Mouth Disease Order 1983 which prohibits the movement of animals into or out of an area within an 8 km radius of the place of a suspected outbreak. There is, however, overwhelming evidence of a very adverse impact on tourism businesses throughout the country as a result of visit cancellations.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the weekly cost to the tourist industry in Shropshire of the impact of the foot and mouth outbreak; and if he will make a statement. [154486]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* There are no figures currently available to make an assessment of the weekly cost to the tourism industry in Shropshire following the foot and mouth outbreak. However, the overall economic impact on the rural tourism industry in England is running at approximately £100 million a week. The Heart of England Tourist Board has estimated that the impact to rural tourism in the 12 counties that make up their region, including Shropshire, is currently running at around £10 million per week.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on progress on applications for free television licences for people aged 75 years and over and the timetable for issuing licences and refunds. [154274]

Janet Anderson: The BBC, as Licensing Authority, has statutory responsibility for the administration of the television licensing system, including free licences for the over-75s. TV Licensing carries out the day to day administration as agent for the Corporation.

The target turnaround time for verification of entitlement to the free licence is one week, provided the application form is completed correctly and the details match those provided to the BBC by the Department of Social Security. Where the details do not match, further information needs to be requested from the applicant and the time taken to verify the application will vary according to the individual case. The timetable for verifying refund applications is the same as for free licences, but short term licences for people approaching the age of 75 have been available since April 2000, so refunds should now be the exception rather than the rule.

The BBC has indicated that approximately 2.95 million free licences and 1.1 million refund cheques have been issued since the introduction of the concession last November. The majority of applications now being received are from people currently aged 74; approximately half a million such applications have been validated and free licences will be issued when the applicants turn 75. Approximately 86,000 applications are currently awaiting validation but the majority of these are from people under the age of 75. 11,000 applications submitted prior to November last year have still to be verified and action is being taken to clear these by the end of this month.

Applications by housing managers on behalf of over-75s who have previously benefited from the £5 Accommodation for Residential Care (ARC) concessionary licence are being processed as the current ARC licence falls due for renewal.

Arts Council for England

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the present term of office of the chairman of the Arts Council for England expires; and when, and by whom, an announcement was made regarding his successor. [154780]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Gerry Robinson's first term as Chairman of the Arts Council of England expired at the end of January 2001. He was reappointed to a second three-year term in February 2001, which expires at the end of January 2004.

Advertising Campaigns

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total cost of advertising campaigns run by his Department and its predecessor and its agencies was in each year since 1992; and if he will give the projected advertising budget for the current year. [154753]

Mr. Chris Smith: The following table shows the cost of newspaper advertising to attract candidates for the many public appointments for which I am responsible.

Year	*£*
1996–97	0
1997–98	0
1998–99	242,700
1999–2000	139,501
2000–01[1]	85,823
2000–01[2]	90,000

[1] Spend to date
[2] Planned spend

Additional expenditure information on advertising by my Department and its agencies is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Regional Arts Boards

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Regional Cultural consortiums regarding the Arts Council for England's commitment to integrating the regional arts boards. [154754]

Mr. Chris Smith: Discussions have not yet begun with the Regional Cultural Consortiums about the Arts Council of England' s proposal for the integrating of the regional arts boards. The proposals made by the Arts Council will be formally discussed with stakeholders, including the Regional Cultural Consortiums, in due course.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Arts Council for England and *(b)* the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions regarding the council's commitment to integrating the regional arts boards. [154755]

Mr. Chris Smith: I discussed the proposals with the Chair and Chief Executive of the Arts Council shortly before they were announced, and I can confirm that DETR have been informed. I am looking forward to receiving formal detailed proposals in due course, and will of course consult with colleagues further on those once I have received them.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he had with the Arts Council for England concerning the future role of the regional arts boards prior to the council's announcement of 15 March; and if he will make a statement. [154756]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have discussed with the Chairman and Chief Executive of the Arts Council the proposals they announced on 15 March and will formally consider the detailed proposals in due course.

University Museums

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from non-charging university museums regarding the repayment of irrecoverable VAT; what discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding this matter; and if he will make a statement. [154750]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have received representations from one university about the scheme under which national museums and galleries which are directly sponsored by Government and which do not charge for admission will be able to recover the VAT that relates to the free admission element of their normal business. The scheme was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget statement on 7 March and will apply to directly funded national museums and galleries. It is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to determine which institutions are included in the scheme.

Intellectual Copyright

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what measures he proposes to take to ensure that Culture On Line's activities do not infringe intellectual copyright; [154758]

(2) what assessment he has made of the potential cost of Culture On Line to public funds. [154757]

Mr. Chris Smith: In September 2000 we secured £5 million from HM Treasury to develop the concept for Culture Online. We are currently preparing a business case for Culture Online, which will include an assessment of both the cost of delivering Culture Online and the scope for any commercial participation. The business case will be completed by July 2001 and will establish the case, if any, for public funding. It will also include an assessment of the most suitable business model for Culture Online, taking into account a number of issues including ownership of Intellectual Property Rights. Specialist legal advice will be included in this assessment.

TREASURY

University Museums

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to permit non-charging university museums to recover the value of VAT payments; and if he will make a statement. [154751]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's VAT refund scheme for the main national museums and galleries was set out in the March 2001 Budget.

Chester Street Holdings

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what action was taken to enforce the provisions of the Insurance Companies Act 1982 concerning margins of solvency following the restructuring of Iron Trades Holdings Ltd. and the liquidation of Chester Street Holdings; [154169]

(2) for what reason the Government's powers of intervention under the Insurance Companies Act 1982 were not used in the case of the restructuring of Iron Trades Holdings prior to the liquidation of Chester Street Holdings. [154170]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Since 1 January 1999, the Financial Services Authority has been the prudential supervisor of insurance companies, operating under contract to the Treasury. In carrying out functions under the Insurance Companies Act 1982 the FSA keeps under review the appropriate use of the intervention powers available to it under that Act.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to ensure that sufferers from an asbestos-related disease working in a publicly owned industry at the time of their contact with asbestos do not lose their rights to compensation following the liquidation of Chester Street Holdings. [154080]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As I said in Westminster Hall on 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 46–49WH, the insolvency of Chester Street Holdings Limited does

not affect the liability of an employer to its employees or former employees. That is the case for all employers, whether they are in the private or public sector.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what contact he had with the Financial Services Authority about the conduct of Chester Street Holdings in the period before liquidation; and what action is being taken as a result. [154167]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Services Authority is in regular contact with Treasury officials about a wide range of insurance supervisory matters.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to investigate the reasons underlying the decision by the Financial Services Authority to approve the restructuring of Iron Trades Holdings shortly before the collapse of Chester Street Holdings. [154168]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As I said in Westminster Hall on 6 March 2001, *Official Report,* columns 46–49WH, the provisional liquidators are required to review the affairs of Chester Street Holdings and the actions of the directors and other parties. The provisional liquidators will report on their findings.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent contact he has had with the Association of British Insurers about Chester Street Holdings and compensation for asbestos sufferers. [154166]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Treasury officials are in regular contact with the Association of British Insurers.

Asbestos

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that insurance companies honour asbestos-related claims. [154269]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Insurance Companies are under a contractual obligation to meet a claim made by a policyholder where this falls within the terms of a contractual policy agreement. The Policyholders Protection Act 1975 has been established to protect the interests of policyholders of insolvent insurance companies.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has had with the insurance industry about *(a)* the sufficiency of their funding for the Policyholders Protection Board to fully compensate those suffering from asbestos-related diseases and *(b)* about safeguarding those suffering from asbestos-related diseases who were in contact with asbestos before 1972 and who are not safeguarded under the terms of the present Policyholders Protection Board. [154222]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Under the Policyholders Protection Act 1975, the Policyholders Protection Board may impose levies on authorised insurance companies carrying on business in the UK to meet the liabilities of the board incurred in assisting or protecting policyholders under that Act.

As I said in Westminster Hall on 6 March 2001, *Official Report,* column 47WH, the insolvency of Chester Street Holdings Ltd. does not affect the liability of an employer to its employees or former employees. We are investigating carefully the position of employees whose employers no longer exist.

Policyholders Protection Board

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the next meeting of the Policyholders Protection Board is. [154268]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I understand that the next meeting will take place on Wednesday 21 March.

Road Fuel Duty

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the reduction in duty for road fuel gases announced in the Budget will be applied; and if he expects the reduction in price to be passed on to consumers. [154738]

Dawn Primarolo: The duty reduction for road fuel gases applies from 6pm on 7 March 2001. Pricing decisions are a matter for the fuel suppliers.

Departmental Policies (Newbury)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Newbury constituency, the effects on Newbury and west Berkshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154577]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Newbury, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 565, or 55 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 93 per cent. and long-term unemployment has fallen by 85 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18–24 year olds had helped 172 young people in Newbury constituency gain valuable skills and experience—93 (54 per cent) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,300 families in Newbury constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 14,100 in Newbury, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,000 in Newbury.

Census

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the basis is for the statement on the census form concerning the voluntary completion of the question concerning religion. [154669]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Census (Amendment) Act 2000, which came into force on 28 July 2000, by amending the schedule to the Census Act 1920, provides a power to include in census returns particulars in respect

of religion. The Act also removes the liability to the penalty for anyone refusing or neglecting to state any such particulars. This has the effect of making any question on religion included in the census voluntary. A statement to that effect is included in the question on the form itself.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the anticipated non-response rates in the forthcoming census are. [154670]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Richard Ottaway, dated 20 March 2001:

As National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking what is the anticipated non-response rate in the forthcoming census. (154670)

The aim for the 2001 Census is to achieve a 100 per cent. count. Having said that I am fully aware of the problems associated with carrying out a census enumeration in some areas, particularly where there are high levels of ethnic minority populations, multi-occupied accommodation, poorer quality housing estates and more modern-style apartments protected by entryphone and other security systems. Many of the new measures and initiatives developed for the 2001 Census are aimed at combating these very difficulties.

A particular success in this area is the new Local Community Liaison Programme in which the ONS is working in partnership with minority groups, charitable organisations and local and health authorities in order to encourage participation in the Census and to help identify sources of potential enumerators.

The adoption of mail-back for the first time as the prime collection methodology in a census in England and Wales will facilitate the concentration of field resources in those areas where lower levels of response are experienced and where additional effort may be required.

An extensive publicity campaign for the 2001 Census in England and Wales, under the banner logo "Count Me In" aims to encourage universal self-inclusion in the Census. In addition to the main campaign there are several other promotions and initiatives being developed to encourage public participation in the Census in an attempt to improve coverage, particularly among those sectors of the community where there was significant under-enumeration in the 1991 Census. Separate drives have been aimed at recruiting enumerators in local areas and to raise the profile of the Census.

The extent and nature of non-response to the Census will be more accurately assessed this time than ever before by conducting an extensive separate follow-up Census Coverage Survey to be carried out by interviewing around 300,000 households shortly after the Census enumeration is completed. Results from this voluntary follow-up survey will be used, in conjunction with the Census data itself, to help produce a consistent set out census-based counts that will form the new base for the series of annual mid-year population estimates for local and health authorities.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152973]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Lincoln, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 1,858, or 48 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 86 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 82 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,319 young people in Lincoln constituency gain valuable skills and experience—668 (51 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,400 families in Lincoln constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 15,500 in Lincoln constituency, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,000 in Lincoln constituency.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter on behalf of his constituent Mr. Chilton forwarded to the right hon. Gentleman by the Minister of State, Department of Social Security in early January. [154725]

Dawn Primarolo: There is no record of this letter being received. If the right hon. Member would like to forward a copy to me it will be dealt with immediately.

Drug Addiction

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out his reasons for limiting his new aid for drug addiction to those who are no longer using drugs. [154082]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The measures were announced by the Chancellor in the Budget. £40 million will be invested over three years in additional resources to help benefit claimants whose drug problems may be getting in the way of their finding a job. The money will help skill up the Employment Service to spot and refer those on drugs into treatment programmes, and provide extra help in securing employment for those who have successfully completed treatment programmes and have come off drugs. The package is not limited to those who are no longer using drugs. Rather, proposals aim to ensure that in receiving help addicts undertake a responsibility to tackle their own addiction and become drug-free.

Euro (Forgery)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he will take to assist banks, bureaux de change and similar agencies in the United Kingdom to detect the presence of forged euro notes and coins presented to them for valid transactions after 2 January 2002. [154063]

Miss Melanie Johnson: ECOFIN reached political agreement on 12 February 2001 on a Council regulation designed to protect the euro from counterfeiting. As part of this, the UK is committed to ensuring that banks, bureaux de change and similar agencies will have access to appropriate information on security characteristics which are incorporated into the design of euro notes and coins so as to be able to detect counterfeits presented to them for valid transactions.

EU Accession Canvassing

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Article of which treaty, and which budget line of the authorised expenditure of the European Community for *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002 authorise expenditure by a body or institution of the European Community for advocating to the citizens of a state applying to become a member that they should approve accession of their country to the European Union. [154011]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There is no treaty article or EC budget line which authorises expenditure for advocating to citizens of candidate states that they should approve accession of their country to the EU.

Post-war Credits

Ms Oona King: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claims there were for post-war credits in each of the last 10 years; what the total value was of those claims in each of those years; and if he will make a statement. [154563]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of successful claims was as follows:

	Number
1990–91	2,279
1991–92	1,685
1992–93	1,700
1993–94	1,835
1994–95	1,784
1995–96	1,276
1996–97	1,563
1997–98	839
1998–99	985
1999–2000	815

The total value of claims for each year is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. It is estimated that some 95 per cent. of the original credit has been repaid, following extensive publicity campaigns.

Taxation (Over-65s)

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from interested organisations on the level of taxation on the over-65s. [154702]

Dawn Primarolo: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer receives a number of representations on a wide range of subjects. By April, as a result of the Government's personal tax and benefit changes, pensioner households will be £600 a year better off on average compared to 1997.

Unemployment (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* total unemployed, *(b)* long-term unemployed and *(c)* young unemployed there were in each ward of Shrewsbury and Atcham in each year since 1979; and if he will make a statement. [154712]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 20 March 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding the number of (a) total unemployed, (b) long term unemployed and (c) young unemployed there were in each ward in Shrewsbury and Atcham in each year since 1979.

The ONS publishes unemployment statistics at national and sub-national levels from the Labour Force Survey following the definitional guidelines promulgated by the International Labour Organisation. This information is however, unavailable for the areas requested.

The ONS also publishes information based on the administrative records of claimants of unemployment-related benefits. These cover all people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or National Insurance credits at Employment Service local offices. They must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which the claim is made.

Information on the claimant count of each month since June 1983 for each ward of Shrewsbury and Atcham can be obtained from the Nomis® database at the House of Commons Library.

Parliamentary Questions

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will give a substantive reply to the question tabled by the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire for answer on 26 February. [154726]

Mr. Timms: Shortly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Gas and Electricity Bills

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what were the average annual domestic bills for *(a)* electricity and *(b)* gas in the UK for the year 2000 broken down by (i) direct debit, (ii) standard quarterly credit and (iii) pre-payment meter payment methods. [154506]

Mr. Hain: Average annual domestic bills[1] for *(a)* electricity and *(b)* gas in cash terms for the year 2000 are as follows:

[1] Averages are weighted by customer numbers and based on all supply companies.

£

Payment method	*Electricity*[1]	*Gas*[2]
Quarterly Credit	256	295
Direct Debit	244	265
Prepayment meter	274	311

[1] An annual consumption level of 3,300 kWh has been assumed. Customers with electric central heating are likely to consume considerably more electricity.

[2] An annual consumption level of 18,000 kWh has been assumed.

Annual figures for previous years are published in the Department's annual "Digest of UK Energy Statistics" and in the "Energy Report".

Newspaper Industry

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of self-regulation in the newspaper wholesaling and retailing sectors; and if he will make a statement. [154464]

Dr. Howells: DTI works closely with those involved across the newspaper sector and, although no formal assessment of the effectiveness of self regulation in the sector has recently been carried out, I believe that in general self regulation is working reasonably well. In particular, I am aware of the recent agreement by those involved in both newspapers and magazines to enter into a process to re-examine distribution issues and we shall be following developments in those discussions.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with the National Federation of Retail Newsagents about problems facing independent retailers; and if he will make a statement. [154463]

Ms Hewitt: Small independent retailers are a vitally important part of the economic life of the country, creating wealth, satisfying customer demands, providing employment and playing an important social role within communities. Although there has been no recent contact with the National Federation of Retail Newsagents (NFRN) we do recognise the difficulties their members face. For example, the Better Regulation Task Force will this year be investigating the regulatory burden faced by small retailers and will be reporting on this in due course.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the outcome is of the consultation on the renewables obligation. [154901]

Mr. Hain: I am pleased to announce today the publication of the analysis of responses to the Renewables Obligation Preliminary Consultation. Key issues were the cost of the Obligation to the consumer, whether or not to include energy from waste in the Obligation, the proposed level of capital grants, the treatment of imports, support for the longer term technologies and the profile of the Obligation up to 2010.

With more than 200 responses received, it is encouraging that our proposed policy has met with broad support from the industry and the public.

All the comments received have been given careful consideration and we shall be making our final proposals in the statutory consultation in May, prior to laying the necessary Order before the House.

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what Government funding has been allocated for *(a)* the market stimulation and *(b)* research into the development of renewable fuels; [151123]

(2) what the organisations that received public funding for research into the development of renewable fuels spent the money on in each year *(a)* between 1992 and 1997 and *(b)* since 1997; how much they received; and if he will list the organisations. [151124]

Mr. Hain: The Government have announced substantial initiatives towards achieving the target of obtaining 10 per cent. of our electricity from renewable energy by 2010.

The main mechanisms for the market stimulation of renewable energy are the proposed Renewables Obligation and the earlier Non Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO). Funds provided by the NFFO programme and its Scottish equivalent are estimated to peak at around £150 million per annum in years between 2003–04 and 2009–10. The Renewables Obligation is estimated to provide up to £600 million per annum by 2010.

Over the next three years, the Government have allocated over £250 million for the development of renewable energy. This includes:

- support of £89 million in capital grants for early demonstration offshore wind and energy crop projects, and £12 million in MAFF planting grants for energy crops;
- the further £100 million public funding announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 6 March for the promotion of new generation renewable technologies;
- and over £55 million for renewables R&D.

The Enterprise, Skills and Innovation White Paper published on 13 February proposes a major initiative to achieve a UK solar photovoltaic demonstration programme in line with those of our major competitors. An initial £10 million has been made available for the first three years.

Exemption of renewables electricity from the Climate Change Levy is also an important driver.

DTI directly supports research, development, demonstration, technology transfer and export promotion activities relating to a range of renewable energy sources through its New and Renewable Energy Programme. The breakdown of expenditure on specific renewable energy sources in the years since 1991–92, including programme management costs, is as shown. This Government have set rising budgets for the programme to begin to reverse the trend set under the previous Administration, and to bring forward new technologies. A budget of £14 million was allocated to the programme for this year. Proposed provision for the programme over the three year period 2001–04 is £55.5 million.

In addition, through the Science Budget, DTI supports relevant research being undertaken by the Research Councils. Expenditure for the full period between 1992 and 1997 is not readily available. Between 1997 and 2000, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the main Research Council funding work on renewables, spent £22.8 million on projects on renewable and clean electricity generation. The total value of current EPSRC projects in this field is £13.4 million.

Under the European Commission's 5th Framework Programme (1998–2002), funding for renewable energy projects co-ordinated by UK companies amounts to some 23 million euros to date.

Taking into account the cost of obtaining the information provided in this answer, a list of all the organisations involved in over 2000 projects supported under the DTI's New and Renewable Energy programme since 1991–92 could not be provided without disproportionate cost.

£ million

	1991–92[1]	1992–93[1]	1993–94[1]	1994–95[1]	1995–96[1]	1996–97[1]	1997–98[1]
Biomass	1.45	2.39	3.00	3.41	3.20	2.62	1.90
Wastes	1.56	1.41	1.16	1.79	1.76	0.87	0.24
Fuel Cells	0.40	0.54	1.14	1.33	1.56	1.22	1.20
Solar	2.97	2.81	2.99	3.02	2.27	2.15	1.95
Wind	8.42	10.61	9.19	3.98	4.15	2.90	1.63
Hydro	0.15	0.09	0.21	0.22	0.14	0.25	0.19
Wave	0.59	0.40	0.25	0.16	0.07	0.09	0.00
Tidal	2.44	2.11	0.73	0.32	0.29	0.00	0.00
Geo-Hot Dry Rocks	1.98	1.33	1.24	0.35	0.00	0.00	0.00
Geo-Aquifers	0.06	0.16	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Commercialisation	0.65	0.98	1.46	1.90	1.80	1.44	1.12
Exports	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.34	0.60	0.80
International	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.32	0.24	0.26
General Studies/Strategic Studies/Strategy and Evaluation	0.94	1.00	0.79	0.43	0.32	0.31	0.39
Marketing and Evaluation	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.56	0.49	0.61
Other	3.34	1.66	2.77	2.31	1.43	0.73	0.67
Total	24.95	25.49	25.11	19.22	18.21	13.91	10.96

£ million

	1998–99[1]	1999–2000[1]	2000–01[1]	2001–02[2]	2002–03[3]	2003–04[3]
Biomass	1.75	2.24	2.74	—	—	—
Wastes	0.05	0.02	0.00	—	—	—
Fuel Cells	1.59	1.55	2.41	—	—	—
Solar	1.39	1.73	2.43	—	—	—
Wind	1.38	1.24	2.39	—	—	—
Hydro	0.15	0.33	0.21	—	—	—
Wave	0.16	0.01	0.57	—	—	—
Tidal	0.00	0.00	0.00	—	—	—
Geo-Hot Dry Rocks	0.00	0.00	0.00	—	—	—
Geo-Aquifers	0.00	0.00	0.00	—	—	—
Commercialisation	1.06	1.14	1.53	—	—	—
Exports	0.86	0.89	0.92	—	—	—
International	0.23	0.00	0.00	—	—	—
General Studies/Strategic Studies/Strategy and Evaluation	0.00	0.00	0.00	—	—	—
Marketing and Evaluation	0.66	0.64	0.61	—	—	—
Other	0.25	0.23	0.19	—	—	—
Total	9.53	10.02	14.00	18	18.5	19

[1] Total spend
[2] Allocation
[3] Plans
Note:
Detailed allocation of provision for 2001–04 remains to be decided

Employment Tribunals

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will take steps to increase the number of trained people available to provide representation to appellants at employment tribunals. [154424]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No. While I have responsibility for the tribunals, that does not extend to the training of the legal and lay representatives who may appear before them. Applicants can represent themselves at an employment tribunal and many do so, although they may be represented if they prefer.

Miners' Compensation

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many miners have died before receiving compensation awarded to them as a result of the High Court action brought by NACODS; and if he will make a statement. [154186]

Mr. Hain: The Department's claims handling agents, IRISC, have registered a total of 7,468 claims by former miners who have died and where the date of death is after the date of claim. In all these cases, the claims will be continued by the claimant's widow or dependants. In addition, where the claimant's death certificate shows that one of the respiratory diseases for which British Coal were found liable either caused or materially contributed to the death, the Department will also make bereavement or loss of society awards. To date, the Department has made 5,197 bereavement or loss of society awards, totalling £43.1 million.

In addition, the Department is also making £2,000 interim payments to those widows who have previously received a bereavement award but still await payment of damages.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many outstanding cases there are of applications for compensation to invalid miners following the High Court action brought by NACODS; what the figure was in November 2000; and if he will make a statement. [154182]

Mr. Hain: As at 26 November, some 127,925 claims were registered for respiratory disease and 115,034 for Vibration White Finger, VWF. Of these, 122,380 and 96,263 respectively remained outstanding.

As at 11 March 2001, some 138,294 claims have been registered for respiratory disease and 117,908 for VWF. Of these, 130,517 and 96,263 respectively remain outstanding.

To date, the Department has paid out £124.6 million in respect of compensation for respiratory disease and £235.3 million in relation to VWF. The Department continues to pay out around £1 million a day in mining compensation.

About 1,000 new claims are being registered each week.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims have been made in respect of respiratory diseases by *(a)* the sufferer and *(b)* widows and dependants where the claimant has died after the date of claim. [147804]

Mr. Hain: The Department's claim handling agents, IRISC, have registered a total of 6,802 claims by former miners who have died and where the date of death is after the date of claim. In all these cases the claims will be continued by the claimant's widow or dependants. In addition, where the claimant's death certificate shows that one of the respiratory diseases for which British Coal were found liable either caused or materially contributed to the death, the Department will also make a bereavement award to the claimant's widow. To date the Department has made 5,200 bereavement awards, totalling £43.1 million. In addition, we announced on 2 March that we propose to make £2,000 interim payments to those widows who have previously received a bereavement award but still await payment on account of damages.

IRISC are not informed by solicitors of the dates of death of widows and dependants and the information is therefore not available.

Green Energy (Thurrock)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the impact of the Government's new funds for green energy on Thurrock. [152935]

Mr. Hain: The additional £100 million announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 6 March 2001 will be used to encourage a range of renewable energy technologies: photovoltaics (PV), offshore wind, energy crops and other new generation technologies. Allocation of this funding to different renewable technologies will take account of the Performance and Innovation Unit's Report on Resource Productivity and Renewable Energy later this year.

The new funds are additional to previously announced support of £89 million in the form of capital grants for the generation of energy from offshore wind and energy crops.

Companies in Thurrock will be eligible to apply for all the support available and also to apply for support under the Department's New and Renewable Energy Programme that supports R and D on renewables.

Manufacturing (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial support has been given to benefit manufacturing companies in Shrewsbury and Atcham since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [154648]

Mr. Caborn: Shrewsbury and Atcham is outside the Assisted Area so the main DTI financial support schemes such as Regional Selective Assistance and Regional Enterprise Grants are not available to manufacturing businesses in this area.

However, manufacturing businesses in the Shrewsbury area are able to benefit from assistance available from the Training and Enterprise Council, the Business Link and other DTI schemes such as the Teaching Company Scheme. Unfortunately, it has not been possible in the time available to quantify the extent to which manufacturing businesses in the area will have taken advantage of assistance available from these other support mechanisms.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152974]

Mr. Caborn: The Lincoln constituency has benefited from a range of initiatives since May 1997 including:

Business Link—the Business Link network provides a wide range of business advice and support to SMEs. It is not possible to isolate Business Link data for the Lincoln constituency. However within the Lincoln City Local Authority District, from 1997 to date, Business Link Lincolnshire has assisted 843 existing businesses and 1,066 potential business start ups and contributed to 278 new business start ups.

Invest UK—an initiative to help investors wishing to set up business in the UK. Over 300 jobs in Lincoln City have been secured under this initiative since 1997.

Regional Supply Office—an initiative which provides a range of support for supply chain development. It is not possible to isolate data for the Lincoln constituency. However since 1997 the Regional Supply Office (RSO) has matched £65 million of business opportunities to Lincolnshire companies. In addition the RSO has worked with Lincoln City Council to resolve supply chain problems.

Smart—a discretionary grant available to SMEs to help them develop technologically innovative products and processes. Within the Lincoln constituency three grants worth £149,850 in total have been awarded since May 1997.

European Regional Development Fund—in 1999 for the first time parts of Lincoln City became eligible to benefit from European Structural Funds under Objective 2, enabling people in the city to

share in a regeneration programme worth some £228 million of grant funding over the next seven years. Grants will help with site development and provision of business premises, SME support, improving the skills of the work force and community economic development.

Enterprise Grants—a new discretionary grant introduced in 2000. Provides support to SMEs investing in capital projects which would not otherwise go ahead. Although SMEs in Lincoln City are eligible to receive Enterprise Grants, no grants have yet been awarded in this area.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to *(a)* Stourbridge and *(b)* the metropolitan borough of Dudley the effects on the area of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154732]

Mr. Caborn: Since 2 May 1997 the DTI has made grant offers to businesses in the Dudley metropolitan borough council area including Stourbridge totalling £2.14 million. These grants under the Regional Selective Assistance and Regional Enterprise Grant schemes have helped to create or safeguard 838 jobs and unlock private sector investment totalling over £20 million. During the same period 14 businesses in the Dudley area have received Smart grants totalling £575,233 to assist with research into the development of new products and processes.

In addition to these direct grant mechanisms businesses in the Dudley area will have benefited from assistance available through the local Business Link and other DTI funded initiatives such as the Teaching Company Scheme which will have had a positive impact on the area's economy.

Redundancies (Paignton)

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effects of manufacturing redundancies at Nortel Networks, Paignton, on the South Devon economy; and if he will make a statement. [154300]

Mr. Caborn: All the local agencies, including the Employment Service, the RDA and the Government Office, are working closely with the company and the local authority to assess the impact of the redundancies at Nortel.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the reply to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 314W, on radioactive waste, if he will list the criteria his Department uses to evaluate what constitutes as soon as practicable in respect of the return of high level radioactive waste to country of origin. [154228]

Mr. Hain: Wastes will be returned as required by contracts when they have been put into a form suitable for transfer, the facilities for export and receipt are ready and all appropriate approvals are in place.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the Health and Safety Executive report, on progress on BNFL's response to three reports on Sellafield issued by the Health and Safety Executive on 18 February 2000. [154201]

Mr. Hain: I welcome this thorough report from the Health and Safety Executive. I also welcome the progress that BNFL has made in addressing the recommendations in HSE's three reports published on 18 February 2000.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of the Lord Chancellor's Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152976]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

Lincoln constituency is covered by the Lincolnshire and Rutland Community Legal Service Partnership which will be formally launched on 21 March. It is one of the 165 Community Legal Service Partnerships throughout England and Wales.

Within Lincoln 12 solicitor firms and two not for profit organisations have been awarded Legal Services Commission contracts with an expected expenditure value for the year 2001–02 of £635,000. The contracts cover a range of categories, and these include welfare benefits, debt, family and employment.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Flooding (Environment Agency Report)

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the Environment Agency's report on the serious flooding in autumn and winter 2000; and if he will make a statement. [154898]

Mr. Morley: I am today publishing this report, copies of which are being placed in the House Libraries. Copies of the regional reports will be placed in the Libraries by 30 March. I welcome publication of this report which I commissioned the Environment Agency to produce, in partnership with the other bodies responsible for responding to the flooding, particularly local authorities and the emergency services.

The report shows that since last October we have seen the worst flooding for half a century, following the wettest autumn on record. Thankfully no loss of life was directly associated with the floods, though 10,000 properties suffered flooding—some repeatedly—and I again extend the Government's sympathies to all those who were affected.

I endorse the key finding that the Agency, and those responsible for the emergency response, performed well. I am particularly pleased to note that the seamless and integrated service of flood forecasting, warning and response, for which I called after the Easter 1998 floods, was delivered in most if not all areas. I am also pleased to note that in a number of localities the emergency response arrangements benefited from exercises conducted last summer between the Environment Agency, local authorities and the emergency services. The new flood warning codes, introduced by the Agency within weeks of the floods, also worked well.

I want to thank the Agency, and all the other organisations and individuals involved, for their efforts in response to the flooding. This involved many hours of long, hard work, rapid decisions which needed to be made, and also individual acts of bravery, for which the country must express its gratitude. The effects of the flooding would almost certainly have been much worse were it not for their efforts.

Nevertheless, the report identifies some further lessons to be learned, the key ones being:

The flood warning arrangements worked well but there are some detailed lessons for further improvement. I have asked the Agency to provide me with their proposals for implementing changes by September 2001. Also, the report notes some deficiencies in the weather forecasts received by the Agency. A review will be taken forward by the Environment Agency in conjunction with the Met Office, to report by September 2001.

There is a need for the current Home Office review of local authority emergency planning arrangements to take account of the lessons learned from the floods.

There remains some confusion in the minds of the public about responsibility for measures to prevent flooding, and for responding to it. The key to sound action is planning, partnership and provision of information. Through the Ministry's High Level Targets, operating authorities are required to provide policy statement which will indicate flood risk locally and how it will be managed, and to describe local partnerships. Such statements are due to be completed soon. These statements will provide information on "assumed" responsibility which will provide a useful basis for determining if further action on attribution is necessary in specific instances and developing a sound local partnership. Provision of a "one stop shop" may then be possible by local agreement.

We have a High Level Target in place for the Environment Agency to organise a programme of local and regional emergency exercises and should also conduct a national emergency exercise during the course of 2001. While local and regional exercises should continue, I have accepted the Agency's recommendation that it is unnecessary to conduct a national exercise this year. I shall consider with the Agency the timetable for a future national exercise.

We need to determine the appropriate level of investment in flood and coastal defence. Substantial increases were made in the Comprehensive Spending Review and the 2000 Spending Review. An additional £51 million was announced in November, and we have also put together an £11.6 million package to fund the exceptional costs of the Environment Agency in responding to the flooding and in undertaking emergency repairs. However, I recognise that we need to be ready to consider whether further expenditure may be justified. We have already instituted additional research to identify in broad terms what future investment may be required so that this can be considered in future spending reviews. Other developments such as strategic catchment studies should assist in the future production of more realistic needs-based expenditure programmes.

We have established a series of High Level Targets to ensure Government policy for flood and coastal defence is delivered by the operating authorities and others. One group of targets requires the Environment Agency to establish a database of flood and coastal defences and to record information on their condition, based on inspections undertaken by the operating authorities. The database is an important development, for which MAFF is currently contributing towards the cost; we will consider whether additional funding is needed. It is also necessary to ensure that inspections of defences are completed by the operating authorities accurately and to time. I am asking the Environment Agency to report on this, as part of their report on the inspections and assessment of flood risk required under the High Level Targets.

The Environment Agency's report raises questions about the process for making investment decisions. I have asked the Agency to provide me with supporting evidence by September 2001 and I will consider with them, and the other operating authorities, whether changes are required. This issue will be relevant to the review, already under way, of the priority scoring arrangements for consideration of MAFF financial support for flood and coastal defence schemes.

Also under way is a review of the current funding arrangements for flood and coastal defence. I shall ensure that relevant recommendations in the report are considered by the Review Steering Group.

The Agency has also undertaken to carry forward further reviews and studies which I anticipate receiving with interest.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was right when, on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 607, he referred to the effects of the earlier violent storm as a "wake up call". We can certainly expect climate change to mean that events of this type will occur more frequently in future. Another inevitable fact is that Governments—past, present and future—cannot prevent all flooding; but where it is sensible and sustainable to do so, we can take further action to reduce the risk.

We can also take action to ensure that as a nation we are prepared to deal with the effects of severe weather, including but not limited to flooding, and that our key national infrastructure can withstand these effects. This is a matter on which we are working closely with local authorities and other key players through the Central Local Partnership.

In summary, if it had not been for the effective response of the Agency and others, the flooding would have had much more serious effects than it did. There are still lessons to be learned, but we have all come a long way since the flooding three years ago.

Serco Contracts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the contracts that exist between SERCO and the Department, its executive agencies and associated public bodies; and if he will list those which have existed in the last three years. [151343]

Ms Quin: For the last three years, the Department's expenditure profile with the SERCO group of companies has been as follows:

	£
1998–99	17,818.55
1999–2000	27,270.50
2000–01	30,399.42

This expenditure comprises a total 139 individual transactions concerned with the supply of photographic film, fuel and vehicle maintenance. From records held

centrally, the Department's Executive Agencies and Associated Public Bodies have had no dealings with the SERCO Group over the last three years.

EU Sugar Programme

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total cost to the EU Budget was of the EU's sugar programme in the latest year for which figures are available. [153984]

Ms Quin: Total expenditure on the sugar chapter for the 1999 EAGGF year was 2.113 billion euro. This was offset to some extent by sugar levies of 1.204 billion euro.

Aquaculture Scientists

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many of his Department's and its relevant agencies' fish disease scientists dealing with aquaculture hold qualifications from an internationally recognised professional body; if he will list the bodies with which they are qualified; and if he will make a statement. [154061]

Ms Quin: At the Weymouth Laboratory of the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, there are nine scientists working on aspects of fish disease in aquaculture who hold a qualification from an internationally recognised professional body. These bodies are:

The Institute of Biology
The Zoological Society of London
The Royal College of Science
The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
The Panhellenic Veterinary Association (Greece)
Université de Médecine (France).

BSE

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total UK stocks of rendered over 30 month scheme material were at the latest available date; and for what sum of money the Government are eligible for reimbursement by the European Union when those stocks are incinerated. [153921]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The total UK stocks of rendered material as at 4 March 2001 were 426,474 tonnes of MBM and 215,442 tonnes of tallow.

The total amount of reimbursement represented by these stocks, claimable at incineration, is approximately £150 million.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research is being undertaken into the survival of M.bovis in *(a)* soil, *(b)* dust, *(c)* water and *(d)* other materials. [154034]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The current research programme is designed to improve knowledge of the epidemiology, modes of transmission, pathogenesis and risk factors associated with bovine TB.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what account his Department is taking of the threat of increased genetic susceptibility to bovine TB of cattle. [154033]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Government have accepted the advice of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG) that research into the genetic base of disease resistance in cattle is not a priority at present, given the major practical difficulties the ISG has identified in pursuing research, and given that any genetic differences seem likely to affect mainly the severity of the disease in cattle, whereas current control policies are based on the removal of all infected animals identified through an immune response.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what methods his Department uses to restrict the spread of bovine TB during the foot and mouth epidemic. [154035]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* All cattle movements in Great Britain are prohibited under the current foot and mouth disease control measures, except when conducted under special MAFF licences.

Organophosphates

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the plant protection products containing organophosphate pesticides which have had approval revoked since September 1998, giving the reason for revocation in each case. [154252]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* 85 plant protection products containing organophosphate pesticides have had their approvals revoked by Ministers since September 1998. A further 61 products are in the process of being revoked. A list of all the products is available in the Libraries of the House, with the reasons for revocation for each product.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the plant protection products containing organophosphate pesticides which have been granted approval under Regulation 5 of the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 since September 1998. [154251]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* 41 plant protection products containing organophosphate pesticides have been granted approval by Ministers since September 1998. A list of all the 41 products which have gained approval is provided in the table.

Plant protection products containing organophosphate pesticides which have been granted approval since September 1998

Registration number	*Product name*	*Marketing company*
Products containing 2-chloroethylphosphonic acid		
M09748	Aventis Cerone	Rhône-Poulenc Agriculture
M09972	Aventis Cerone	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M09985	Cerone	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M09986	Charger	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M09868	Cleancrop Fonic	United Agri Products
M09553	Cleancrop Fonic M	United Agri Products

Plant protection products containing organophosphate pesticides which have been granted approval since September 1998

Registration number	*Product name*	*Marketing company*
M09989	EXP03149D	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M09571	Greencrop Tycoon	Greencrop Technology Ltd.
M10394	Ice	BASF plc
M09979	Marnoch Phonet	Marnoch Ventures Ltd.
M10004	Nomad	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M10395	Satellite	BASF plc
M09373	Standon Mepiquat Plus	Standon Chemicals Ltd.
M10020	Strate	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M09634	Terpitz	Me[2] Crop Protection
M10029	Upgrade	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
Products containing azamethiphos		
M09439	Alfacron Plus	Novartis Animal Health (UK) Ltd.
M09314	Farm Fly Spray 10 WP	Rentokil Initial (UK) Ltd.
Products containing chlorpyrifos		
M09775	Ballad	Headland Amenity Ltd.
M09778	Choir	Nufarm Whyte Agriculture Ltd.
M09929	Crossfire 480	Aventis Environmental Science
M09153	Dursban WG	Dow AgroSciences Ltd.
M09667	Greencrop Pontoon	Greencrop Technology Ltd.
M10139	Lorsban WG	Dow AgroSciences Ltd.
M09274	Maraud	The Scotts Company (UK) Ltd.
M09226	Suscon Green	Scotts Europe BV
M09902	Suscon Indigo Soil Insecticide	Fargro Ltd.
Products containing dimethoate		
M09583	Danadim	Cheminova Agro (UK) Ltd.
M09477	Greencrop Pelethon	Greencrop Technology Ltd.
M10492	Sector	Cheminova Agro (UK) Ltd.
Products containing ethoprophos		
M09973	Aventis Mocap 10G	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
M09750	Aventis Mocap 10G	Rhône-Poulenc Agriculture
M10003	Mocap 10G	Aventis CropScience (UK) Ltd.
Products containing fenitrothion		
M09598	Dicofen	pbi Agrochemicals Ltd.
Products containing pirimiphos-methyl		
M10508	Actellic 2% Dust	Syngenta Crop Protection UK Ltd.
M10509	Actellic D	Syngenta Crop Protection UK Ltd.
M10448	Actellic Smoke Generator No 10	Sorex Ltd.
M10540	Actellic Smoke Generator No 20	Syngenta Crop Protection UK Ltd.
M09501	Fumite General Purpose Insecticide Smoke Cone	The Scotts Company (UK) Ltd.
Products containing tolclofos-methyl		
M09673	Rizolex	Sumitomo Chemical Agro Europe SA
M09358	Rizolex Flowable	Sumitomo Chemical Agro Europe SA

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the plant protection products containing the active ingredient chlorpyrifos which have been granted approval under Regulation 5 of the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 in the last 12 months. [154250]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Two plant protection products containing chlorpyrifos have been granted approval by Ministers in the last 12 months to 13 March 2001. These are:

Reg. Number	*Product name*	*Marketing company*
M09153	Dursban WG	Dow AgroSciences Ltd.
M10139	Lorsban WG	Dow AgroSciences Ltd.

Agricultural Exports (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the value in 2000 was of agricultural exports from farms based in Shropshire, broken down by agricultural products; and if he will make a statement. [154704]

Ms Quin: Statistics on the value of agricultural exports are only compiled for the UK as a whole. No information is available on the value of exports from farms based in Shropshire. The total value of exports of food, feed and drink from the UK in 2000 amounted to £8.6 billion.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he is issuing in relation to the foot and mouth epidemic to local authorities about pedestrian access to canal towpaths. [152690]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The Ministry has not issued specific advice regarding pedestrian access to canal footpaths. However we have posted advice on MAFF's website regarding restrictions and precautions on outdoor activities in an infected area. We advise members of the public not to take part in activities on land where livestock is kept, or which might bring them into contact with susceptible species.

The Ministry has issued advice to Local Authorities on the Foot and Mouth Disease (Amendment) (England) Order 2001 and the Foot and Mouth (Amendment) (No 2) Order 2001. These Regulations allow, with exceptions, MAFF and local authorities to prevent the entry of any person onto any land or into any agricultural building in a controlled area (currently Great Britain has been declared a controlled area). They also allow local authorities to prohibit the movement of members of the public onto any land where there may be animals and onto any footpath or right of way within identified areas in their districts, for the purpose of preventing the spread of foot and mouth disease. These restrictions could be applied to canal footpaths.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on compensation arrangements for animals culled because of possible infection with the foot and mouth virus, with particular reference to *(a)* effects on hill subsidies and environmental allowances if stocks have been removed thus contravening the requirements for receiving subsidy, *(b)* the time scale for payments to be made and *(c)* valuations. [152951]

Ms Quin: We are aware that, as a consequence of foot and mouth disease, farmers are facing difficulties in respect of CAP subsidy schemes, including those funded under the England Rural Development Programme. Although some of these difficulties may be covered by force majeure provisions, some will need changes to specific regulations. We are in urgent discussions with the European Commission about them. In the meantime it is important that farmers contact their Regional Service Centre if they believe they will have difficulty in complying with scheme requirements.

Arrangements are in place to ensure that compensation claims for animals slaughtered to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease will be processed and paid as quickly as possible. We aim to pay compensation to owners within about a week of slaughter taking place.

An independent valuation is carried out on the animals which are due to be slaughtered and the owner is invited to agree a statement of valuation. If an owner chooses to reject this valuation, he may call in his own valuer so that the matter can go to arbitration.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps have been taken to protect zoos from the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [153767]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) on 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 564W.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria are used by his Department to define an outbreak of foot and mouth disease that has more than one geographical location associated with it. [153838]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* An outbreak of foot and mouth disease is declared when disease is confirmed on any separate or distinct holding. For example, if a single business consisting of two separately located farms had foot and mouth disease confirmed at both locations, this would be treated as two separate outbreaks.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has given to retail premises specialising in products for farmers about the risk of cross-infection of the foot and mouth virus. [153839]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* Such businesses should comply with the general advice posted on the MAFF website www.maff.gov.uk for persons who work in the countryside.

Central to this advice is that people should follow strict cleansing procedures which would include leaving vehicles outside the farm, disinfecting boots and wearing boots or clothing supplied by the farm. People working in the countryside should ensure that all mud, slurry and manure is washed off before they leave the premises.

It is essential that all visits to farms and possible contacts with animals are recorded. The records should include the date and time of the visit. Should disease occur on a farm then these records will be used to trace movements and possible spread of the disease.

Operators of retail outlets may wish to advertise the MAFF guidance to their customers.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if outbreaks of foot and mouth disease have occurred in the vicinity of landfill sites; and if he will make a statement about the implications for the control of the disease. [153821]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* Information as to whether infected premises are located in the vicinity of a landfill site is not readily available. However, veterinary advice is that landfill sites have not played any part in the spread of the disease.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the average annual cost per farmer of buying foot and mouth vaccine. [153719]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* If the Ministry were to approve vaccination against foot and mouth disease, vaccine would be dispatched to local control centres. Veterinary surgeons employed by the Ministry for the purposes of foot and mouth control would be responsible for the vaccination of susceptible species. There would be no cost to livestock farmers.

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason the Prosper De Mulder rendering plant in Widnes was chosen as the sole site to dispose of animals slaughtered as a result of foot and mouth disease; what plans he has to use other rendering plants in the United Kingdom; and if he will list the locations of other rendering plants. [154074]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Prosper De Mulder plant in Widnes was chosen on the basis of its capacity, its location, and its ability to meet

a range of bio-security considerations. Following the successful use of this facility, a further site near Exeter is now being used and further sites are under consideration.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which contractors he has engaged to provide fuel for on-farm incineration of animals put down as foot and mouth suspects. [154214]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Ministry is using a great many contractors at a local level throughout the country. This information could be collected only at disproportionate cost.

Hand-carried Imported Food Stuffs

Mr. Gale: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of controls over the importing of fruit and vegetables hand-carried by visitors to the United Kingdom. [154248]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* An assessment of the plant health risks from passengers' baggage was carried out in 1992, as a result of which personal imports from outside the EU of vegetables (except potatoes) and up to 2 kg of fruit are permitted. Customs officers seize fruit in excess of 2 kg, and any potatoes, when they are detected at entry. There are no restrictions on the quantity of fruit or vegetables which may be brought into the UK from within the EU.

Flood Defences (Lewes)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects the Environment Agency to identify a costed preferred scheme to improve flood defences in Lewes. [154334]

Mr. Morley: I understand that the Environment Agency is starting work on studies leading to the preparation of a flood defence strategy for the River Ouse and its tributaries. It is expected that the strategy, which will seek to identify sustainable options for flood defence in the catchment, will take eight to 12 months to complete. The timing of applications for grant aid on individual schemes will then be a matter for the Agency.

Quarantine Laws

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the result of the changes made in the quarantine laws; and what further changes he proposes. [154084]

Ms Quin: The Ministry is currently carrying out an evaluation of the Pet Travel Scheme, which will be published in due course. We are also committed to reviewing the possible inclusion of North America in the Pet Travel Scheme. We will consider further changes to the scheme when the result of this work is available.

Hill Farmers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will complete his review of hill farm incomes. [153498]

Ms Quin: Hill farm incomes are reviewed every autumn. The results of last year's review, entitled "Economic Conditions in the Hills and Uplands in the United Kingdom: Statistical Tables", were made available to the Libraries of the House on 29 November 2000. The Hills Task Force, set up in November 2000 to look at hill farmers' access to support under the ERDP and other measures, has been asked to report by the end of March 2001.

PRIME MINISTER

Renewable Energy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on progress made to date by the G8 renewables task force. [154193]

The Prime Minister: The G8 Renewable Energy Task Force will present its final report to the G8 Heads of Government at the Genoa Summit in July 2001. The UK is pleased with the Task Force's progress to date, and particularly with the active involvement of so many high-level representatives from business, Government and non-government organisations. We will make a full statement of how the UK intends to carry forward the Task Force recommendations once the final report is available.

Pensioners (Annuities)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer on 14 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 1011, if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of giving pensioners the freedom to choose to invest in products other than an annuity. [154324]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Relaxing the existing requirement to purchase an annuity would provide an incentive for some to use pension schemes for purposes other than providing a secure income throughout retirement. Costs will vary depending on the nature of any reforms, including what level of income must first be secured and what tax charge is applied to withdrawals above that level. Proposals for tax-free withdrawals could cost billions of pounds a year in lost income tax and extra tax relief.

Strategic Communications Unit

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the work programme for the Strategic Communications Unit for the year 2000–01. [154335]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 328W.

CABINET

Absenteeism

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office pursuant to her answer of 12 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 472W, for what reasons the Office for National Statistics no longer presents the data to which she refers broken down by public and private sector. [153951]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Mr. Philip Hammond, dated 20 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on why Labour Force Survey data on absence from work due to illness and injury is no longer presented by public and private sector (153951). I am replying in his absence.

Information about absence from work due to sickness and injury is collected in the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS also includes a question about the industrial sector that respondents work in, which is classified to public or private sector groupings.

The LFS databases provide this information and can be accessed by the House of Commons Library. In addition, an article was published in the December 2000 issue of Labour Market Trends which includes an analysis of sickness absence in the public and private sectors for Summer 2000.

Driving Standards Agency

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will award the Driving Standards Agency a charter mark. [154740]

Mr. Stringer: The Driving Standards Agency was last awarded a charter mark in 1997. They reapplied last year. The independent Charter Mark Judging Panel concluded that this application should be deferred pending improvement in a number of areas. The re-application will therefore be assessed again in the summer.

Political Advisers

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many political advisers will resign when a general election is called; and what severance compensation they will be entitled to. [154290]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer the right hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 130W. Entitlement to severance compensation is also set out in the Model Contract.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Compensation Scheme

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will ensure that when pensioners are written to they, as part of the implementation of the Social Security (Inherited SERPS) Regulations 2001, are notified of his Department's compensation scheme for financial loss as a result of misleading information supplied by his Department. [154578]

Mr. Rooker: Under our proposals, the spouses of existing pensioners are fully protected; they will be able to inherit up to 100 per cent. of their late spouse's SERPS, as now. They do not need to claim compensation for their position to be fully restored. We are in the process of writing to all pensioners to explain the position.

Severe Disablement Allowance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many new claims for Severe Disablement Allowance have been received each month since April 2000. [154078]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of new claims to Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) in each month since April 2000

Month	*SDA new claims*
April 2000	3,459
May 2000	3,884
June 2000	3,966
July 2000	3,830
August 2000	4,172
September 2000	4,226
October 2000	4,418
November 2000	4,539
December 2000	3,122
January 2001	4,065

Source:
Figures are taken from Central Data Unit 100 per cent. counts.

Winter Fuel Payment

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people were eligible to receive Winter Fuel Payment in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000; and how many he estimates will receive it in 2001. [153581]

Mr. Rooker: Around 10 million people were eligible for Winter Fuel Payments in the winter of 1999–2000. Up to 11.5 million people could be eligible for the payment this winter, 2000–01, with a similar figure for next winter, 2001–02.

Lone Parents

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents on Income Support there are in the Leeds, Central constituency; and how many there were in May 1997. [154287]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Lone parents receiving Income Support in Leeds, Central constituency

	Thousand
	Leeds, Central constituency
May 1997	3.3
November 2000	3.1

Notes:
1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100.
2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and therefore may be subject to sampling error.
3. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependant children, not in receipt of Pensioner or Disability Premium.
4. Dependant children are defined as children aged up to 15 or aged 16 to 18 in full-time education.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1997 and November 2000.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents on Income Support there are in *(a)* South Tyneside and *(b)* South Shields constituency; and how many there were in May 1997. [154438]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The information is in the table.

Lone parents receiving Income Support in South Tyneside metropolitan borough council area and South Shields constituency

Thousand

	May 1997	*November 2000*
South Tyneside Local Authority Area	3.5	3.4
South Shields Parliamentary Constituency	2.0	2.1

Notes:
1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100.
2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and therefore may be subject to sampling error.
3. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependant children, not in receipt of Pensioner or Disability Premium.
4. Dependant children are defined as children aged up to 15 or aged 16 to 18 in full-time education.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1997 and November 2000.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152975]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Lincoln since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Lincoln 10,634 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Lincoln the number has reduced from 3,500 to 1,800. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally, and in Lincoln from 2,500 to 1,700.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 16,500 older people in Lincoln have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 15,500 pensioners in Lincoln will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 6,600 in Lincoln. 2,800 pensioner families in Lincoln are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Newbury)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Newbury constituency, the effects on Newbury and west Berkshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154575]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Newbury since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about seven million families receive Child Benefit, and in Newbury 12,034 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Newbury the number has reduced from 900 to 600. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100; in Newbury the number has remained at around 800.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 16,400 older people in Newbury have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 14,000 pensioners in Newbury will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,700 in Newbury. 1,200 pensioner families in Newbury are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Pension Contributions

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the cost of pension contributions incurred by his Department was in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01 in (i) Scotland and (ii) the UK. [154444]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Cost of pension contributions incurred by this Department in the UK

Year	*Cost £ million*
1997–98	141
1998–99	149.6
1999–2000	157.6
2000–01	[1]

[1] Not yet available

The cost of pension contributions relating to staff in Scotland is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152652]

Mr. Rooker: Since May 1997 spending by the Department on departmental or agency logos or associated branding is as follows:

Better Government for Older People—Life Begins at 50. A logo developed for the InterMinisterial Group for Older People to link communications across Government.

Logo Cost: £7,050

Focus on Delivery—a logo used internally to brand all communications activity about major changes in the way the Department is organised and operates.

Logo cost: £1,175

50 Anniversary of the Welfare State—the Departmental logo was adapted for the year in which it celebrated its 50 Anniversary (1998)—includes all guidelines.

Logo cost: £9,000

Note:

This includes some stationery costs as it is not possible to separate them out.

Minister for Women Logo—introduced in 1997.

Logo cost: £9,000

Notes:

1. Includes some inseparable stationery costs.

2. The Minister for Women has an Intralink, website containing a logo. A breakdown of its cost is inseparable.

The Working Age Agency—Branding of the new Agency is ongoing, therefore, costs are inseparable at this stage.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average length of time is for the Independent Case Examiner of the Child Support Agency to investigate a claim once it has been filed. [153938]

Angela Eagle: The current average clearance time for cases referred to the office of the Independent Case Examiner at February 2001 is 32.3 weeks. When a case is received, an initial review is carried out before a full investigation can begin. Once the initial review has been undertaken, cases currently wait around 16 weeks for the full investigation to start.

Revenue Savings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the revenue savings from reducing the period during which a jobseeker's allowance claimant can turn down a job without losing benefit to eight weeks. [151546]

Angela Eagle: No such estimate has been made.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the number of pensioners who would qualify for *(a)* Housing Benefit, *(b)* Income Support and *(c)* Council Tax Benefit for the first time as a result of the increase in the Minimum Income Guarantee in April. [153746]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table and gives the number of additional pensioners floating on to the main Income Related benefits in 2001–02 resulting from the increase to the applicable amount. This includes all the measures announced in the November 2000 pre-Budget report; aligning the different pensioner premiums, protecting the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) in line with the increases to the basic State pension in 2001 and earnings uprating. It also includes the increase to the capital limits announced in Budget 2000.

These figures are not additive because people may be entitled to more than one of these benefits.

Number of additional pensioners that will float on to the main income related benefits under the changes compared to Rossi uprating alone

	Thousand
	2001–02
MIG	140
Housing Benefit	30
Council Tax Benefit	50

Notes

1. The assumption used is that the costs of the MIG have been calculated over and above the cost of uprating the MIG by Rossi.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10,000 cases.
3. The number of floaters has been calculated using the Policy Simulation Model for Income Related Benefits. This models the benefit system in 2001–02 and is based on data from the Family Resource Survey (FRS) for 1997–98, uprated to 2001 prices. Figures for floaters are calibrated to historical take up assumptions and therefore do not reflect behavioural changes due to recent initiatives.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what the *(a)* target and *(b)* actual clearance times were for Disability Living Allowance (i) initial applications, (ii) renewal claims, (iii) reviews and (iv) appeals in each quarter from 1996 to October 1999 and monthly from November 1999 to date; [152023]

(2) what the *(a)* target and *(b)* actual clearance times were for Disability Living Allowance (i) revisions and (ii) supersessions in each month from November 1999 to date. [152026]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Dafydd Wigley, dated 16 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what the (a) target and (b) actual clearance times were for disability living allowance (a) revisions and (b) supersessions in each month form November 1999 to date. Also what the (a) target and (b) actual clearance times were for disability living allowance (i) initial applications, (ii) renewal claims, (iii) reviews and (iv) appeals in each quarter from 1996 to October 1999 and monthly from November 1999 to date.

The information you require is as follows:

1. Targets

	Primary	*Secondary*
April 1996 to March 1997		
Initial applications	65% in 30 days	85% in 53 days
Renewal claims	65% in 30 days	85% in 55 days
Reviews	60% in 55 days	80% in 75 days
Appeals	60% in 30 days	90% in 60 days
April 1997 to March 1999		
Initial applications	62% in 30 days	85% in 53 days
Renewal claims	65% in 30 days	85% in 55 days
Reviews	60% in 55 days	80% in 75 days
Appeals	60% in 30 days	90% in 60 days

From April 1999, the Benefits Agency changed the format for reporting performance to a single-tier target.

	Target
April 1999 to March 2000	
Initial applications	85% in 53 days
Renewal claims	85% in 55 days
Reviews	80% in 75 days
Appeals	90% in 60 days
April 2000 to March 2001	
Initial applications	95% in 53 days
Renewal claims	95% in 84 days
Reviews	95% in 99 days
Appeals	95% in 99 days

It should be noted that 'reviews' includes in-time and out-of-time reviews prior to October 1999, and both reconsiderations and supersessions after that date.

2. Actual average clearance times are expressed in days and are:

2. Actual average clearance times—expressed in days

	Initial claims	*Renewals*	*Reviews*	*Appeals*
June 1996	28.51	22.78	44.43	29.32
September 1996	31.21	23.90	47.33	29.90
December 1996	32.01	23.86	48.66	30.12
March 1997	32.10	23.96	49.31	30.04
June 1997	34.20	24.46	49.50	27.95
September 1997	36.51	28.14	53.44	31.67
December 1997	37.34	29.19	53.29	32.79
March 1998	37.23	29.79	52.28	33.20
June 1998	31.50	34.22	46.98	32.17
September 1998	32.44	37.80	48.95	34.57
December 1998	33.93	37.78	49.47	35.08
March 1999	35.03	37.56	49.67	36.08
June 1999	37.54	38.36	54.77	40.72
September 1999	38.72	39.48	57.25	46.38

Monthly

	Initial claims	*Renewals*	*Reconsiderations*	*Supersessions*	*Appeals*
October 1999	40.00	35.00	46.00	32.00	48.00
November 1999	44.00	50.00	30.00	38.00	49.00
December 1999	47.00	51.00	37.00	45.00	50.00
January 2000	51.00	54.00	50.00	58.00	57.00
February 2000	51.00	53.00	61.00	68.00	64.00
March 2000	49.00	53.00	66.00	74.00	67.00

Monthly

	Initial claims	*Renewals*	*Reconsiderations*	*Supersessions*	*Appeals*
April 2000	49.10	50.00	66.10	73.90	67.40
May 2000	51.50	50.70	60.30	70.40	67.70
June 2000	51.40	49.00	54.50	67.90	66.50
July 2000	48.70	39.30	49.00	62.10	63.90
August 2000	47.50	39.40	43.00	57.90	58.60
September 2000	46.20	34.80	44.80	55.60	61.00
October 2000	45.70	32.30	44.70	55.00	55.40
November 2000	44.50	32.10	42.60	52.50	51.90
December 2000	44.00	31.90	39.40	51.50	48.40

New procedures for assessing claims for DLA/AA were introduced last year to improve the accuracy of decisions on entitlement. Customers can receive clearer explanations of decisions on their benefit entitlement. Initially these changes led to significant increases in the time it took to process each case which, together with a growing caseload, created a temporary, but significant, backlog of work. In addition, the backlog of work caused an increase in the number of enquiries received from customers, resulting in additional work for staff to process. The backlog has been tackled as a priority with a number of improvements being made to processes, forms and the use of IT in order in turn to improve clearance times. However, changes of this order require time for staff to be trained and to become familiar with new processes before they can become fully effective. Decision-makers have become accustomed to the new procedures and the backlog has now been cleared.

I hope this is helpful.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Newcastle City Council. [155013]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) report was published today in respect of Newcastle City Council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

BFI looked at the performance of Newcastle in August 1997 as one of a series of trial inspections during the initial set up of BFI, but the findings were not published.

Inspectors report that Newcastle has responded positively to their 1997 findings and recommendations. The council has a large HB and CTB caseload and a transient population and the BFI was pleased to note that there were no backlogs at the time of their on-site inspection, despite the volume of work.

There have been noticeable improvements in the council's administration. In particular, its claim form, verification and liaison with the Benefits Agency, Rent Service, private sector landlords and Housing Associations.

The report also notes that substantial progress has been made in counter fraud work. The council now undertakes its own prosecutions and has introduced a computerised fraud management system.

The report acknowledges a significant improvement has been the development of a joint protocol between Internal Audit and District Audit which ensures both teams are working together to ensure maximum audit coverage and effectiveness.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Bailey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Sandwell metropolitan borough council. [155012]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) report was published today in respect of Sandwell metropolitan borough council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

This was a follow-up inspection. The BFI previously reported on Sandwell metropolitan borough council in August 1999. Since then the council has responded very positively to BFI's recommendations and has been particularly active in taking steps to tackle fraud and error, despite a high level of staff turnover and recruitment problems.

Inspectors noted that the council had implemented most of their recommendations and this had led to improvements in its overall administration and counter fraud performance.

Inspectors noted that the council had approved a prosecution policy and together with training for its fraud officers this had led to the council conducting a large number of successful prosecutions. Inspectors found the council had the best performing fraud section of the 30 highest spending local authorities the BFI have inspected to date.

Inspectors also noted that centralising benefit processing has helped the council reduce backlogs and improve clearance times.

The report concludes that the council has achieved a lot in a short space of time and this is commendable. However, there is still room for further improvement, in particular through the council implementing the Verification Framework to support the council's counter fraud strategy, and the report makes recommendations for this.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Pensions Agreement (Japan)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the effects of the recent agreement with Japan on the pensions of UK citizens who live in Japan. [154133]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The recent agreement with Japan has no effect on pensions of UK citizens who live in Japan.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 21 March 2001

DEFENCE

Service Personnel (Compensation)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the review for compensation arrangements for those killed and disabled during service with the armed forces will be completed; how the review will be presented to Parliament; if payments resulting from the review will be retrospective; and if he will make a statement. [154044]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 756W. This stage of the review has taken longer than expected because of legal and financial complexities. It is proposed that any new scheme would be introduced for all incidents giving rise to illness, injury or death after the date of introduction. Claims relating to incidents which occurred before this time would continue to be covered by the existing arrangements. Following consultation, we expect to take final decisions on the review by early next year, when we will inform Parliament in the normal way.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152645]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Job Evaluation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason service officers have not had the same job evaluation as enlisted personnel; and if he will make a statement. [153979]

Mr. Spellar: Job evaluation of both Other Ranks and Officer posts has been routinely undertaken since 1970. A new job evaluation system was introduced in 1997 and was extensively tested across all ranks including Officers. During the period leading up to Pay 2000, priority has been given to evaluating Other Ranks in order to assign posts to pay ranges based on job weight. Most Senior Officer posts have now been evaluated. We are about to begin a comprehensive programme of evaluation for the remainder of the Officer corps with the aim of completing the first tranche by September to meet the stated requirements of the Armed Forces Pay Review Board.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Peerages

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how many members of the public have contacted the Appointments Commission to give their views on its role and the criteria and the process used to select applicants for nomination for a peerage. [153807]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that 40 members of the public have responded to the Commission's invitation for views on the process and the criteria it has drawn up to guide its assessment of nominations.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how many applicants for a People's Peerage have their main home outside the United Kingdom. [153764]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that of the 3,200 applications for consideration by the Appointments Commission as non-political peers received by 17 November 2000, 17 have their main home outside the United Kingdom.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Salaries

Mr. Tyler: To ask the President of the Council how many hon. Members voluntarily elected to forgo *(a)* part and *(b)* all of their parliamentary salary in the 2000–01 financial year. [154516]

Mrs. Beckett: No hon. Members have taken a reduced parliamentary salary during this financial year.

Fair Trade Products

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee what fair-traded products are *(a)* used and *(b)* sold in the cafeterias and restaurants of the Palace of Westminster. [155066]

Mr. Dennis Turner: While I cannot, of course, answer for the policies of the Refreshment Department in another place, I am pleased to confirm that the following Fairtrade Mark products are sold in the cafeterias and restaurants of the House of Commons: "Clipper" teas; "Tikki Café" coffee beans and ground coffee from Matthew Algie Tea and Coffee Merchants; and "Divine" milk chocolate and "Dubble" chocolate rice bars from The Day Chocolate Company.

The House of Commons Refreshment Department also has a policy to support the aims of the Cotonou Convention, specifically with reference to the purchase of Caribbean bananas and cane sugar.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 30 November 2000. [154496]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 30 November 2000 regarding a similar query. I explained that the impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally collected by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects cannot be matched in the way requested. The three major projects which I mentioned are ongoing. They are a burglary reduction project in Rusholme, a targeted policing project against armed crime in South Manchester and the neighbourhood wardens projects in three parts of Gorton.

The Manchester Youth Offending Team received a visit from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in December 2000 and there was a significant increase in the number of Pre-Sentence Reports prepared for the courts during that quarter. There are plans for this progress to be sustained.

As I explained in the earlier reply, all the policies of the Home Office will in a more general way impact on Manchester, Gorton to a greater or lesser extent. Changes since I last wrote to my right hon. Friend are as follows:

The asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

Good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website, www.homeoffice.gov.uk, but once again this is not collected on a constituency basis.

Departmental Policies (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Sutton and Cheam constituency, the effects on Sutton and Cheam of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154416]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The latest report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Sutton and Cheam constituency or the immediate locality:

Reducing Burglary Initiative

One project from Sutton was awarded £35,000 under round two of the Reducing Burglary initiative. The project will work on anti-social behaviour and other crimes and include increased use of intelligence gathering, surveillance and arrest to direct resources on prolific offenders. Anti-social behaviour, civil and repossession orders will be used to address offending by those likely to fill the void left by the removal of prolific offenders. A partnership approach will be taken to tackle issues such as the improvement of housing allocation and pre-school education provision.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) are funding an Intervention Scheme and a Bail Supervision Team in the Sutton and Cheam constituency. Between September 1999 and March 2002 the YJB are contributing almost £120,000 to a Network Drugs Advice Project. The project will reduce crime by reducing drug and alcohol use among young offenders. A project worker will be based in each of the two YOTs and will assess levels of substance abuse and the influence it may have on individuals' crime-related activity. Motivational interviewing, solution focused, brief intervention, rational emotive behavioural and existential therapeutic approaches will be provided for approximately 1,500 young people over the period of the bid.

The YJB are also contributing nearly £85,000 to a Bail Support Scheme. The project aims to reduce offending by young people while subject to bail; reduce delays caused by non-appearance of young people in court and reduce unnecessary use of secure facilities for young people on remand.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Sutton and Cheam to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Departmental Policies (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency, the effect on Lancaster and Wyre of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154681]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The latest report will be published shortly.

Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Wyre Community Safety Partnership was awarded £120,000 for a project entitled Wyre CCTV Unit. The scheme will consist of two CCTV units, capable of being deployed to any part of Wyre targeting short term crime 'hotspots' and communities, which are suffering from incidents of youth crime and disorder.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) is funding two Intervention Schemes and one Bail Supervision Scheme in the Lancaster and Wyre area. Almost £57,000 is being funded towards Drugline Lancashire—Preston Arrest Referral and Cautioning Plus Project. The main aims of this project include the provision of direct services to challenge cycles of drug use and crime: counselling, information, befriending, advocacy, holistic welfare, early and crisis intervention. They also include the establishment of a networking system combining a focus on drugs, crime and young people.

Approximately £37,000 has been awarded for the Lancashire Restorative Justice Project. The main aim is to provide both victims and young offenders with the opportunity to communicate with one another in a safe environment in order that the offender may make amends for previous inappropriate behaviour and assist the victim to come to terms with the harm suffered.

A Bail Support Scheme has been awarded £191,000 in the area. The project aims to provide a practical alternative to magistrates and courts in Lancashire and Blackburn for remands to custody, secure accommodation and remands to local authority accommodation.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Lancaster and Wyre to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

David Blagden

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received on the subject of David Blagden; and if he will make a statement. [154418]

Mr. Boateng: I have received a good deal of correspondence on Mr. Blagden's behalf suggesting that his continued custody is unfair and unjust given the nature of his index offence and the length of time he has served. There has also been considerable media interest in the case of this discretionary life sentence prisoner both at local level and nationally.

Legal advisers acting for David Blagden are currently challenging by judicial review the content of material due to be put before my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, for his consideration of the Parole Board's recommendations following its hearing of this case on 2 May 2000. Until this action is concluded, it is not possible to respond to the Parole Board's recommendation.

Prison Education

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the education budget for the Prison Service was for the 2000–01 financial year; and what it will be for the 2001–02 financial year; [154525]

(2) what the education budget for the Prison Service was for the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01; and what it will be for the 2001–02 financial year. [154527]

Mr. Boateng: The information available is for certain identifiable areas of education expenditure, covering payments to education and library service providers and purchase of education materials. It does not include the private sector managed prisons.

Expenditure in 1999–2000 was £47.4 million. Forecast expenditure in 2000–01 is about £50 million.

Both of these figures include Value Added Tax (VAT) payments, where applicable, but do not include refunds to prisons of any recoverable VAT, details of which are not readily available.

As announced in paragraph 23 of the recently published plans for the new partnership between the Prison Service and the Department for Education and Employment "Improving Prisoners' Learning and Skills", a copy of which is in the Library, funding for education, libraries and education materials will be at least £51 million in 2001–02, with planned increases to at least £59 million in 2002–03 and £63 million in 2002–04. These figures allow for VAT refunds.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the average number of hours per prisoner spent in educational classes per week, in each year from 1992 to present; and if he will make a statement. [152874]

Mr. Boateng: The available information is set out in the table. Information is not available for years before 1995. Comparable data are not collected from private sector prisons.

The figures relate only to education classes delivered by education contractors, who are in the main further education colleges, and do not include vocational training, physical education or distance learning. Not all prisoners need or wish to participate in education classes and the figures do not therefore reflect the number of hours spent by those prisoners who engage in education classes.

Year	*Average number of hours per prisoner per week spent in education classes in public sector prisons*
1995	3 hours 36 minutes
1996	3 hours 12 minutes
1997	2 hours 54 minutes
1998	2 hours 54 minutes
1999–2000	3 hours 12 minutes

Note:
Figures may not all be on a like for like basis as the 1999–2000 hours of study data relate to the financial year not calendar year as previously.

Correspondence

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will respond to the letters from the hon. Member for Manchester, Central dated 19 October 2000 and 17 January about Mr. H. H. R. (H1001080). [154589]

Mrs. Roche: Lord Bassam wrote to my hon. Friend on my behalf on 16 February.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what average time was spent on remand in 2000 by *(a)* females aged under 21 years, *(b)* males aged under 21 years, *(c)* adult females and *(d)* adult males, respectively. [154653]

Mr. Boateng: Provisional figures for time spent on remand are given in the table.

Average number of whole weeks spent on remand by adult defendants in indictable cases in 2000

	Average whole weeks spent remanded:		
	In custody	*On bail*	*Number of defendants*
Adult defendants who were remanded in custody throughout court proceedings	6	0	1,563
Adult defendants who were remanded in custody for part of the proceedings	4	8	1,449
Adult defendants who were remanded on bail only	0	10	14,046
All adult defendants	1	6	24,750

Prisoner Releases

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for the period between the commencement of the Home Detention Curfew scheme and 28 February inclusive, *(a)* the number of prisoners released on the scheme, *(b)* the number of prisoners convicted of each specific offence who were released on the scheme, with a breakdown of the offences committed, including specific offences committed by prisoners normally classified under the categories (i) other homicide and attempted homicide, (ii) other violence against the person, (iii) drug offences, (iv) assaults and (v) other offences, including a breakdown of the prisoners normally classified in the sub-category of other offences called other offences, *(c)* the average sentence (i) received and (ii) served, and the average period spent on the scheme, in respect of each specific offence, *(d)* the number of prisoners released on the scheme, with a breakdown of the offences committed, who (i) breached the conditions of the curfew, (ii) disappeared and were recaptured, (iii) disappeared and remain unlawfully at large and (iv) had their licences revoked, and for what reasons, *(e)* a breakdown of the specific offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme while on the scheme, including all offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence and *(f)* a breakdown of the specific offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme who committed a further offence while on the scheme that was similar in character to that for which they were originally convicted, including all offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence; and if he will make a statement. [152693]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* I have written to the right hon. Member and placed a copy of the letter in the Library.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the longest period of detention a person at present seeking asylum in the United Kingdom has been held in detention since arrival at a port of entry in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [154453]

Mrs. Roche: The longest period of detention of an asylum seeker currently detained under Immigration Act powers and so detained since their arrival in the United Kingdom on 30 July 1999, is 600 days.

While detention under Immigration Act powers should always be for the shortest period possible, the decision on whether to maintain detention is strictly monitored and made on a case-by-case basis. Various factors influence that process, such as an individual's previous history, connections with the United Kingdom and an assessment on their willingness to comply with the terms of any temporary admission or release. In all cases detention must be considered essential for it to continue.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy with regards to ethnic Albanians from Presevo returning to that part of Serbia after being refused asylum in the United Kingdom. [154260]

Mrs. Roche: Under the Milosevic regime, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was not prepared to accept failed asylum seekers back into the country. It has therefore not been possible to make returns to FRY (apart from Kosovo) for several years. However, following the change of government and the restoration of full diplomatic relations, we are in touch with the authorities of the FRY about arrangements for returning FRY

nationals with no basis for continued stay in the United Kingdom. We shall not seek to enforce returns unless we are satisfied that to do so would be consistent with our international obligations.

Deportations

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women have been deported in each of the last three years for (i) criminal and (ii) immigration offences; and if he will make a statement. [154459]

Mrs. Roche: The requested information on the number of persons deported in each of the last three years for criminal and immigration offences is shown in the table. Information on the gender of those persons removed is not held centrally and could be obtained only by examining individual case files.

Persons removed from criminal and immigration offences 1998–2000[1,2]

	1998	*1999*[3]	*2000*[3]
Criminal offences			
Conducive to the public good[4]	115	115	[5]—
Following court recommendation[6]	240	250	[5]—
Immigration offences			
Breaches of Conditions of leave to enter and remain[7]	1,350	790	[5]—
Deportation of family members[8]	15	[9]—	[5]—
Total[1]	1,720	1,170	1,705

[1] Includes voluntary departures
[2] Under the provisions of section 3(5) and 3(6) of the Immigration Act 1971
[3] Data are provisional
[4] Under section 3(5)(b) of the Immigration Act 1971. This may include instances of deportation where there was no conviction of a criminal offence
[5] Not available
[6] Under section 3(6) of the Immigration Act 1971
[7] Under section 3(5)(a) of the Immigration Act 1971
[8] Under section 3(5)(c) of the Immigration Act 1971
[9] Less than 5
Note:
All figures rounded to the nearest five

Animal Experiments

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of animals that were used for experimental purposes in England and Wales during the last 12 months. [154458]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Information relating to scientific procedures performed on living animals is collected and published for each calendar year and laid before Parliament in a Command Paper in late summer the following year. The number of animals used in scientific procedures which were started in 1999, the latest year for which figures are available, was 2.57 million. More detailed information is given in Table 1a of the publication Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain, 1999, a copy of which is in the Library.

Criminal Record Checks (Volunteers)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances business volunteers working as mentors in schools will be required to be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau; and if so whether they will be exempt from paying the fee. [154004]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On the assumption that the person's role was unpaid and entailed working in a school or unsupervised access to children, the person would be eligible for a high level disclosure which would be free of charge.

Cruelty to Animals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were convicted of cruelty to animals in England and Wales in each of the last three years, who were sentenced to a term of imprisonment. [154455]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information taken from the Home Office's court proceedings database showing the number of persons convicted of cruelty to animals who were sentenced to a term of imprisonment during the period 1997–99 is given in the table. The proportion of those convicted of an animal cruelty offence sentenced to a term of imprisonment rose from 4.9 per cent. in 1997 to 5.4 per cent. in both 1998 and 1999.

Number of persons convicted at all courts and sentenced to a term of imprisonment[1] *for offences relating to animal cruelty, England and Wales 1997–99*

	1997		*1998*		*1999*	
Offence	*Convictions*	*Of which sentenced to a term of imprisonment*	*Convictions*	*Of which sentenced to a term of imprisonment*	*Convictions*	*Of which sentenced to a term of imprisonment*
Protection of Animals Act, 1911 (as amended)	867	45	887	56	825	55
Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, Sec 8	8	—	2	—	1	—
Protection of Animals Act, 1934	4	—	4	—	—	—
Docking and Necking of Horses Act, 1949	—	—	—	—	—	—
Pet Animals Act, 1951	4	—	6	—	9	—
Protection of Animals (Amendment) Act, 1954	30	3	19	3	21	1
Animal Health Act, 1981, Secs 40–42, 46 and 49 and Orders made under Secs 8, 9, 37, 38, 39 and 43	57	—	62	—	34	—
Slaughterhouses Act, 1974	—	—	2	—	4	—
Abandonment of Animals Act, 1960, Sec 1	21	—	26	1	12	—
Animals (Cruel Poisons) Act, 1962	1	—	—	—	—	—
Animal Boarding Establishments Act, 1963	2	—	5	—	6	—
Riding Establishments Acts, 1964 and 1970	—	—	1	—	—	—
Slaughter of Poultry Act, 1967	3	—	15	1	7	—

Number of persons convicted at all courts and sentenced to a term of imprisonment[1] for offences relating to animal cruelty, England and Wales 1997–99

Offence	1997 Convictions	1997 Of which sentenced to a term of imprisonment	1998 Convictions	1998 Of which sentenced to a term of imprisonment	1999 Convictions	1999 Of which sentenced to a term of imprisonment
Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1968, Secs 1, 2 and 6	8	—	5	—	11	—
Protection of Badgers Act, 1992 (except Sec 13)	25	10	4	—	10	4
Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, Sec 9	3	—	—	—	—	—
Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, Sec 11	—	—	3	—	3	—
Wild Mammals (Protection) Act, 1996	3	—	7	2	—	—
Breeding of Dogs Acts, 1973 and 1991	4	—	4	—	4	—
Diseases of Animals Act	74	—	65	—	39	—
Wild Birds Protection Acts	63	—	42	—	118	—
Total	1,177	58	1,159	63	1,104	60

[1] Includes offenders sentenced to a term of detention in a Young Offender Institution

Metropolitan Police (Suspensions)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Metropolitan Police officers have been suspended from duty for a period of over 18 months due to allegations about their conduct in each of the last five years. [154452]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has provided the information in the table:

Year of suspension	Number of officers suspended
1996	13
1997	14
1998	40
1999	12

The figure for the year 2000 is not readily available because the 18 month period has not yet elapsed.

Sectarian Violence

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce legislation to treat sectarian motivated violence and harassment as a specific crime. [154389]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have no present plans to introduce legislation to make a specific offence of violence or harassment motivated by hostility based on the victim's membership (or presumed membership) of a religious group. The courts already have power to reflect aggravating factors of this type in the sentences they pass.

Entry Permits

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the criteria under which an immigration officer may grant *(a)* an asylum seeker and *(b)* an immigrant a 28 day permit to enter the United Kingdom. [154297]

Mrs. Roche: Although immigration officers are able to exercise discretion when granting leave to enter, there are no specific categories which provide for entry for 28 days only; therefore, no criteria exist for such a grant of leave.

Newly arrived asylum seekers would not normally be granted entry on arrival. They would, instead, be granted temporary admission pending consideration of their application for asylum. Dependent upon circumstances, the period of temporary admission will vary. However, if they had no friends or family in the United Kingdom and were granted temporary admission, this could initially be for one month, but again no specific criteria exist for this.

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* asylum seekers and *(b)* immigrants were given temporary admission to the United Kingdom by immigration officials at Heathrow in each of the last six months. [154308]

Mrs. Roche: The information is given in the table.

Table 1: Asylum cases granted temporary admission (excluding DAS)

Arrival month	Total Heathrow Terminal 1	Total Heathrow Terminal 2	Total Heathrow Terminal 3	Total Heathrow Terminal 4	Monthly total
September 2000	150	179	216	105	650
October 2000	161	126	211	116	614
November 2000	155	152	230	117	654
December 2000	166	171	236	127	700
January 2001	101	114	212	94	521
February 2001	101	126	200	92	519
Port total	834	868	1,305	651	3,658

Table 2: Non asylum cases granted temporary admission (excluding DAS)

Arrival month	*Total Heathrow Terminal 1*	*Total Heathrow Terminal 2*	*Total Heathrow Terminal 3*	*Total Heathrow Terminal 4*	*Monthly total*
September 2000	111	181	231	84	607
October 2000	79	169	188	67	503
November 2000	99	136	187	84	506
December 2000	102	143	209	52	506
January 2001	106	165	166	84	521
February 2001	123	154	220	90	587
Port total	620	948	1,201	461	3,230

Note:
All totals exclude asylum dependants (DAS).

Airwave Public Safety Radio

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment has been made of the trials of the Airwave public safety radio communications system; and if he will make a statement. [154431]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The main evaluation began on 19 March when Divisions in the Lancashire Constabulary started to migrate progressively to Airwave and use the service operationally. Service performance will be assessed continually by the Lancashire force and the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO) against rigorous criteria and a formal report is planned for issue in June 2001. If the service meets the criteria set out in the main Airwave contract then national implementation of the service will begin.

Last autumn a number of contractually defined tests to prove radio coverage and service features and performance were carried out. Both Lancashire and PITO were party to these tests which proved satisfactory. PITO subsequently ran and monitored a large number of scripted quasi-operational tests on the system for a seven week period between November 2000 and January 2001. These tests involved some 300 police personnel drawn from the majority of forces in England, Wales and Scotland. User feedback was generally very positive.

Coram Family

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what additional information the Charity Commission has requested from the Coram family since the Attorney-General intervened in the collection scheme. [153669]

Mr. Boateng: This is a matter for the Charity Commission, who will write to the hon. Gentleman. A copy of the Commission's reply will be placed in the Library.

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153420]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information requested is as follows:

(a) Home Office Campaigns

1996–97—Expenditure £5.23 million

Car Crime Prevention

Accelerated Promotion Scheme for Graduates (APSG) Police

Electoral Registration

Special Constables

Fire Safety

Retained Firefighters

1997–98—Expenditure £2 million

Absent Voting

Accelerated Promotion Scheme for Graduates (APSG) Police

Electoral Registration

Special Constables

Fire Safety

1998–99—Expenditure £1.8 million

Electoral Registration

Accelerated Promotion Scheme for Graduates (APSG) Police

Fire Safety

Special Constables

Crime Partnerships

1999–2000—Expenditure £6.37 million

European Parliament Election—including United Kingdom-wide household door drop

Accelerated Promotion Scheme for Graduates (APSG) Police

Electoral Registration

Fire Safety

Special Constables

Door drop for European Elections

2000–01—Expenditure to date £24.43 million

Fire Safety—including household door drop in England and Wales

Vehicle Crime

Police Recruitment including Accelerated Promotion Scheme for Graduates (APSG)

Human Rights

Rolling Registration

Home Office Agencies

(b) Forensic Science Service

1996–97—Expenditure £61,914

Corporate sector direct mail campaigns

Corporate sector (trade Press) advertising campaigns

1997–98—Expenditure £92,700

Law Enforcement sector (trade press) advertising campaigns

Corporate sector (trade press) advertising campaigns

1998–99—Expenditure £54,883

Corporate sector (trade press) advertising campaigns

Law Enforcement sector (trade press) advertising campaigns
Corporate sector direct mail campaigns

1999–2000—Expenditure £32,899

Corporate sector (trade press) advertising campaigns

Law Enforcement sector (trade press) advertising campaigns
Corporate sector direct mail campaigns

2000–01—Expenditure £9,713

Corporate sector (trade press) advertising campaigns

Corporate sector direct mail campaigns

Law Enforcement sector (trade press) advertising campaigns

Prison Service Agency

1996–97—Expenditure £40,000

Prison Officer Fast Track

1997–98—Expenditure £28,000

Prison Officer Fast Track

1998–99—Expenditure £48,000

Prison Officer Fast Track

1999–2000—Expenditure £0

2000–01—Expenditure £0

UK Passport Agency

1996–97—Expenditure £10,000

Abolition of British Visitors Passport

1997–98—Expenditure £0

1998–99—Expenditure £0

1999–2000—Expenditure £678,000

Passport Extension

Passport fee increase

2000–01—Expenditure £50,000

Passport Awareness Door Drop

Departmental Public Bodies

(c) Commission for Racial Equality

1996–97—Expenditure £300,000

European Year Against Racism

1997–98—Expenditure £0

1998–99—Expenditure £40,000

Personal Responsibility

1999–2000—Expenditure £0

2000–01—Expenditure to date £200,000

"Would I?" campaign.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Corus

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what factors arising from the downsizing of Corus will be taken into account in his current review of company law. [154515]

Dr. Howells: The wide-ranging review of company law launched by Government in 1998 is being conducted by an independent steering group of company law experts, business people and others. It is expected to present a final report to Ministers later this year. I am sure that the steering group will take all relevant factors into account in reaching its conclusions and recommendations.

Miners' Compensation

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements his Department has made for undertaking further medical assessment procedures in the north east of Wales since the current office was refused planning permission by Wrexham County Borough Council. [154545]

Mr. Hain: Healthcall has been asked to cease assessments in May. There are only a small number of claimants in the Wrexham area and Healthcall is investigating alternative sites in the area for the portakabin modular unit with the help of the local council.

In addition, Healthcall is in the process of equipping two mobile testing units to be used throughout Great Britain. If it is unable to identify an alternative site for the portakabin it plans to use the mobile units to test in Wrexham as and when the need arises.

I visited this site recently and have given an undertaking that there will be no disruptions or delay to the processing of claims of appointments.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many more claims for compensation his Department expects to receive from ex-miners and their families from the north east of Wales. [154547]

Mr. Hain: It is difficult to forecast the number of further claims of compensation for respiratory disease expected. Nation-wide, there are currently 1,000 new claims initiated in respect of respiratory disease each week. The current number of claims is currently 140,000.

In relation to vibration white finger, VWF, there was a cut-off date on 30 September 2000. The total number of claims is 118,000.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what timescale his Department has for processing claims for compensation from ex-miners and their families from the north east of Wales. [154546]

Mr. Hain: It is difficult to say how long it will take before the last claim is assessed in the north east of Wales. New claims can still be made and across the UK there are about 1,000 new claims each week. We are prioritising the most injured and eldest miners and widows.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims from ex-miners and their widows from the north east of Wales coalfield his Department has received in the last five years. [154548]

Mr. Hain: In the area of north east Wales, as defined by the postcodes LL11–16, 18–22, 24, 26, 28–29, 32–34, CH1 and 4–8, IRISC, the Department's claims handlers, have registered 1,256 claims in respect of compensation for respiratory disease and 549 claims in relation to vibration white finger, VWF. To date, there have been 371 individual payments totalling £1.37 million in respect of respiratory disease and 139 individual payments in respect of VWF amounting to £0.66 million.

Gas and Electricity Prices

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the price paid for electricity and gas *(a)* by very large consumers in the United Kingdom steel industry and *(b)* by their competitors in Europe. [154276]

Mr. Hain: Figures are not separately available for energy prices to the iron and steel industry.

In general, industrial consumers in the UK paid lower prices in real terms for electricity in 2000 than in any year since 1970. Average prices paid by industrial consumers for electricity in the UK in 1999 were seventh lowest of the 12 EU member states for which data are available. We recognise that some large industrial consumers may be paying more for electricity than their EU counterparts.

In general, industrial consumers in the UK paid higher prices in real terms for gas in 2000 than in 1999, however they remain lower than in any year prior to 1996. Average prices paid by industrial consumers for gas in the UK in 1999 were the lowest of the eight EU member states for which data are available. The latest information available suggests that large industrial consumers are continuing to pay less for gas than their EU counterparts, despite the recent increases in prices.

The Department conducts a quarterly survey of 1,200 manufacturing companies in Great Britain, the results of which are published in "Energy Trends". Data collected by this survey for Quarter 3 2000 indicate that extra large industrial users of electricity, i.e. those consuming more than 150 GWh per annum, pay 2.54 p/kWh and that large industrial users of gas, i.e. those consuming more than 8.8 GWh per annum, pay 0.529 p/kWh.

Data from Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Commission, for electricity and gas prices to different sizes of consumer are published twice a year in their "Statistics in Focus" publication. The latest available information for the largest consumers from this source are presented below:

Natural gas prices for industry, pence per kwh

	1 January 2000		*1 July 2000*	
	Size I4–2 (116.3 GWh p.a.)	*Size I5 (1163 GWh p.a.)*	*Size I4–2 (116.3 GWh p.a.)*	*Size I5 (1163 GWh p.a.)*
Belgium—National	0.66	n/a	0.84	n/a
Denmark—National	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Germany—Dusseldorf	0.94	0.77	1.19	0.85
Spain—Madrid	0.84	0.84	1.02	1.02
France—Paris	0.83	n/a	0.97	n/a
Ireland—Dublin	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Italy—Milan	0.84	n/a	1.05	n/a
Luxembourg—City	1.08	n/a	1.34	n/a
Netherlands—Rotterdam	0.82	0.65	n/a	n/a
Austria—Vienna	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Finland—National	0.86	0.72	0.96	0.75
Sweden—National	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
UK—National	0.65	0.52	0.71	0.52

Notes:
1. Prices include all taxes unless refunded. Prices converted using monthly average exchange rates.
2. n/a indicates that data are not available, usually because of confidentiality issues.

Source:
Derived from Eurostat Statistics in Focus

Electricity prices for industry, pence per kWh

	1 January 2000		*1 July 2000*	
	Size Ih (50 GWh p.a., 10MW, 5,000 hrs)	*Size Ii (70 GWh p.a., 10MW, 7,000 hrs)*	*Size Ih (50 GWh p.a., 10MW, 5,000 hrs)*	*Size Ii (70 GWh p.a., 10MW, 7,000 hrs)*
Belgium—National	3.01	2.58	3.17	2.72
Denmark—National	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Germany—Dusseldorf	2.86	2.59	3.87	3.44
Spain—Madrid	3.50	3.23	3.50	3.23
France—Paris	2.80	2.52	n/a	n/a
Ireland—Dublin	3.31	3.01	3.31	3.04
Italy—National	4.07	3.66	4.54	4.13
Luxembourg-Grand Duchy	2.71	2.38	2.72	2.40
Netherlands—Rotterdam	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Austria—Vienna	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Finland—National	1.92	1.85	1.93	1.85
Sweden—National	1.79	1.67	1.91	1.78
UK—National	3.17	3.11	3.32	3.09

Notes:
1. Prices include all taxes unless refunded. Prices converted using monthly average exchange rates.
2. n/a indicates that data are not available, usually because of confidentiality issues.

Source:
Derived from Eurostat Statistics in Focus

Data from a private consultant, "Energy Advice", indicate the latest prices for these sizes of consumer are as follows:

Gas prices for industry, pence per kWh

	1 January 2000		*1 July 2000*		*1 February 2001*	
	Size D (106 GWh p.a.)	*Size F (1164 GWh p.a.)*	*Size D (106 GWh p.a.)*	*Size F (1164 GWh p.a.)*	*Size D (106 GWh p.a.)*	*Size F (1164 GWh p.a.)*
Belgium	0.76	0.69	0.96	0.89	1.21	1.13
Germany	0.99	0.72	1.30	1.01	1.62	1.18
France	0.85	0.80	1.00	0.95	1.25	1.20
Italy	0.94	0.84	1.17	1.02	1.39	1.19
Netherlands	0.83	0.69	1.00	0.86	1.25	1.12
UK	0.56	0.51	0.57	0.51	0.77	0.73

Notes:
1. Prices include non-refundable taxes.
2. UK prices are estimated averages of all suppliers. New contract prices in mid February are estimated as 1.01–1.06 pence per kWh for large consumers on firm supply terms and 0.92–1.01 pence per kWh for interruptible supplies.

Source:
Energy Advice

Electricity prices for industry, pence per kWh

	1 January 2000		*1 July 2000*		*1 February 2001*	
	Size Ciii (52.5 GWh p.a., 10MW, 5,250 hrs)	*Size Civ (70 GWh p.a., 10MW, 7,000 hrs)*	*Size Ciii (52.5 GWh p.a., 10MW, 5,250 hrs)*	*Size Civ (70 GWh p.a., 10MW, 7,000 hrs)*	*Size Ciii (52.5 GWh p.a., 10MW, 5,250 hrs)*	*Size Civ (70 GWh p.a., 10MW, 7,000 hrs)*
Belgium	3.14	2.72	3.24	2.83	3.27	2.87
Germany	3.20	2.79	3.13	2.52	3.31	2.68
rance	3.00	2.70	2.82	2.55	2.84	2.56
Italy	3.85	3.43	4.63	4.50	4.83	4.72
Netherlands	3.26	2.96	3.35	3.15	2.81	2.77
UK	3.52	3.41	3.08	2.97	3.08	2.97

Note:
Prices include non-refundable taxes.

Source:
Energy Advice

Electricity prices for industry, pence per kWh

	Size Eiv. 80MW Special Contracts/ "As Found", 1 February 2001	
	Minimum	*Maximum*
Belgium	2.40	2.62
Germany	2.10	2.52
France	2.03	2.21
Italy	3.97	4.10
Netherlands	2.25	2.45
UK	2.35	2.87

Note:
Prices include non-refundable taxes.

Source:
Energy Advice

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with BNFL in respect of the implementation of the company's new management of change arrangements. [154200]

Mr. Hain: I met senior managers of BNFL on Tuesday 13 March, but managing change within BNFL is a matter for the company, subject to the satisfaction of the nuclear safety regulator, the Health and Safety Executive.

British Coal Canteen Workers (Equal Value Claims)

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the progress towards a settlement between British Coal and its canteen workers on equal value claims. [153613]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Negotiations between the legal representatives of British Coal and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) have re-opened. On 7 March, British Coal made a new and significantly improved offer, but unfortunately there has, as yet, been no response from the NUM side.

I very much hope the NUM will give the offer the serious consideration which it merits, as I am anxious that a way can be found to allow payments to be made to the claimants as quickly as possible.

Departmental Policies (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Sutton and Cheam constituency, the effects on Sutton and Cheam of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154417]

Mr. Caborn: The parliamentary constituency of Sutton and Cheam has benefited from a range of initiatives since May 1997. Direct business advice and support to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) has been provided by the DTI through core programmes and the Business Links. While my Department does not collect detailed statistical information on a constituency basis, over 2,360 requests for advice, information and support from SMEs in Sutton and Cheam have been handled by the Business Links since May 1997.

Departmental Policies (Truro and St. Austell)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St. Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154530]

Mr. Caborn: The Department has provided the following support for businesses in Truro and St. Austell constituency since May 1997.

Regional Selective Assistance (RSA)

RSA is a capital investment grant linked to the creation or safeguarding of jobs in designated areas of need (the Assisted Areas). Two RSA grant offers totalling £0.675 million have been made to businesses in the Truro and St. Austell constituency, to support projects with a total capital expenditure of £7.3 million, and to create and safeguard a total of 163 jobs. The whole of the constituency is included in the new Assisted Areas map effective from July 2000; only parts of the constituency were included in the previous map.

Enterprise Grants

The Enterprise Grants scheme is a simplified scheme that was introduced in April 2000 to help small firms undertake fixed capital investment projects. Two offers totalling £0.024 million have been made to firms in the Truro and St. Austell constituency.

Smart

Smart awards are designed to help small firms with the introduction of new products and processes. Two Smart awards totalling £0.07 million have been made to firms in the Truro and St. Austell constituency.

Business Link

PROSPER Business Link has provided services to small businesses in the Truro and St. Austell constituency since 1997. These include general and specialised advice to help businesses grow, export development counselling, ICT advice, and a full range of specialist information. From April 2001 these services will be provided by the Small Business Service operating through a franchise awarded to a PROSPER led partnership. This new service will be more customer focused ensuring that services are driven by local need.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Protection

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions her Department has had with the Council of Europe to develop joint policies for the welfare and protection of children. [154449]

Clare Short: My Department has not had any recent discussions with the Council of Europe on child protection. However, children are central to DFID's programmes for the eradication of poverty.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what checks her Department makes on goods imported into the United Kingdom to ensure that they are not made by child labour; and if she will make a statement. [154457]

Clare Short: My Department is committed to the reduction of child labour with special emphasis on the worst forms. We do not make checks on goods imported into the UK but are supporting the efforts of Governments, non-governmental organisations, and international bodies such as the International Labour Organisation to end exploitative child labour in developing countries in both domestic and export sectors.

We are also providing assistance to business, through, for example, the Ethical Trading Initiative and the Resource Centre for the Social Dimensions of Business Practice, for the elimination of child labour and other exploitative labour practices, including in supply chains. We support the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development guidelines for multinational enterprises.

In November 1999 we published a report on child labour—"Helping not Hurting Children"—which outlines the dangers for children of calls for boycotts and trade sanctions. A copy will be sent to my hon. Friend.

General Agreement on Trade in Services

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the impact of the proposed General Agreement on Trade in Services on basic services in developing countries. [154302]

Clare Short: Developing and developed country governments choose both the sectors in which and the extent to which they liberalise services under the General Agreement on Trade in Services. Services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority—that is, public services like health and education services—are explicitly excluded from the GATS (although private services are covered by the GATS).

Further liberalisation of private services under GATS offers developing countries potential benefits in a number of different sectors. Increased competition in basic services such as banking, transport and telecommunications would provide more efficient and effective infrastructure in developing countries, which is vital if they are to achieve the economic growth they need to reduce poverty.

Colombia

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to the US Government concerning the use of herbicide spraying as part of the drug-crop eradication campaign, Plan Colombia. [153933]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

The FCO and other Departments maintain a wide-ranging and regular dialogue on drugs issues with the US Government and other key international partners. This dialogue includes discussion of drug crop eradication methods in Colombia and in other drug producing countries.

We have indicated our support for the principle of independent international monitoring of the aerial fumigation of large-scale illicit drug cultivation in Colombia.

Strategy Unit

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her corporate strategy unit for aid policy department was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for the unit on a full-time basis. [150370]

Clare Short: A strategy unit was established in DFID's Policy Department in 1998. The unit itself publishes no reports, but it played a co-ordinating role in the production by DFID of a set of nine publicly available strategies for achieving the International Development Targets. Special advisers do not participate in the work of the unit. It contains two full-time and one part-time regular departmental staff.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 6 November 2000. [154500]

The Solicitor-General: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 6 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 1W.

On 13 November 2000, the City of Manchester branch of the Crown Prosecution Service underwent the reorganisation I referred to in my previous answer. In line with the Glidewell proposals, the branch now has Trial Units and Criminal Justice Units covering the North and South Manchester Policy Divisions. At the present time and for the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that the Crown Prosecution Service will be able to co-locate with the police at Elizabeth Slinger Road Police Station.

In partnership with other agencies, the Crown Prosecution Service has made a concerted effort to reduce the length of time, between arrest and sentence, that persistent young offenders remain within the criminal justice system. On 25 November 2000, there were 201 persistent young offender cases currently before Manchester Youth Court. On 14 March 2001, that figure had been reduced to 137. Similarly, the average time from arrest for all current cases has shown a reduction from 98 days to 89 days over the same period. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful period. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the work of the criminal justice system.

On 15 January 2001, section 51 Crime and Disorder Act 1988 came into force. One of the first cases dealt with by the City of Manchester branch involved the arrest of four defendants under Operation Auction 1. This, as my right hon. Friend knows, is a police operation set up to combat a high level of street robberies in Gorton. The four defendants made their first appearance before Manchester City Magistrates Court on 16 January 2001. On 24 January 2001 they appeared before the Crown Court. One of the defendants, Stuart Smith, indicated immediately that he intended to plead guilty to assault with intent to rob. He entered his guilty plea on 8 February 2001 and was sentenced to a Detention and Training Order for two years. This illustrates the potential effectiveness in speeding up serious cases. Slightly over three weeks from the date of his first court appearance, the defendant received a substantial custodial sentence. Previously the case was unlikely to have been finalised within three months. Committal proceedings would have taken approximately eight weeks and a further four weeks would have elapsed between committal and a plea and directions hearing at the Crown Court.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office affect my right hon. Friend's constituency only indirectly.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Balkans

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on NATO's decision to allow Serb forces into a section of the buffer zone between Kosovo and Macedonia. [154012]

Mr. Vaz: Following the successful negotiation of a ceasefire between the Yugoslav army and local Albanian leaders, the Commander of KFOR (COMKFOR) has authorised the return of FRY forces to one sector of the 5 km Ground Safety Zone (GSZ). Around 900 FRY military personnel have deployed to a small section of the GSZ on the border with Macedonia. In accordance with pre-conditions laid down by COMKFOR, they will not deploy any tanks or heavy artillery. They must also ensure that no Serb irregular or paramilitary forces enter the GSZ. The deployment is being monitored by KFOR.

Tibet

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice he gave to the Princess Royal concerning her plans to visit Tibet. [154209]

Mr. Battle: Government discussions with the Royal Households about the planning and pattern of overseas visits are always in confidence.

Uganda

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the conduct of the presidential election in Uganda. [154299]

Mr. Wilson: The presidential elections in Uganda provided a genuine choice of candidates and alternative policy platforms. In general candidates were able to campaign throughout the country and to present their policies through the media.

We share the concerns expressed in the preliminary report by the consortium of local organisations which monitored the elections (NGO Election Monitoring Group—Uganda) over reports of violence and intimidation including by Government agents, which marred the later stages of the campaign, and over reports of serious

irregularities in some areas on polling day. We await the Ugandan Electoral Commission's response to these concerns.

The patience and goodwill of the majority of Ugandan voters is a testament to their desire for democratic participation.

President Mugabe

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made to the UK by the Belgian Government regarding President Mugabe's recent meeting with the Belgian Foreign Minister. [154673]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The Belgian Government made no representations.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made to the Government of Belgium regarding President Mugabe's recent meetings with them. [154672]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The UK's views on the situation in Zimbabwe were explained to the Belgian Government in writing before their meetings with President Mugabe on 5 March.

TREASURY

Motor Fuel

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the annual cost was in 2000 of the Customs and Excise staff, vehicles and equipment used to combat the smuggling of motor fuel products into Northern Ireland; and how much excise duty he estimates was lost as a result of such smuggling. [153428]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The annual cost of Customs and Excise staff in Northern Ireland tackling all criminal activity affecting its areas of responsibilities was £3.3 million in 2000.

Customs and Excise do not have an estimate of excise duty lost through smuggling of motor fuel products in 2000.

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 6 November 2000. [154498]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Since 6 November, the pre-Budget Report 2000 and Budget 2001 have introduced a number of policies which will further benefit the Manchester, Gorton constituency. In particular, all 10,900 pensioners in Manchester, Gorton will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001; and all 2,300 Working Families Tax Credit recipients in Manchester, Gorton will receive an additional £5 per week from June 2001.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St. Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154537]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Truro and St. Austell, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 1,210, or 41 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 84 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 75 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,161 young people in Truro and St. Austell constituency gain valuable skills and experience—646 (56 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,600 families in Truro and St. Austell constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 22,700 in Truro and St. Austell, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic State Pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 13,800 in Truro and St. Austell.

Departmental Policies (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency, the effect on Lancaster and Wyre of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154683]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Lancaster and Wyre, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 590, or 33 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 74 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 66 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 596 young people in the Lancaster and Wyre constituency gain valuable skills and experience—327 (55 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, around 1,500 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 22,100 in Lancaster and Wyre, will receive an above-inflation increase in the

basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 14,400 in Lancaster and Wyre.

Departmental Policies (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Sutton and Cheam constituency, the effects on Sutton and Cheam of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154413]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Sutton and Cheam, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 786, or 56 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 84 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 86 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 260 young people in Sutton and Cheam constituency gain valuable skills and experience—150 (58 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 500 families in Sutton and Cheam constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 15,400 in Sutton and Cheam, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,100 in Sutton and Cheam.

Tax Credits (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many families in Wales are eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit; [154552]

(2) how many people in Wales have *(a)* applied for and *(b)* receive the Children's Tax Credit. [154551]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates of the number of families in Wales in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) are shown in the WFTC Quarterly Enquiries, copies of which are in the Library.

On the Children's Tax Credit, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers given to the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 497W.

Fuel Duties

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received on the level of fuel duties; and if he will make a statement. [154708]

Mr. Timms: The Government have received numerous recent representations on a wide range of issues including fuel duties. These have all been given careful consideration.

Taxation (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have gained since 1 May 1997 in Shrewsbury and Atcham from the *(a)* reduction in VAT on fuel, *(b)* reduction in the basic income tax and *(c)* introduction of the 10p starting tax rate; and if he will make a statement. [154659]

Dawn Primarolo: All people in Shrewsbury and Atcham who have purchased domestic fuel and power since 1 September 1997 will have benefited from the reduced rate that came into effect on that day.

Nationally, almost all income tax payers gain from the introduction of the 10p starting tax rate and more than 85 per cent. of taxpayers gain from the cut in the basic rate.

For the number of taxpayers in Shrewsbury and Atcham, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 513W.

Annuity Reform

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the calculation underlying the statement in the Red Book 2001, page 95, paragraph 5.67, on the costs of undertaking annuity reform; and if he will make a statement. [154144]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Relaxing the existing requirement to purchase an annuity would provide an incentive for some to use pension schemes for purposes other than providing a secure income throughout retirement. Costs will vary depending on the nature of any reforms, including what level of income must first be secured and what tax charge is applied to withdrawals above that level. Proposals for tax-free withdrawals could cost billions of pounds a year in lost income tax and extra tax relief.

Income Tax Returns

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many days leeway are allowed before a fine is imposed for late submission of personal income tax returns after the due date. [154584]

Dawn Primarolo: Where a tax return is received on the day after the statutory filing date, no penalty is imposed for late submission.

The statutory filing date for most returns is 31 January, so such a return received on 1 February is not penalised. A return found in tax office post box by 7.30 am on 2 February is assumed to have been delivered before midnight on 1 February, and is not penalised.

HEALTH

Midwives

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many midwives there were in *(a)* May 1997, *(b)* 1979 and *(c)* at the latest date for which

figures are available (i) in total and (ii) in full-time equivalents; and if he will assess the impact of the 1994–95 change from a pay scale based system to an occupation code-based one. [142990]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is set out in the table.

The system of classifying National Health Service staff by occupation code introduced in 1995 has proved successful, improving quality of information and at the same time reducing the burden on data suppliers.

NHS hospital and community health services: midwifery staff in England as at 30 September each year

Year	*Whole time equivalent*	*Headcount*
1979	20,020	[1]
1997	18,050	22,380
1999	17,880	22,800

[1] Not available

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
2. Figures exclude learners and agency staff
3. A new classification of the non-medical work force was introduced in 1995
4. Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Community Health Councils

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the role of local councils following the abolition of community health councils. [144193]

Ms Stuart: The democratic deficit in the National Health Service has long been recognised. In future, democratically elected councillors will take on from community health councils the important function of scrutinising local NHS service through local authority overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs).

The provisions that give local authority OSCs the new powers to scrutinise the NHS are contained within the Health and Social Care Bill, which is currently before Parliament. The Bill will enable the OSC to scrutinise and review the operation, management and development of the NHS bodies within its area, it will then make reports and recommendations of those NHS bodies based on the results of that scrutiny.

The aim of the new scrutiny arrangements is to allow flexibility and to enable the building of local authority scrutiny models that are fit for ensuring that the NHS is scrutinised rigorously, and that scrutiny is democratically accountable to the local population.

Treatment Costs

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the average cost per NHS patient of treatment by *(a)* an orthopaedic and *(b)* a podiatric surgeon. [147270]

Mr. Denham: We have made no such estimates.

Nurses (Housing)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what housing is being built for nurses employed in NHS hospitals in the Greater London area. [148312]

Mr. Denham: In the spring of last year a housing co-ordinator was appointed to facilitate access to appropriate affordable housing for National Health Service staff in London and already some 500 units have been available.

An accommodation bureau has also been established and a database now exists containing all the units available. The bureau will enable individual members of staff to be made aware of what is available and to ensure that maximum efficiency is made of the accommodation we currently now access.

A number of bids involving some 7,500 new homes for own occupation for NHS staff have been made under the Starter Home Initiative Challenge Fund via the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. These are currently being evaluated and an announcement will be made in June.

Overseas Doctors

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support and assistance he will be providing to assist overseas doctors in completing the required professional and language tests to enable them to register in this country as part of his proposal to recruit overseas doctors under the NHS plan. [149804]

Mr. Denham: We have no plans to support doctors (many of whom will still be resident in their home countries) while they prepare for professional and language tests that are, in themselves, no guarantee of employment in the United Kingdom. The early stages of testing are, however, more accessible as they are now available in a number of countries outside the UK.

Free Eye Tests

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* each health authority area benefited from free eye tests in the last year. [153147]

Mr. Denham: In 1999–2000, there were some 11.8 million free National Health Service sight tests carried out in the United Kingdom. Figures for health authorities in England are shown in the table.

	Number
Avon	197,740
Barking and Havering	71,990
Barnsley	39,420
Bedfordshire	101,630
Berkshire	129,910
Bexley and Greenwich	73,790
Birmingham	233,450
Bradford	107,360
Brent and Harrow	88,530
Bromley	58,490
Buckinghamshire	111,690
Bury and Rochdale	71,460
Calderdale and Kirklees	113,930
Cambridgeshire	133,610

	Number
Camden and Islington	57,770
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	95,410
County Durham	98,070
Croydon	59,890
Doncaster	53,570
Dorset	144,230
Dudley	62,210
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	97,490
East and North Hertfordshire	102,700
East Kent	128,480
East Lancashire	103,720
East London and the City	129,190
East Riding	106,560
East Surrey	63,540
East Sussex	145,170
Enfield and Haringey	93,560
Gateshead and South Tyneside	70,050
Gloucestershire	109,260
Herefordshire	35,540
Hillingdon	45,130
Isle of Wight	26,560
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	49,490
Kingston and Richmond	50,760
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	105,590
Leeds	130,610
Leicestershire	179,730
Lincolnshire	125,780
Manchester	81,960
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	95,570
Morecambe Bay	59,260
Newcastle and North Tyneside	101,320
Norfolk	153,110
North and East Devon	95,610
North and Mid Hampshire	90,270
North Cumbria	60,250
North Derbyshire	59,240
North Essex	176,190
North Nottinghamshire	81,100
North Staffordshire	85,070
North West Lancashire	103,740
North Yorkshire	125,300
Northamptonshire	107,470
Northumberland	59,040
Nottingham	117,420
Oxfordshire	101,590
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	117,820
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	98,430
Rotherham	41,860
Salford and Trafford	85,830
Sandwell	65,270
Sefton	57,070
Sheffield	103,480
Shropshire	89,010
Solihull	32,680
Somerset	109,570
South and West Devon	137,330
South Cheshire	125,870
South Derbyshire	116,550
South Essex	146,830
South Humber	70,180
South Lancashire	41,710
South Staffordshire	112,150
Stockport	53,300
Sunderland	55,900
Tees	119,930
Wakefield	65,330
Walsall	54,400
Warwickshire	87,130
West Hertfordshire	99,270
West Kent	179,630
West Pennine	80,190
West Surrey	123,040
West Sussex	149,260
Wigan and Bolton	101,500
Wiltshire	126,950
Wirral	70,380
Wolverhampton	58,230
Worcestershire	101,490

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the countries in which officials of the Food Standards Agency have conducted investigations into the safety of food destined for British markets. [150242]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 13 February 2001]:* Primary responsibility for the safety of food rests with the national competent authority of each country, whether a member state of the European Community or a third country. It is the responsibility of each individual country to ensure that food exported to the United Kingdom complies with both national and European Union food safety requirements. The EC, and not the United Kingdom Food Standards Agency, has competence for monitoring and, where appropriate, investigating issues of compliance with EU food safety law, both in third countries exporting food to the European market and in member states producing food for trade within the EC.

NHS Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to begin further consortia procurement programmes for IT systems in the NHS before the post-implementation review of the South West Procurement Programme has been completed and published. [153096]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* As indicated in the National Health Service information management and technology procurement review (published by the NHS Executive in June 2000), the South Western regional procurement programme needs to have been judged as successful by means of a post-implementation review before this approach can be recommended nationally.

In the meantime, however, individual trusts outside South Western region may use a consortium approach to procurement if they wish to do so, and some trusts are doing so at present.

Blood Donors

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what action he is taking to increase the level of blood donations in each of the next five years; [153566]

(2) what steps he is taking to increase the level of blood donorship in each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [154396]

Mr. Denham: The National Blood Service (NBS) plans to recruit 420,000 more donors in the financial year 2001 to 2002. Future recruitment of donors will depend on the demands for blood. The NBS target for collection

is produced annually based on the success of a rolling marketing and communication plan to maximise blood collection.

NBS is working to recruit and retain donors by mailing campaigns and television and radio advertising. A new campaign will be launched later this year. These encourage more frequent donation patterns and NBS research has shown that the "Give Blood" message is successful. Communication with donors continues through a series of initiatives which include the NBS magazine "The Donor", sent to donors twice yearly, contacting donors to remind them of their next donor session and further development the NBS website with plans to include on-line invitations to give blood.

Medical Records

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health under what circumstances NHS hospitals and trusts may withhold medical records from patients who have requested them; and what recent guidance he has issued to hospitals and trusts on this subject. [153774]

Ms Stuart: Medical records can be withheld from a patient where the record contains information that may cause serious harm to the physical or mental health of the patient or any other person or includes confidential information about a third party. Guidance on this issue was issued in 1991 and remains in force.

Waiting Times

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in which health authorities more than one patient in eight has waited over one year for in-patient treatment, excluding day cases, in the last year. [153966]

Mr. Denham: The health authorities at which more than one in eight patients on the waiting list for an ordinary admission have been waiting for more than 12 months are shown in the table.

Health authority[1]	*Percentage of patients who had waited 12 months or more*
East Surrey	14.7
Southampton and South West Hampshire	14.2
West Sussex	13.4

[1] At 31 December 2000

Note:
1 in 8 = 12.5 per cent.

Organ and Tissue Retention

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Retained Organs Commission will validate the system to be used by the Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals NHS Trust for recording the organs and tissues retained following post mortem. [153948]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* The Retained Organs Commission (ROC) expects to receive a recommendation from the South East Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive on the accuracy of the cataloguing of retained organs by the Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals NHS Trust by 30 April 2001, at the latest, in accordance with the guidance issued by the commission on 9 March, a copy of which is at www.nhs.uk/retainedorgans.

Validation by the ROC of the system used by this trust will depend upon the substance of this recommendation.

Barnet Health Authority

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about waiting lists in the Barnet health authority area. [154739]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The in-patient waiting list at Barnet health authority has fallen from 7,321 at 31 March 1997 to 5,507 at 31 January 2001, (the latest date for which figures are available). This represents a decrease of 25 per cent.

Residential Homes

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what new measures he plans to introduce to reduce the incidence of *(a)* overuse and mis-use of medicinal drugs, *(b)* physical abuse, *(c)* sexual abuse and *(d)* neglect of residents of homes for the elderly. [154077]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* We are reforming the current regulatory arrangements for care homes and nursing homes for all client groups. The Care Standards Act 2000 establishes a new independent body, the National Care Standards Commission, which will regulate all care homes, whether in the private, voluntary or statutory sector, from April 2002. The commission will register and inspect homes according to national minimum standards. These standards will promote better quality of care and prevent abuse of all kinds by grounding practice on the principles of dignity, choice, privacy and respect.

They will guarantee residents access to an effective complaints procedure and ensure that residents are cared for by trustworthy, competent and reliable staff, who have been properly trained for this difficult and sensitive job.

National minimum standards for care homes for older people were published on 2 March 2001. We intend to publish standards for other client groups in homes soon.

In addition, the Department launched guidance titled 'No Secrets' on 20 March 2000, under Section 7 of the Local Authority Services Act 1970. 'No Secrets' deals with developing and implementing multi-agency policies and procedures to protect vulnerable adults from abuse.

All prescribing for older people, including those in residential and nursing home care, should be undertaken and monitored carefully by the doctor responsible. The Department published advice in 1998 on prescribing in residential and nursing homes. The National Service Framework for Older People will contribute to improving the care of older people with dementia by setting national standards for health and social care services.

British Fluoridation Society

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what purposes grants are paid to the British Fluoridation Society Ltd. [152905]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* Grants are paid to enable the British Fluoridation Society to provide information to health authorities, water undertakers and the general public on technical aspects of water fluoridation projects and the effects of fluoridation on levels of dental decay and overall health.

Bed Blockers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department collects weekly figures on the numbers of bed blockers; if he will publish the figures; and how many bed blockers there were on *(a)* 1 March 2001, *(b)* 1 February 2001, *(c)* 1 January 2001, *(d)* 1 December 2000 and *(e)* 1 November 2000. [153973]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available for the dates requested. The information on bed blockers is available through Quarterly Monitoring Returns, which are available in the Library.

Variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about clusters of cases of Variant Creutzfeldt Jakob disease. [155227]

Yvette Cooper: Ninety-seven 'definite' and 'probable' cases of variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (vCJD) have been identified to date. A number of geographically associated case groupings is under investigation, but only one such grouping has so far been identified by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) in July 2000 as being unlikely to have occurred by chance. That grouping of cases occurred in an area in Leicestershire near Queniborough. A subsequent investigation by Leicestershire health authority into these cases has been undertaken and the results are being announced in a report published today. A copy is being placed in the Library. The main conclusion from the investigation is that there is a strong association between these cases and cross-contamination of carcase meat with cattle brain material which occurred at a number of local butchers' premises during the 1980s.

Controls on specified risk material (SRM) have, since 1989, required brains of cattle over six months old to be removed and disposed of under controlled conditions. It has been illegal since then for them to be used for human consumption. And, since 1996, it has been a legal requirement for the whole head of cattle over six months old to be disposed of in the slaughterhouse as SRM under the supervision of the Meat Hygiene Service.

Scientific advisers and health experts, including SEAC, will be looking very carefully at the results of the study, to assess the implications for our wider understanding of vCJD.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues in *(a)* the Treasury and *(b)* the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions concerning the economic impact on the tourism industry of foot and mouth disease; [153744]

(2) what discussions he has had with representatives of the tourism industry regarding the availability of compensation for loss of business resulting from foot and mouth disease; [153743]

(3) what estimate he has made of the economic impact of foot and mouth disease on the tourism industry. [153745]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the statement I made in the House on 14 March 2001, *Official Report,* columns 1021–36 and to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 20 March 2001, *Official Report,* columns 191–210.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting has met with industry representatives to discuss the economic difficulties facing the tourism industry on a number of occasions in the last few weeks; she also visited Devon on 14 March to hear firsthand from tourism businesses. I similarly visited Cumbria on 16 and 17 March, and have had a number of meetings with tourism representatives and with ministerial colleagues.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who is responsible for making the VAT payment on the donation given by the Hinduja brothers to the Faith Zone of the Millennium Dome. [153733]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), having recently reviewed its papers on the Hinduja Foundation's contribution of £1 million to the Faith zone, concluded that VAT is chargeable in respect of that contribution. NMEC reached this conclusion on the basis that an allocation of free tickets to the Hinduja Foundation represented a benefit. The Company made a voluntary disclosure to HM Customs and Excise. NMEC has now brought this payment into account for VAT purposes and will make the appropriate payment when all related aspects are agreed with HM Customs and Excise. NMEC is satisfied that in respect of the earlier treatment of the Hinduja Foundation's contribution, and the latter allocation of tickets, there was no deliberate attempt by NMEC staff to avoid VAT. There was an innocent error which, having been identified, is now being corrected.

Churches

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received on the grant to churches awarded in the recent Budget; how churches can apply; and if he will make a statement. [154567]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My Department has been charged by the Chancellor with taking forward the development of the new grant scheme for listed places of worship. The announcement has attracted considerable interest, and my officials have taken numerous inquiries since the 7 March. It is my intention that the scheme should be operational as early as possible and I will make a further announcement in due course.

Underwater Archaeology

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what additional funding will be made available to English Heritage to take account of new responsibilities in relation to underwater archaeology. [154233]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* English Heritage's overall grant in aid will be increased by £7 million in 2002–03, and £9 million in 2003–04, partly to take into account the transfer to English Heritage of functions relating to underwater archaeology. English Heritage will also receive £350,000 per year, which represents the sum currently spent by DCMS on underwater archaeology.

Communications White Paper

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what response the Government have received to the White Paper "A New Future for Communications"; and if he will make a statement. [155263]

Mr. Chris Smith: Some 250 organisations and individuals have submitted general responses to the White Paper which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I announced on 12 December last year.

The overall thrust of the White Paper was largely welcomed by respondents, and it was notable that the overwhelming majority expressed support for the creation of a new single regulator, an Office of Communications (OFCOM).

More specific issues attracted a range of views. These responses are being placed on the Communications White Paper website (www.communicationswhitepaper.gov.uk), except where the respondent requested otherwise.

In addition, some 6,500 letters and e-mail messages have been received specifically in support of Christian broadcasting and these are also being taken into account.

A summary of these responses by independent consultants, David Graham & Associates, has also been published on the website and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Air Pollution

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will give details of the 2001–02 charging schemes for local air pollution control under Part 1 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and Local Authority-Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control under the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999. [154043]

Mr. Hill: Charges to cover the costs of local enforcing authorities in regulating processes which are subject to Part 1 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 were introduced in April 1991. Interim charges for processes which are subject to the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 were introduced in August 2000.

With the approval of the Treasury, and following consultation with local authority associations and industry, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has made revised schemes for England in respect of Environmental Protection Act and England and Wales in respect of the Pollution Prevention and Control Act. The schemes specify the scale of fees and charges to take effect from 1 April 2001.

The initial application fee will be unchanged and the annual subsistence fee will be increased by £1 for both schemes. For those processes transferring, in due course, to local authority control under the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 there will be an increase of £56 in subsistence charge to cover the production of new technical guidance.

The Secretary of State was unable to justify an increase in the basic fees and charges from 1 April 2001 because not enough local authorities are undertaking cost accounting for their functions under Part 1 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and there is insufficient financial information.

The schemes will be laid before both Houses and copies placed in the Libraries.

Civil Servants (Accommodation)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the policy of his Department is towards providing accommodation for departmental civil servants in London. [153784]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* My Department does not provide living accommodation for staff working in London or anywhere else in the country. Where there is a business need for staff to work in London, and where this results in their having to move home, staff may be able to benefit from a range of allowances available. For example, financial assistance can be provided towards the costs of searching for new accommodation and towards the costs incurred in moving home. An exception to this involves "Duty Officers" who work a shift system and provide a DETR presence during the weekends and nights. These Duty Officers are not provided with a permanent residence but with temporary sleeping accommodation within one of our headquarter buildings.

Dual-fuel Vehicles

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he has taken to encourage vehicle manufacturers to produce vehicles with dual-fuel tanks; and if he will make a statement. [154005]

Mr. Hill: My Department sponsors the Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme that provides grants towards the cost of purchasing cleaner fuel vehicles. Thanks to Powershift and the low level of duty on gas fuels, more vehicle manufacturers and aftermarket converters now produce dual-fuel vehicles that can run on both LPG and petrol. My Department is also in close touch with vehicle manufacturers, encouraging them to introduce production-line dual-fuel vehicles. I am pleased to note that several vehicle manufacturers are considering doing so.

RAM Scrap Incidents

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Health and Safety Executives database on RAM scrap incidents was established; and how many incidents of radioactively contaminated scrap metal have been recorded on the data base. [154227]

Mr. Meacher: In 1996 the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB), HSE and the Environment Agency jointly established the Ionising Radiations Incident Database (IRID). This is essentially a voluntary notification scheme under which 'non nuclear' industries report, to NRPB, radiological incidents which could involve occupational or public exposure. IRID does not solely include information about scrap metal incidents. The database is operated by NRPB and HSE holds no separate database.

The first IRID report, "IRID—Ionising Radiations Incident Database—First Review of Cases Reported and Operation of the Database", published by NRPB in 1999, ISBN 0 85951 436 6, recorded 10 incidents categorised as "recycling of materials".

Coalmining Communities

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what specific support his Department has provided to coalmining communities since 1997 by *(a)* region and *(b)* local authority area. [154305]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Following the report of the Coalfields Task Force in 1997, the Department introduced a range of measures to provide specific support to the coalmining communities. £52 million was allocated to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust to support communities from the coalfield areas of England, Scotland and Wales, to which an additional £45 million has recently been agreed for the Trust in England over the three years to March 2005. In addition, English Partnerships and the Regional Development Agencies are delivering the National Coalfields Programme, for which the Department has provided a ringfenced budget of over £380 million, about £126 million of which has already been committed.

In addition to these coalfield specific programmes, a range of national programmes directly benefit the coalmining communities, including the Single Regeneration Budget, The Housing Investment Programme and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

A detailed breakdown as requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 17 November 2000. [154497]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal funding which this Department has provided to Manchester in 2000–01 is shown in the table. It includes grants and borrowings approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much money has been spent since November 2000 or how much has been spent in the Gorton constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*2000–01*
Revenue Support Grant	282.3
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	119.6
Housing Investment Programme	49.0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	4.5

Electrical Contractors

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to create a statutory UK system of registration for electrical contractors. [154307]

Ms Beverley Hughes: None. The voluntary National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting already has wide coverage among electrical contractors. The Quality Mark and Constructionline, the Government schemes for assessment and approval of contractors in the domestic and non-domestic sectors, are also operated on a voluntary basis. This gives them the necessary flexibility to react to changing circumstances in their respective markets.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to promote the consistent use of the construction line system of registration for electrical contracting companies and to avoid duplication with the Health and Safety Executive's Contractors Health and Safety Assessment Scheme. [154388]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Constructionline, the Government's register of approved contractors and consultants, is developing co-operative arrangements with the local government-operated Contractors Health and Safety Assessment Scheme (CHAS). The aim is to encourage clients to make efficient links between Constructionline and the more detailed health and safety database on CHAS and to avoid duplication for contractors which are registering on the two schemes.

Concessionary Bus Fares

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce a national scheme of concessionary bus fares for pensioners; and if he will make a statement. [154309]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* We have just introduced a national minimum standard for concessionary fares schemes, requiring all authorities to ensure at least half-fare reductions for elderly people on local buses. We have no immediate plans for further standardisation, although we continue to discuss issues of this kind with interested parties.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact on rural policy of the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [153323]

Mr. Meacher: The Government recognise the very serious impact that the outbreak of foot and mouth disease and the restrictions that are necessary to contain it are having on the rural economy generally. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has asked me to chair a task force to consider these impacts and to make recommendations on measures to help those caught up in the crisis and to kick start the rural economy once the outbreak has been eradicated. The Government's policies set out in the White Paper "Our countryside: the future (CM 4909)" published in December 2000, will set the framework for the well-being of our rural areas in the longer term.

Hybrid Bills

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to ensure that *(a)* an environmental assessment and *(b)* an informal public inquiry are carried out in respect of hybrid Bills before they are introduced. [154679]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has not introduced a hybrid Bill during this Parliament. However, hybrid Bills are subject to the same pre-parliamentary processes as other Bills, which includes environmental assessments.

Departmental Policies (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency, the effect on Lancaster and Wyre of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154684]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Lancaster and Wyre constituency has benefited from funding provided to Lancaster city council, Wyre borough council and Lancashire county council. It is for the local authorities to decide where within their areas these resources are invested.

The principal funding which this Department has provided in 1997–98 to 2000–01 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowings approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant[1]	6.7	6.6	6.6	6.5	7.0
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[1]	4.3	4.4	4.7	5.2	5.2
Revenue Support Grant[2]	2.7	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.9
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	3.3	3.3	3.6	4.0	3.9
Housing Investment Programme[3]	1.8	2.0	2.3	3.9	4.3
Capital Receipts Initiative[3]	n/a	1.0	1.1	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme[3]	0	0	0	n/a	n/a
Housing Investment Programme[4]	1.3	1.1	1.2	1.5	1.1
Capital Receipts Initiative[4]	n/a	0.5	0.5	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme[4]	0	0	0	n/a	n/a
ERDF Funding—Lancashire[5]	0.8	0.3	1.7	0	0
ERDF Funding—Lancaster	0.05	0.2	0	0	0
ERDF Funding—Wyre	0	0.02	0	0	0
Transport Supplementary Grant	3.7	1.7	2.9	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	2.1	1.6	1.5	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval[6]	4.9	3.1	5.2	11.0	28.0

[1] Figures for Lancaster city council. These figures have not been adjusted to make year on year comparisons.
[2] Figures for Wyre borough council. These figures have not been adjusted to make year on year comparisons.
[3] Figures for Lancashire county council
[4] Figures of Wyre borough council
[5] Some of the Lancashire projects are county-wide and therefore some of the grant shown may have gone to Lancaster or Wyre.
[6] 2000–01—This figure is from Lancashire county council's provisional Local Transport Plan settlement.

Highways Agency

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Highways Agency will publish its annual report and accounts for 1999–2000. [154910]

Mr. Hill: The Highways Agency annual report and accounts 1999–2000 has been published today and copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Local Government Finance

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government plans to implement the proposed reform of the local authority capital finance system set out in the Green Paper, "Modernising Local government Finances"; and if he will make a statement. [155121]

Ms Armstrong: Consultees have overwhelmingly endorsed our proposals to abolish the present system of local authority capital controls and replace it with the prudential system described in the Green Paper. Legislation will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows. The new system will rely heavily on professional regulation and my Department has agreed to provide financial support to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy who will draft the

necessary professional Code. Work on that and on other detailed development of the system will be taken forward immediately.

Under the new system local authorities will be free to invest in their communities without having to get permission each time from central Government. The consultation confirmed our view that the proposed safeguards in the system will ensure that authorities do not run up unsustainable levels of debt, and that the increased flexibility will allow them to deliver better value for money, including through partnership working.

East Midlands (Planning)

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish his response to the recommendations of the independent panel that conducted the public examination of the draft regional planning guidance for the east Midlands; and if he will make a statement. [155260]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has today published for consultation proposed changes to the draft Regional Planning Guidance for the east Midlands. These are largely based on the recommendations of the independent panel that held a public examination into draft RPG last summer.

In October 2000 my right hon. Friend published new guidance on regional planning in Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) Note 11. This followed the announcement of a new approach to planning for housing provision last March which was taken forward in more detail in revised Planning Policy Guidance Note 3. Important issues for the region to take forward are contained in the Urban and Rural White Papers issued last November. The proposed changes to the draft RPG for the east Midlands reflect the principles and priorities set out in these statements. They aim to support economic growth and regeneration while protecting and enhancing the region's environment.

For housing, the regional allocation and those for each structure plan area are now expressed as annual averages to reflect the requirements in PPG3 and PPG11 for annual bench marks, rather than a fixed total. Adjustments can then be made regularly as required by the "plan monitor and manage" approach. The regional allocation of 13,900 a year should meet expected needs. We are proposing a small reduction for Lincolnshire of 200 a year over the draft to discourage long distance commuting across the regional boundary into East Anglia and reduce the pressure for developing greenfield sites.

We agree with the panel's recommendation that 60 per cent. of housing completions should be on previously developed land by 2008. The regional planning body will be invited to develop sub regional targets to allow for variations in local circumstances while still aiming for 60 per cent. at the regional level. We propose to adopt the panel's recommended annual rate of 3,400 dwellings a year as an appropriate indicator for monitoring whether affordable housing need is being met.

The panel considered that a new business park near to the East Midlands Airport and Junction 24 (M1) in addition to the existing commitments for business development there, could undermine regeneration of nearby urban areas, in particular Nottingham, Derby and Leicester. We agree with the panel, as we are not persuaded that sufficient limitations on occupation are possible through the planning system to avoid harmful displacement of economic activity from those urban areas.

Draft RPG proposed designating two major investment sites (sites of at least 50has and capable of being safeguarded for a single user). We propose to adopt the panel recommendation that no new greenfield sites should be promoted for this purpose until a comprehensive analysis has been carried out of the quantity and quality of the existing supply of employment land.

We make it clear that there should be no variation across the region in the systematic approach to selecting sites for development so as not to damage the credibility of the RPG and to maintain consistency with the sustainable development objectives of national policy. We agree that the coalfields are a priority for regeneration. The outcome of applying a systematic approach to the selection of sites might be that some greenfield development would occur, but only if that is the most sustainable option in the context of local circumstances and the priority for employment development.

We agree with the panel that car parking standards should be consistent with those in Draft PPG13, and should be applied across the region to all new employment development but above certain thresholds.

The consultation period on the proposed changes will be for 12 weeks ending on 15 June. Views are invited and should be made to the Government Office for the east Midlands. Copies of all the relevant documents have been placed in the House Library and made available to the region's MPs.

Sports Planning

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has issued about planning for sport, open space and recreation. [155261]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I am today issuing a consultation paper which proposes new, more robust planning policies for sport, open space and recreation. The proposed revision of Planning Policy Guidance note 17: Sport and Recreation (PPG17) follows our commitment in the Urban and Rural White Papers to creating more sustainable communities that offer a better quality of life.

The draft guidance contains key messages that planning authorities must take into account in preparing their plans and in making planning decisions. It advises authorities to:

conduct assessments of the need for sport, open space and recreational provision in their areas;

plan for additional sports and recreation facilities including playing fields, open spaces, parks, sports centres and stadia where there is an identified shortfall;

protect the existing range of open air and built recreation facilities which are of value to local communities. Authorities should resist the development of open space unless it can be shown that it is not needed for outdoor recreation;

ensure that new developments are provided with attractive, good quality sports and recreation facilities;

locate facilities so that they are accessible by walking, cycling and public transport; and

locate "intensive" recreation facilities such as indoor sports centres in or on the edge of town centres where possible so that they can lend vitality to them.

It is essential to their quality of life that people have access to open space and a wide range of sporting and recreational facilities. We are proposing a systematic assessment procedure to assist local authorities in determining whether any shortfall in the provision of open space, sports or recreational facilities exists in their areas. This will help them in planning to remedy any deficiencies. The draft guidance reinforces current measures to safeguard existing open space and further protects playing fields, which are vital to the health and well being of our young people, as well as benefiting the wider community.

Copies of the consultation draft of PPG17 have been placed in the Library and Vote Office. It will be sent to local planning authorities, developers, sporting organisations and other interested parties, and responses to the draft guidance are invited by Friday 15 June.

Countryside Planning

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has, following publication of the White Paper "Our Countryside: the Future", to clarify planning policy guidance for the countryside; and if he will make a statement. [155262]

Mr. Raynsford: A competitive and sustainable agricultural industry is vital to the economic, social and environmental well-being of rural areas. The Prime Minister's Action "Plan for Farming" and the White Paper "Our Countryside: the Future" emphasised the Government's desire both for agriculture to be prosperous, forward-looking and sustainable, and to encourage diversification and enterprise. Reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is changing the direction of agriculture and the England Rural Development Programme provides a major switch of CAP funds to support the new approach.

Planning policies for the countryside are set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 7, "The Countryside: Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development" (PPG7). That guidance is now four-years-old and needs to be clarified in respect of the Government's policy on farm diversification. I am therefore amending the text of the guidance to reflect the importance that the Government attach to effective planning for sustainable farm diversification projects and the re-use of redundant farm buildings.

The first point in paragraph 2.8 of PPG7 is amended as follows:

"encourage rural enterprise, including the diversification of farm businesses;"

Paragraph 3.4 no longer adequately reflects the significant changes now shaping the agricultural industry. I am therefore deleting the current text and replacing it with the following:

"3.4A—The Government's long term strategy for farming was set out in "A New Direction for Agriculture" published in December 1999 and was taken a step further with the launch of the "Action Plan for Farming" in March 2000. The England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) was launched in October 2000. Together, these are providing opportunities to help the industry become more competitive and diverse and to promote environmental aims. Farming continues to make a significant contribution to the economy of rural areas but increasingly diversification into non-agricultural activities is vital to the continuing viability of many farm businesses. Local planning authorities should set out in their development plans the criteria to be applied to planning applications for farm diversification projects. Local planning authorities should be supportive of well-conceived farm diversification schemes for business purposes that are consistent in their scale with their rural location.

3.4B—The ERDP will, through the Rural Enterprise Scheme (RES) and the Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG), provide support for selected diversification proposals, subject to competition. Success in securing RES and PMG funding may depend upon obtaining prior planning permission for diversification proposals, but the potential availability of any grant funding is not a material consideration when determining a relevant planning application. Further guidance on development related to agriculture (other than that covered by permitted development rights) and to farm diversification is given in Annex C, which includes a non-exclusive list of examples of potential farm diversification. It is usually preferable for farm diversification schemes to re-use good quality existing buildings and put them to a new business use, rather than build new buildings in the countryside. New buildings, either to replace existing buildings or to accommodate expansion of enterprises, may also be acceptable provided that they satisfy sustainable development objectives and are of a design and scale appropriate to their rural surroundings."

Planning guidance relating to the protection of England's best quality agricultural land is also contained in PPG7. The Rural White Paper signalled the Government's intention that decisions about the development or protection of best and most versatile agricultural land (BMV land) should rest with local authorities. Additionally, the Draft Soil Strategy for England, which we published for consultation on 6 March, sets out our wider proposals for protecting and managing our soil resources.

Paragraphs 2.17 and 2.18 of PPG7 are therefore withdrawn and the following paragraphs should be substituted:

"2.17—Development of greenfield land, including the best and most versatile agricultural land (defined as land in grades 1, 2, and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification), should not be permitted unless opportunities have been assessed for accommodating development on previously-developed sites and on land within the boundaries of existing urban areas (see PPG3 in respect of housing development). Where development of agricultural land is unavoidable, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality, except where other sustainability considerations suggest otherwise. These might include, for example, its importance for biodiversity, the quality and character of the landscape, its amenity value or heritage interest, accessibility to infrastructure, workforce and markets, and the protection of natural resources, including soil quality. Some of these qualities

may be recognised by a statutory wildlife, landscape, historic or archaeological designation, such as a National Park or Site of Special Scientific Interest.

2.18—Local authorities planning to allow the development of greenfield land, where soil or agricultural quality is a consideration, should seek advice from MAFF and from other relevant bodies such as English Nature, the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency or English Heritage as appropriate. They may also be required to consult one or more of these agencies of any intention to allow development under the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995, and in respect of development plan proposals as described in Annex C to PPG12. The decision whether to utilise BMV land for development is for each local planning authority, having carefully weighed the options in the light of competent advice."

MAFF will continue to provide technical advice to local planning authorities on agricultural land quality issues and other matters relating to agricultural development as described in Annex B to PPG7. My Department expects to issue good practice guidance on methodologies for integrating competing sustainability considerations later this year. In due course the Government expect to repeal the statutory right available to the Minister of Agriculture under section 18(3) and 44(3) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to require the Secretary of State to intervene in development plans to which MAFF have unresolved objections.

My Department will be writing to every planning authority in England to inform them of the clarification of PPG7 set out in this statement and a version of PPG7 which consolidates these and other changes already announced will be posted on the Department's website at: www.planning.detr.gov.uk. Other planning policy guidance notes and mineral policy guidance notes that refer to PPG7 should be read in conjunction with this statement.

Integrated Transport Planning

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to announce the designation of Centres of Excellence for Integrated Transport Planning. [154899]

Mr. Hill: We are today designating 14 Centres of Excellence for Integrated Transport Planning.

The Centre of Excellence initiative is aimed at recognising the efforts of local authorities in taking forward the planning of integrated transport at the local level and reflects the importance of spreading good practice.

We invited bids from all transport authorities in England (outside London). Having assessed the bids received we have awarded the following local transport authorities or groups of authorities Centre of Excellence status for the period covered by their current local transport plans:

Bristol city council

Devon county council

Hampshire county council

Hertfordshire county council

Nottingham city council

Nottinghamshire county council

Oxfordshire county council

Surrey county council

Warrington borough council

City of York council

Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority and the metropolitan district councils in the Greater Manchester area

Merseyside Passenger Transport Authority and the metropolitan district councils in the Merseyside area

South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority and the metropolitan district councils in the South Yorkshire area

West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority and the metropolitan district councils in the West Yorkshire area.

My Department has also today published "Transport 2010: Meeting the Local Transport Challenge" which sets out how the local transport settlement announced on 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 202W, contributes to the achievement of our local transport objectives established in "Transport 2010: The 10 Year Transport Plan".

Copies of the document have been placed in the Library of both Houses and are available from the Vote Office.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of her Department's policies and actions since 6 November 2000. [154501]

Jane Kennedy: Generally the Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. Over the last four years we have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families. This is an ongoing process.

In December 2000 a business case for a new Civil Justice Centre for Manchester was approved. Work will now be taken forward to provide the new facilities by 2004–05.

The Manchester Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP), which covers the Manchester, Gorton constituency, is one of 165 CLSPs throughout England and Wales.

Throughout the Manchester, Gorton constituency, nine law firms and one Law Centre have been awarded contracts with the Legal Services Commission whose current value amounts to over £476,000. This represents a decrease in funding based on the figures for November 2000.

The broad reason for the decrease is that clients are choosing to attend Not-for-Profit agencies for assistance with social welfare law issues. Consequently across the Greater Manchester area, the total value of contracts awarded to local Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CAB),

including the two CABx in the Manchester, Gorton area and Shelter, has increased to £622,388. A portion of that money will therefore be spent in assisting Gorton constituents.

Additionally, the Trustee Act 2000 came into force on 1 February this year. It sweeps away the restrictive default investment powers granted to trustees, including charitable trustees, by the Trustee Investments Act 1961. They are replaced by a much wider investment discretion for the trustees and the power to make use of modern investment practices. These new powers will continue to be exercisable as default powers by trusts and charities whose founding documents give no or no sufficient investment powers themselves, and contain no restrictions which forbid the taking of such powers. It is expected that older trusts and charities will be the most likely to benefit. There are three or four charities on the Register of Charities associated with Gorton by name, and no doubt many more trusts, charitable and otherwise associated with the area. It is not possible to say which of them might benefit, but the potential for benefit is there for all of them.

Departmental Policies (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency, the effect on Lancaster and Wyre of her Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154680]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

In particular, the constituency of Lancaster and Wyre is part of the North-West Lancashire Community Legal Service Partnership. The partnership is recently formed and is in the process of agreeing its priorities for future funding.

The current annual Legal Services Commission expenditure for the partnership on Civil Legal Help is £451,100.

Also, the Trustee Act 2000 came into force on 1 February this year. It sweeps away the restrictive default investment powers granted to trustees, including charitable trustees, by the Trustee Investments Act 1961. They are replaced by a much wider investment discretion for the trustees and the power to make use of modern investment practices. These new powers will continue to be exercisable as default powers by trusts and charities whose founding documents give no, or no sufficient, investment powers themselves, and contain no restrictions which forbid the taking of such powers. It is expected that older trusts and charities will be the most likely to benefit. There are over 500 charities on the Register of Charities associated with Lancaster and Wyre by name, and no doubt many more trusts, charitable and otherwise associated with the area. It is not possible to say which of them might benefit, but the potential for benefit is there for all of them.

Court Service

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the key performance targets are for the Court Service Executive Agency for 2001–02. [155346]

Jane Kennedy: The table illustrates the key performance targets that the Lord Chancellor has set the Court Service for 2001–02.

	Performance indicator	*Target 2001–02 (%)*
KPI 1	The quality of service provided to court users	88
KPI 2	The percentage of administrative work in the civil courts processed within target time	94
KPI 3	The percentage of Crown court defendants/appellants whose cases begin within target time	78
KPI 4	Percentage of asylum appeals completed (through both tiers of IAA) within 4 months	65
KPI 5	Percentage of value recovered of enforceable (correctly directed) warrants	72

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Prices

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what discussions he is having with abattoirs in respect of the cuts in price being paid to farmers for beef; [153186]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that farmers receive a higher price for beef following the foot and mouth epidemic; [153183]

(3) if he will make a statement on the price being paid by abattoirs for beef; [153184]

(4) what help and assistance he can give to farmers to compensate for the collapse in the beef price at abattoirs. [153185]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* MAFF officials are in regular contact with abattoir representatives over the new Licensing for Slaughter scheme and are monitoring prices regularly. Official deadweight price reporting for beef has now been re-established and beef prices have shown a slight decline of up to 3 per cent. It has to be borne in mind that abattoirs have additional costs and up to 50 per cent. reduced throughput to contend with under the new scheme. My right hon. Friend's first priority is to eradicate foot and mouth disease. The Licensing for Slaughter scheme is there to release pressure on producers and get meat supplies moving again. My right hon. Friend has already asked all in the supply chain to behave in a spirit of mutual commercial co-operation. The market situation is being kept under review.

Sand Eels

Dr. Godman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if industrial fishing for sand eels is prohibited in closed cod-spawning areas; and if he will make a statement. [154588]

Mr. Morley: A derogation is allowed for sand eel fishing in the spawning cod closed areas, subject to strict conditions on monitoring and control, but not for fishing for Norway pout, which involves a higher whitefish bycatch. The estimated bycatch of cod in the sand eel fishery is less than 2 per cent.

GM Crops

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what commercial activities are prescribed by the voluntary agreement with the GM industry on GM crop trials. [144375]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Government and the industry body SCIMAC made a voluntary agreement in November 1999 on the conduct of the farm-scale evaluations of certain GM crops. Under the terms of this agreement:

"There will be no widespread planting leading to general market access of GM crops grown in the UK until the farm-scale evaluations are complete.

For the duration of the farm-scale evaluations, no direct commercial benefit will be sought from these plantings by the consent-holders."

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if the voluntary agreement with the GM industry on the conduct of crop trials in the United Kingdom *(a)* covers trials licensed under a Part C consent and *(b)* allows the harvesting and storage of GM seed from trial sites before the completion of the crop trials; [144371]

(2) if fertile seed is being harvested from GM trial sites in the United Kingdom and stored. [144367]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Government and the industry body SCIMAC made a voluntary agreement in November 1999 on the conduct of the farm scale evaluations of certain GM crops.

The agreement covers all GM crops including those with Part C consent under European directive 90/220. At present one of the crops involved in the evaluations, herbicide tolerant maize, has a Part C consent.

The Part B consents permitting the oil seed rape, fodder beet and sugar beet to be grown in the farm scale evaluations require the crops to be destroyed on harvest. The maize in the evaluations, which has a Part C consent, is a forage variety which would be harvested for silage not seeds. The terms of the approval for herbicide use on the maize does not permit it to enter the food or feed chain and the crop is destroyed on harvest.

The agreement does not permit any other field scale plantings of these crops without the approval of the Scientific Steering Committee who will take account of the relevance of the proposals to biodiversity.

A number of Part B consents for small scale plantings of other GM crops are currently in force. Each specifies the fate of the crop at the end of the trial and some permit the saving of seed for further research or testing.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the participation rate in higher education for 18 to 24-year-olds in each UK nation and Government office region in each of the last five years. [145254]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* Participation rates are not routinely collated below national level. The available figures for the four home countries, showing the proportion of under 21-year-olds who enter higher education for the first time, are given in the table. A higher proportion of young people from Scotland and Northern Ireland enter HE than from England and Wales. This is largely due to high levels of participation in Diplomas, Certificates and other similar undergraduate qualifications in these countries. There was an increase in the Great Britain index in 1997–98 related partly to changes in the funding arrangements for higher education, with students choosing to enter HE rather than wait until 1998–99. There was a corresponding reduction in 1998–99 before the entry rates started to increase again in 1999–2000. Between 1996–97 and 1999–2000, total students rose by 76,000 in England and by 89,000 in Great Britain.

Age participation index (API)[1] by country

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000[2]*
England	n/a	32	29	30
Wales	n/a	32	30	29
Scotland	n/a	46	44	43
Northern Ireland	n/a	44	40	42
Great Britain	33	33	31	32

[1] The API is defined as the number of GB domiciled initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate HE aged under 21, expressed as a percentage of the average number of 18 and 19-year-olds in the population

[2] Provisional

Note:

n/a = Not available

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students were in higher education in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 2000–01. [154391]

Mr. Wicks: The available data are given in the table. Figures for 2000–01 will be available at the end of April.

Higher education students in England[1]

Thousand

Academic year	*Number*
1996–97	1,534
1999–2000	1,610

[1] Full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, home and overseas, including the Open University

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average level of Government funding was per student in higher education in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 2000–01. [154392]

Mr. Wicks: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) on 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 164–65W.

University Salaries

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average salary increase was for *(a)* university vice-chancellors and principals and *(b)* university academic and academic-related staff in (i) 2000–01, (ii) 1999–2000, (iii) 1998–99, (iv) 1997–98 and (v) 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [149877]

Mr. Wicks: Available figures from the New Earnings Survey for the earnings increases of university teaching professionals, covering lecturers in both pre and post 1992 universities, are:

Year	*Percentage*
1999–2000	2.9
1998–99	2.0
1997–98	3.2
1996–97	5.6
1995–96	–0.1

No data are held centrally on Vice-Chancellors' pay.

New Deal (Wildcat)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 299W, on New Deal, (1) if he will list the companies which have been approached by *(a)* his Department's, (i) Ministers and (ii) officials and *(b)* New Deal Taskforce in order to solicit payments to fund Wildcat's services to his Department, indicating the date of each approach; [153686]

(2) if he will list the payments which have been made to Wildcat by his Department, indicating the date of each payment; [153687]

(3) if he will list the companies which have contributed funds to his Department for onward transmission to Wildcat, indicating the amount in each case and the date on which each payment was received. [153688]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* The following companies provided funds via the New Deal Taskforce to Wildcat Corporation.

Company	*Amount (£)*	*Date*
Microsoft	35,000	3 July 2000
Credit Suisse First Boston	20,000	28 July 2000
KPMG	20,000	3 August 2000
Freshfields	20,000	3 August 2000
The Rockefeller Foundation	6,500	September 2000
Morgan Stanley Dean Witter	20,000	[1]14 September 2000
Prudential	20,000	12 October 2000
Deloitte and Touche	20,000	17 October 2000
HSBC	20,000	13 December 2000
Salomon Brothers	20,000	15 March 2001

[1] Sent directly to Wildcat

New Deal

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* black and *(b)* Asian people have taken part in the New Deal employment scheme; what percentages of (i) black, (ii) Asian and (iii) white unemployed people have found employment through it in each borough of Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [154507]

Ms Jowell: The New Deals have had a valuable impact on many local communities, tackling unemployment, and the long-lasting damage that it can cause, with a new and innovative approach. Latest figures, to the end of December 2000, for Shropshire show the following take-up of New Deal given in the tables:

New Deal for young people statistics—to December 2000

Great Britain	*Starts*
White	465,100
Black	32,300
Asian	36,400

Shropshire unit of delivery	*Starts*	*Total jobs*	*As a percentage of starts*
White	2,679	1,492	56
Black	24	11	46
Asian	49	32	65

New Deal 25+ statistics—to December 2000

Great Britain	*Starts*
White	356,749
Black	21,338
Asian	11,938

Shropshire unit of delivery	*Starts*	*Total jobs*	*As a percentage of starts*
White	1,410	214	15
Black	[1]7	[1]2	—
Asian	[1]10	[1]1	—

[1] Figures less than 10 make percentages unreliable.

New Deal for lone parents statistics—to December 2000

Great Britain	*Starts*
White	129,306
Black	8,624
Asian	2,343

Shropshire unit of delivery	*Starts*	*Total jobs*	*As a percentage of starts*
White	1,172	433	37
Black	16	[1]8	—
Asian	10	[1]2	—

[1] Figures less than 10 make percentages unreliable.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people in Shrewsbury and Atcham have benefited from the New Deal since last May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [154658]

Ms Jowell: In the period from the start of the New Deal for Young People, April 1998 to December 2000, there have been 478 starts to the programme in Shrewsbury and Atcham. Of these, 240 young people have gained employment from the programme.

Nationally, in addition to the 274,000 young people recorded as gaining jobs, we estimate a further 83,000 young people gained jobs from New Deal.

Performance-related Pay (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers in Wales have not handed in the application form for performance-related pay. [154553]

Ms Estelle Morris: The final deadline for teachers in Wales to hand in their threshold application forms has not yet passed, so we do not currently know how many will, or will not, hand in application forms.

Specialist Schools (Norfolk)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many specialist schools *(a)* have been and *(b)* are planned to be established in Norfolk. [154645]

Ms Estelle Morris: There are 10 specialist schools in Norfolk: six Technology Colleges, two Sports Colleges, one Arts College and one Sports College. So far as plans are concerned, it is for individual schools in Norfolk to decide whether it is appropriate to make a specialist school application.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what contingency arrangements he has made for *(a)* the conduct of public examinations and *(b)* the assessment of coursework (i) related to land use and (ii) of a more general nature, on account of the current foot and mouth disease situation. [154677]

Mr. Wicks: The Department is liaising closely with the awarding bodies on the impact of the foot and mouth emergency on public examinations. The awarding bodies have already announced that where students are unable to travel to their schools and colleges to complete assessments/examinations because of MAFF restrictions, special consideration arrangements will apply and candidates will be considered for aegrotat awards. The awarding bodies have also announced that they will agree to alternative arrangements where students are unable to complete fieldwork and coursework assignments because of restrictions on access to land. Both announcements have been placed on the awarding bodies' websites. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Class Sizes (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each primary school in Shrewsbury and Atcham the number of classes containing over 30 pupils on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* the latest date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [154701]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on class sizes at individual schools is not normally published. However, in January 1997 20.1 per cent. of Key Stage 1 classes in Shrewsbury and Atcham had 31 or more pupils. By September 2000 the figure was zero. In January 1997 42 per cent. of the Key Stage 2 classes in the constituency had 31 or more pupils. By January 2000 the figure had dropped to 25.7 per cent. The size of the average Key Stage 2 class in the constituency fell over this period from 28.7 to 27.3.

We are delivering our infant class size pledge, including in Shropshire. The local education authority has received £3.6 million to support the initiative, and had met the 30 limit in full as early as September 2000. At the same time, the size of the average Key Stage 2 class in the Authority fell from 29.1 in January 1997 to 28.3 in January 2000. Primary headteachers will receive an average £24,000 in direct funding in 2001–02 to spend as they choose—including on reducing class sizes further if that is a priority.

Labour Statistics (Hendon)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many adult long-term unemployed there are in Hendon; and how many there were in May 1997. [154733]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* As at 8 February 2001 there were 762 people in the constituency of Hendon, aged 18 or over, unemployed for six months or more and claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. The comparable figure as at May 1997 was 1792.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many long-term young unemployed there are in Hendon; how many there were in May 1997; how many have benefited from each of the New Deal options; and if he will make a statement. [154734]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* As at 8 February 2001 there were 84 people in the constituency of Hendon aged 18–24, unemployed for six months or more and claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. The comparable figure as at May 1997 was 309.

Since the start of the New Deal for Young People in April 1998, 19 have started the employment option; 159 the Full Time Education and Training option; 32 the Voluntary Sector option; and 9 the Environment Taskforce option in Hendon as at the end of December 2000.

Departmental Policies (Norwich, North)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Norwich, North constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [151143]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Norwich, North constituency and on Norwich LEA have been placed in the Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Insurance

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the cost of insurance incurred by his Department was to cover its buildings and employees in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01 in Scotland. [154443]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* On 1 April 1998 all of the Department's buildings in Scotland were transferred under the PRIME contract to the private sector consortium Trillium. The insurance cover of the buildings is now a matter for Trillium.

Prior to 1 April 1998, the insurance charges for any sites the Department occupied under a lease would have been paid by landlords and where appropriate passed on to the Department via the service charge. Details of the cost of this to the Department in 1997–98 are not available. Additionally, all departmental buildings owned by the Department were covered by Crown Indemnity and the Department was not required to provide any insurance cover for these buildings.

The principles of Crown Indemnity apply equally to all forms of compulsory insurance. The Department is therefore exempt from providing any insurance cover for its employees.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Wales *(a)* have applied for and *(b)* receive the Minimum Income Guarantee. [154549]

Mr. Rooker: Between April 2000 and January 2001, 26,802 pensioners have applied for the Minimum Income Guarantee in Wales. There are approximately 97,000 pensioners receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee in Wales.

Notes:

1. The figure is based on a 5 per cent. sample and is therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

2. The figure is rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

3. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 and over.

Sources:

Management Information Statistics

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 2000

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Wales are eligible for the Minimum Income Guarantee. [154550]

Mr. Rooker: The information we hold is as follows.

There are approximately 97,000 pensioners receiving Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) in Wales.

Notes:

1. The figure is based on a 5 per cent. sample and is therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

2. The figure is rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

3. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 and over.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 2000.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in London are *(a)* eligible for and *(b)* in receipt of the Minimum Income Guarantee. [154171]

Mr. Rooker: The information we hold is as follows.

There are approximately 207,000 pensioners receiving Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) in London.

Notes:

1. Cases have been allocated to each London Government Office Region by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 2 of the Postcode Directory.

2. The figure is based on a 5 per cent. sample and is therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

3. The figure is rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

4. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 and over.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 2000.

Welfare Reform (Disabled People)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the measures in his welfare reform programme which will assist disabled people to take up work. [154280]

Mr. Bayley: We have put a number of measures in place to remove barriers to work for disabled people. These include higher earnings disregards in the Independent Living Funds and improvements to the linking and therapeutic earnings rules in Incapacity Benefit. We are also piloting Capability Reports as part of the Personal Capability Assessment, which we introduced in April 2000.

We have introduced the Disabled Person's Tax Credit (DPTC) to help make work pay. In the Budget my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an increase in DPTC from June and this, combined with increases in the National Minimum Wage in October, will raise the guaranteed minimum income for a disabled person moving into work of 35 hours per week or more to £170 a week for a single person, and £257 a week for a couple with one child.

Furthermore, we are extending the New Deal for Disabled People across Great Britain. From July 2001 a national network of Job Brokers will be set up jointly by the Department of Social Security and the Department for Education and Employment to offer people receiving incapacity benefits the support, guidance and preparation they need to find paid work and move off benefit dependence, continuing to test and assess what works best.

Alongside the national extension, in early 2002 we will be starting New Deal for Disabled People Job Retention and Rehabilitation Pilots jointly with the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health. These pilots will test the relative effectiveness of different employment and health interventions in reducing the number of people forced to give up work through prolonged illness or disability.

The national extension and Job Retention and Rehabilitation pilots draw on lessons learnt from the pilot phase of the New Deal for Disabled People which, by the end of January 2001, has helped over 6,500 people into work.

Departmental Policies (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Sutton and Cheam constituency, the effects on Sutton and Cheam of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154414]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Sutton and Cheam since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Sutton and Cheam 9,661 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Sutton and Cheam the number has reduced from 1,200 to 800. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Sutton and Cheam from 700 to 500.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 16,400 older people in Sutton and Cheam have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 15,600 pensioners in Sutton and Cheam will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 7,200 in Sutton and Cheam. 1,700 pensioner families in Sutton and Cheam are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Better Government for Older People

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the response of the Government are to the recommendations of the "Better Government for Older People" report. [153305]

Mr. Rooker: We responded to the recommendations of the "Better Government for Older People" programme in "Building on Partnership", which was published on 30 January. A copy is in the Library.

Benefit Fraud (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of tackling benefit fraud in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire since 1 May 1997. [154649]

Mr. Rooker: After years of neglect, we have implemented an effective strategy for dealing with Social Security fraud. Figures are not available for the areas requested but nationally we have already made a 6.7 per cent. reduction in the level of fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance. This is the first significant reduction.

We are on course to meet our first target, of a 10 per cent. reduction in fraud and error, well ahead of the scheduled date in 2002.

SCOTLAND

Barnett Formula

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions she has had with the Treasury about the operation of the Barnett Formula; and if she will make a statement. [145641]

Mrs. Liddell: The Barnett formula continues to provide a fair deal for Scotland within the United Kingdom and we have no plans to change it. I have had no recent discussions with the Treasury.

UK Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will meet Scottish members of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss issues raised in the Parliament's manifesto. [152961]

Mr. Foulkes: I would be willing to meet Scottish members of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss issues raised in the Youth Parliament's manifesto.

New Deal

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many young people in each constituency in Scotland have *(a)* participated in the New Deal and *(b)* found jobs as a result of the New Deal. [152464]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The table shows for each parliamentary constituency in Scotland the number of young people who have participated in, and found jobs through, the New Deal since its introduction in 1998.

Parliamentary constituency	*Starters*	*Jobs*
Aberdeen, Central	706	326
Aberdeen, North	459	189
Aberdeen, South	394	193
Airdrie and Shotts	1,311	657
Angus	1,014	531
Argyll and Bute	681	361
Ayr	1,049	503
Banff and Buchan	424	224
Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross	598	291
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	1,272	617
Central Fife	1,456	696
Clydebank and Milngavie	1,002	469
Clydesdale	1,108	569
Coatbridge and Chryston	1,059	528
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	845	486
Cunninghame, North	1,178	606
Cunninghame, South	1,394	726
Dumbarton	1,344	645
Dumfries	1,039	497
Dundee, East	1,713	823
Dundee, West	1,620	775
Dunfermline, East	1,023	506
Dunfermline, West	771	380
East Kilbride	706	381
East Lothian	436	258
Eastwood	583	296
Edinburgh, Central	646	272
Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh	719	311
Edinburgh, North and Leith	813	366
Edinburgh, Pentlands	653	310
Edinburgh, South	578	297
Edinburgh, West	473	246
Falkirk, East	934	489
Falkirk, West	1,030	545
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	766	416
Glasgow, Anniesland	1,216	493
Glasgow, Baillieston	1,450	613
Glasgow, Cathcart	938	414
Glasgow, Govan	1,179	482
Glasgow, Kelvin	979	347
Glasgow, Maryhill	1,511	570
Glasgow, Pollok	1,206	536
Glasgow, Rutherglen	914	414
Glasgow, Shettleston	1,497	618
Glasgow, Springburn	1,781	749
Gordon	359	186
Greenock and Inverclyde	830	425
Hamilton, North and Bellshill	1,193	634
Hamilton, South	1,046	502
Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber	548	287
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	1,375	636
Kirkcaldy	1,328	595
Linlithgow	725	402
Livingston	917	512
Midlothian	472	265
Moray	641	392
Motherwell and Wishaw	1,282	618
North-East Fife	489	220
North Tayside	663	338
Ochil	1,056	516
Orkney and Shetland	204	122
Paisley, North	989	505
Paisley, South	941	485
Perth	655	377
Ross, Skye and Inverness, West	650	359
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	576	303
Stirling	678	315
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	660	370
Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale	530	291
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	281	136
West Renfrewshire	550	291
Western Isles	294	165
Total	64,400	31,268

Salmon Farming

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of salmon farming undertakings in the UK were UK-owned in 1995; and if she will make a statement. [154143]

Mrs. Liddell: Details of the ultimate ownership of salmon farming businesses are not routinely collected.

However, a study on the economic impact of the salmon farming industry, published in 1999 by the then Scottish Office, reported that a one-off survey of the Scottish industry had found that in 1996, 19 companies, representing at that time 47 per cent. of salmon production, were foreign-owned.

Salmon farming is devolved and is now a matter for the Scottish Executive.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland Bill)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Advocate-General for Scotland on what date she notified the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament that she did not intend to refer the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Bill to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. [147384]

The Advocate-General: My Legal Secretary wrote to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament on 22 September 2000 to notify him that I did not intend to make a reference in respect of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Bill to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council under section 33(1) of the Scotland Act 1998.

WALES

Poverty in Wales

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* people and *(b)* children were living in poverty in Wales in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999, (iv) 2000 and (v) 2001. [153166]

Mr. Bayley: I have been asked to reply.

Poverty and social exclusion are complex multi-dimensional issues, affecting many aspects of people's lives—including income, health, housing, the quality of their environment and opportunities to learn. There is no single measure that can capture the complex problems that need to be overcome.

However a number of these aspects have seen significant improvement in Wales since 1997. For example, the number of unemployed people in Wales has fallen by around 35,000 from nearly 90,000 in February 1997 to around 55,000 in February 2001. Between 1997 and 2000 the number of children in families in Wales in receipt of out of work benefits has fallen from 160,000 to around 145,000. The proportion of 11-year-olds in Wales achieving level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 has risen in English from 64 per cent. in 1997 to 74 per cent. in 2000 and in Mathematics from 64 per cent. in 1997 to 69 per cent. in 2000.

The annual report, "Opportunity for all", available in the Library, sets out and monitors the UK Government's strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion. The UK Government are working in partnership with the National Assembly for Wales to tackle poverty and social exclusion in Wales.

Note:

Unemployment figures based on claimant count information.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the *(a)* dates and *(b)* locations of his meetings with the Irish Prime Minister between 1 July and 31 December 1999. [154766]

The Prime Minister: I met the Taoiseach on the following occasions between 1 July and 31 December 1999:

Date	*Location/Event*
1 July	Meetings at Castle Buildings
2 July	Breakfast at Hillsborough and meetings at Castle Buildings
20 July	Meeting at No. 10
6 September	Meetings at No. 10
14 October	Bilateral talks, Finland
9 December	Bilateral talks, Helsinki
17 December	British/Irish Council at Lancaster Gate and press briefing at No. 10

Social Exclusion

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made on tackling social exclusion; and if he will make a statement. [155228]

The Prime Minister: The Social Exclusion Unit is today publishing a report, "Preventing Social Exclusion", which sets out the Government's approach to taekling social exclusion and the results that have been delivered so far in preventing social exclusion, reintegrating those who become excluded, and delivering basic minimum standards. It is a long-term approach, but clear results are now coming through:

One million more people are in work, and claimant unemployment has fallen to below 1 million for the first time since 1975. Unemployment has fallen fastest in the most deprived areas;

Educational achievement is improving—higher standards than ever before for 11-year-olds in English and maths with a 10 and 13 per cent. improvement in each subject respectively between 1998 and 2000;

More than a million children have been lifted out of poverty;

Overall crime is falling and burglary is down by a quarter since 1997.

Clear results are also coming through on the specific topics tackled by the Social Exclusion Unit;

A fall in the numbers of rough sleepers of over a third between June 1998 and June 2000;

A drop in school exclusions of nearly a fifth between 1997 and 1999. A third of all local education authorities provided full-time education for excluded pupils in 2000 and two-thirds plan to do so in 2001;

A fall of over 15 per cent. between 1998 and 1999 in the numbers of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment and training;

A clear downward trend in teenage conceptions and an increase in the proportion of teenage parents in training, education or employment from 16 per cent. in 1997 to 31 per cent. in 2000;

Progress in reducing the national truancy rate has been disappointing. Although some local areas have reduced truancy rates the national rate has remained static since 1997. This is being urgently addressed;

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was finalised in January this year. This is an unashamedly long-term plan, laying the foundations to ensure that within 10 to 20 years, no-one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live.

The Social Exclusion Unit's future priorities are going to be: to complete the current project on reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners; to follow up initial work on young runaways, on which a background paper is being published today; and to start two new projects on the educational attainment of children in care, and transport and social exclusion.

An overall strategy for working with children and young people is being developed by the Children and Young People's Unit. As a first step, they are today publishing "Tomorrow's Future: Building a Strategy for Children and Young People", which sets the Government's intent to work with children and young people and a wide range of stakeholders in developing the strategy.

Copies of all three reports have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Sir Richard Evans

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the occasions he has met Sir Richard Evans at No. 10 Downing street since 1 May 1997. [154336]

The Prime Minister: I have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations it is not my practice to provide details of all such meetings.

CABINET OFFICE

Anti-drugs Strategy

8. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [153308]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator's Annual Report for 1999–2000 shows that we are making progress towards meeting the challenging targets we have set as part our 10-year anti-drugs strategy.

Colleagues in Wales have launched "Tackling Substance Misuse in Wales: A Partnership approach". This reflects many of the key elements of the UK anti-drugs strategy but also covers the full range of substances misused in Wales, including alcohol.

We announced significant additional investment for targeted action in England and in the Budget. Similar provision is being made in Wales. National Assembly plans for 2002–03 and 2003–04 also provide for increases of £1 million and £1.5 million respectively. This represents nearly 60 per cent. increase in direct expenditure by the Assembly to combat substance misuse.

10. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent meetings she has had with her counterparts in other countries on anti-drugs initiatives. [153310]

Marjorie Mowlam: One of the four key aims of the Government's drugs strategy is to reduce the availability of Class A drugs in the UK.

Progress is being achieved through co-ordinated interdepartmental activity on agreed priorities, resulting in increased seizures of heroin and cocaine en-route to the UK and increased disruption of criminal groups involved in trafficking.

The UK is also active in international forums, including the UN, G8 and EU, aimed at strengthening the global framework for tackling the illicit drugs trade.

15. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the Government's anti-drugs policy. [153316]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator's Annual Report for 1999–2000 shows that we are making progress towards meeting the challenging targets we have set as part our 10-year anti-drugs strategy.

We recognise the particular importance of tackling the problem at local level and that there is more to do. That is why we announced in the Budget significant additional investment for targeted action at local level.

This will give the Wirral Drugs Action Team an opportunity to work with local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships to help local communities disrupt local drug markets and tackle drug related crime and the anti-social behaviour so often associated with it.

23. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what discussions she has had with the Government's Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator on trends in the number of deaths from class A drugs since the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. [153327]

Marjorie Mowlam: I hold regular meetings with the Government's Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator to discuss all aspects of the Government's anti-drug strategy, including the changes in the deaths from Class A drugs.

International Drugs Strategy

9. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on progress in tackling the international drugs trade. [153309]

Marjorie Mowlam: As part of my recent visits to Jamaica, Iran, the USA and Colombia, I have held meetings with Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General, Condi Rice, the US National Security Adviser, President Pastrana of Colombia and others, to help strengthen our working partnerships against the destructive international drugs trade and share information and ideas for future action.

People's Panel

11. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what agricultural issues have been referred to the People's Panel for its views. [153311]

Mr. Stringer: No research has been conducted through the People's Panel on agricultural issues, though several food-related questions have been examined.

Better Regulation Taskforce

12. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the work of the better regulation taskforce. [153313]

Mr. Stringer: The independent Better Regulation Task Force produced eight valuable reports last year, and is now studying the economic regulators, the impact of housing benefit on lone parents, regulations affecting small shopkeepers and issues around risk.

Class A Drug Use (Young People)

13. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what analysis she has made of changes in the level of use of *(a)* heroin and *(b)* cocaine by young people since 1997. [153314]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Figures from the British Crime Survey show that the use of heroin remained steady between 1996 and 1998 with fewer than 0.5 per cent. of 16 to 24-year-olds using it in the last year. However, for cocaine there was an increase from 1 per cent. in 1996 to 3 per cent. in 1998.

For the 11–15 age group heroin use has also remained steady between 1998 and 1999 with fewer than 0.5 per cent. of young people using it in the last year.

Cocaine use also remained steady between 1998 and 1999 with 1 per cent. of 11 to 15-year-olds using it in the last year.

We have set challenging targets to halve the numbers of young people using illegal drugs by 2008 and have recently announced an extra £152 million package from April 2001 to March 2004 for spending on education, prevention and treatment services for young people.

There is concern about young people's involvement with drugs, crack in particular. The Southwark DAT have commissioned further work, borough wide, to explore young people's drug use and their involvement in drug dealing in more depth to inform the future development of services.

Rural Affairs

14. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the impact of the ministerial group on rural affairs. [153315]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Ministerial Group on Rural Affairs helps ensure a joined-up approach to rural issues. Although details of Cabinet Committee business are not disclosed, a good example of that approach in action is the Rural White Paper, published on 28 November.

19. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action she has taken to co-ordinate Government policy on rural affairs since the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [153320]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have been abroad on business during the outbreak of the disease.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture has been in the lead during this outbreak. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has kept a close eye on developments and has established a Rural Relief Task Force under my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment.

22. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the impact of the ministerial group on rural affairs. [153325]

Marjorie Mowlam: The ministerial group on rural affairs helps ensure a joined-up approach to rural issues. Although details of Cabinet Committee business are not disclosed, a good example of that approach in action is the Rural White Paper, published on 28 November.

Farming

16. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office in what way she will be involved in the reappraisal of the role of British farming. [R] [153317]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Ministerial Group on Rural Affairs co-ordinates the Government's policies affecting rural areas, including those relating to farming.

Cannabis

17. **Mrs. Gorman:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to legalise cannabis. [153318]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government have a clear and consistent policy towards all illicit drugs based on the evidence of the harm they cause.

Cannabis is a controlled drug for scientific reasons. We are still learning about the health risks, including chronic health effects such as the risk of cancer. The Government will keep the evidence under review.

As far as cannabis use for medicinal purposes is concerned, the UK is leading the world in research into the possible medical benefits of cannabis derivatives.

The Government are supporting a major research project which will be concluded within the next two years. If the current clinical trials into cannabis are successful and lead to the development of an effective cannabis-based medicine which is granted a marketing authorisation by the Medicines Control Agency, the Government have made it clear that they would be willing to amend the misuse of drugs regulations to allow such a medicine to be prescribed by doctors.

Disabled People

18. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps have been taken to monitor the performance of each Government Department in recruiting and promoting people with disabilities. [153319]

Mr. Stringer: All Departments report to Ministers annually on:

(a) Progress to double the number of people with disabilities in the senior Civil Service

(b) Performance against targets covering other staff in their organisation.

Regulatory Reform Bill

20. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what measures of deregulation she plans to introduce in the next 12 months following the passing of regulatory reform legislation. [153322]

Mr. Stringer: On Monday 19 March, I placed a list of proposals that could be enacted under the Regulatory Reform Bill in the House Library.

The Bill received its Second Reading the same day.

Consultation documents issued this week on five measures from that list. These will:

simplify, speed up and make fairer the procedures for renewing business leases;

place local authority business tenants on the same footing with lease renewals as other business tenants;

deregulate new year's eve licensing and the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and

reform the grants and loans arrangements for the renewal of private sector housing; and

allow people to use banknotes and smartcards when playing with gaming machines.

The full list of 51 proposals currently stands as follows:

1. Abolition of 20 partner limit (DTI)
2. After-hours child care at schools (DfEE)
3. Approving a LEA's curriculum complaints procedures (DfEE)
4. Attachment of Earnings (LCD)
5. Births and Deaths—Wales (ONS)
6. Births and Deaths—errors on certificates (ONS/HMT)
7. Bootleggers—Disclosure of names (HM Customs and Excise)

8. Building Regulations (DETR)
9. Business tenancies (DETR)
10. Civil Registration Service Reform (ONS/HMT)
11. Copyright and Patents (Patent Office)
12. Dental services—provision by corporate bodies (DoH)
13. Disclosure of information by MAFF to HSE (MAFF)
14. Disposal of land at less than best price (DETR)
15. DVLA links with Benefit Agency (DVLA)
16. DVLA/Passport Agency Data Links (DVLA)
17. Environment Agency Legislative Review (DETR)
18. Fire safety (Home Office)
19. Gaming Machines (Home Office)
20. Grants and loans for the renewal of private sector housing (DETR)
21. Home Grown Cereals Authority: Approval by Ministers of pensions and gratuities and arrangements for maintaining pension schemes (MAFF)
22. Home Grown Cereals Authority: Approval by the Treasury of remuneration for advisory committee members (MAFF)
23. Home Grown Cereals Authority: Corn Returns (MAFF)
24. Housing Transfers (DETR)
25. Invalid Care Allowance (DSS)
26. Landlord and Tenant Act s.57 (DETR)
27. Legal Services Ombudsman—personal signature (LCD)
28. Meat and Livestock Commission—extension of powers (MAFF)
29. Medicine Licences (DoH)
30. New Years Eve deregulation (Home Office)
31. NHS Accounting for charitable funds (DoH)
32. National Insurance Contributions (NICS)—Third party awards to employees (Inland Revenue)
33. Orders removing exemptions from caravan site licensing (DETR)
34. Public Health Legislation—communicable disease (DoH)
35. Reform of charity law (Home Office/Charity Commission)
36. Reform of Gambling—Bingo (Home Office)
37. Reform of Unsolicited Goods and Service Act (DTI)
38. Rehabilitation of offenders—cautions, reprimands and final warnings (Home Office)
39. Repeal of Trading Stamps Act (DTI)
40. Restaurant licensing hours (Home Office)
41. Road Traffic Regulation (DETR)
42. Sexual Offences and access to victim material (Home Office)
43. Solicitors Act 1974 (LCD)
44. Street Trading (Home Office)
45. Tree Preservation Order System (DETR)
46. Unfair contract terms (DTI)
47. Vaccine Damage Payments Scheme (DSS)
48. Vehicle Crime Reduction—Seriously Damaged Vehicle Information Hot Line and Mandatory Mileage Recording (DVLA)
49. Vexatious Litigants (LCD)
50. Voluntary aided schools capital funding arrangements (DfEE)
51. Weights and measures (DTI)

Modernising Government Programme

21. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made in the Modernising Government Programme to ensure that correspondence between hon. Members and Ministers can be electronic. [153324]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Following the commitment given in the Modernising Government White Paper, all Departments now have a central email address to which hon. Members, and members of the public, can mail their correspondence. Details of Departments' email addresses can be found on each Department's website.

E-signatures

24. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made in implementing policy on the use of e-signatures. [153328]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Good progress has been made in implementing policy on the use of electronic signatures.

The electronic signature registration process on the Government Gateway, which provides an authentication mechanism for citizens and businesses using Government services, went live early in February 2001.

The Inland Revenue has introduced electronic filing of tax returns, and PAYE end of year returns, both certified by a form of electronic signature.

Customs and Excise is introducing electronic filing of VAT returns, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is introducing an electronic Area Aid Application service for farmers. Both these services will be available in March 2001 and will use electronic signatures.

Orders are planned under section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 to enable Departments to accept electronic signatures for various transactions. Examples are electronic conveyancing, the use of electronic signatures by general practitioners on electronic prescriptions and by Ministers on newly made Statutory Instruments transmitted electronically to HMSO.

Civil Service Posts (Relocation)

25. **Mr. Pickthall:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Civil Service posts have been moved from London to the regions since May 1997. [153329]

Mr. Stringer: The information is not available in the form requested. In April 1997, there were 475,341 permanent Civil Service staff of whom 86,640 were working in London. By April 1999, of 460,039 permanent staff, 84,420 worked in London. The proportion of staff working in the capital has changed very little, from 18.2 per cent. to 18.4 per cent. over the same period.

Ministerial Visit (Iran)

26. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about her recent visit to Iran. [153330]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay).

Knowledge Network

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what has been the cost to the Government of the new Knowledge Network system; and if she will make a statement. [153404]

Marjorie Mowlam: The cost to the Government of the new Knowledge Network system has been £3.6 million (GBP) to date.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of her Office's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152984]

Mr. Stringer: The policy recommendations in Cabinet Office reports relate to England as a whole and it is therefore not possible to say what their specific impact is on a particular constituency. Additionally, any policy changes arising from Cabinet Office unit reports, such as the Social Exclusion Unit and the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit, are implemented by the appropriate Government Department rather than by the Unit itself.

Departmental Policies (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency, the effects on Lancaster and Wyre of her Office's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154689]

Mr. Stringer: The policy recommendations in Cabinet Office reports relate to England as a whole and it is therefore not possible to say what their specific impact is on a particular constituency. Additionally, any policy changes arising from Cabinet Office unit reports, such as the Social Exclusion Unit and the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit, are implemented by the appropriate Government Department rather than by the Unit itself.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 22 March 2001

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to facilitate the reporting by the public of invalid road vehicle excise duty discs. [154445]

Mr. Hill: Members of the public may report apparently unlicensed vehicles seen on the public road by providing details of the vehicle concerned, together with the location and details of the keeper, if known, to the nearest Local Office of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). This information is used as a starting point for further investigation.

Alternatively, members of the public may complete specially designed witness statements which are available from the Agency's network of Local Offices. The statement form may also be downloaded from the DVLA website. If prosecution action follows, a copy of the statement containing the witness's name is made available to the alleged offender.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much revenue was raised from motorcycle and moped vehicle excise duty in the last 12 month period for which figures are available, indicating the amount raised for each vehicle excise duty band; if he will estimate the rate of evasion, indicating the estimated number of untaxed motorcycles and mopeds used on public highways for each category; and if he will make a statement. [154721]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* £40.3 million was raised in vehicle excise duty (VED) from motorcycles and mopeds in 1999–2000 in Great Britain.

Following a full roadside survey in 1999, it is estimated that there are around 265,000 unlicensed motorcycles and mopeds in GB. This represents a drop in the evasion level from 35 per cent. in 1994 to 25 per cent.

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has a number of initiatives in hand to tackle the problem of unlicensed motorcycles. The Agency is working closely with the police in targeting unlicensed motorcycles at events and rallies and conducting specific motorcycle enforcement campaigns. The introduction of automatic number plate readers later this year will make it easier to detect unlicensed motorcycles. A consultation document will be issued shortly which will seek views on the introduction of a licence disc for motorcycles which cannot be removed intact once fixed to the number plate. As well as making it easier to detect unlicensed motorcycles this proposal should also resolve the problem of the theft of motorcycle licence discs.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 2 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 315W, on London Underground, what proportion of the maximum capacity of London Underground train carriages was reached at peak periods during January and February on a line by line basis. [154397]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for London Underground Ltd. (LUL) who inform me that they regularly monitor train crowding which enables them to assess the level of crowding on the busiest sections of each line. The complexity of this survey means that it is not cost-effective for it to be carried out on a monthly basis. It is therefore not possible to provide the information specifically requested in the question for January and February this year as to do so would incur disproportionate costs.

The table shows the most recent information as measured by London Underground at various times during 1999–2000. For each line it provides a snapshot of the busiest quarter-hour period on the busiest section The table shows in columns F and G the theoretical design capacity of trains as set out in the earlier answer on 2 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 315W, and in columns H and I the average number of people recorded by LUL in 1999–2000 as using those lines at the busiest period. However, it should be noted that in practice some trains may have a higher and some a lower crowding. This could be caused by either any unevenness in the time between consecutive trains or in the uneven distribution of customers along platforms.

A	*B*	*C*	*F*	*G*	*H*	*I*
			Design capacity		*Actual number of people*	
Line	*Busiest section*	*Time*	*Hour capacity*	*Quarter-hour capacity*	*Hour capacity*	*Quarter-hour capacity*
Bakerloo	Charing Cross to Piccadilly Circus	08.45–09.00	27,954	6,989	21,676	5,419
Central	Bethnal Green to Liverpool Street	08.45–09.00	45,582	11,395	37,876	9,469
Victoria	Victoria to Green Park	08.45–09.00	42,363	10,591	33,098	8,274
Waterloo and City	Waterloo to Bank	07.45–08.00	14,818	3,704	11,854	2,964
Jubilee	St. John's Wood to Baker Street	08.45–09.00	19,375	4,844	19,949	4,987
Northern	Clapham North to Stockwell	08.45–09.00	28,258	6,564	29,286	7,321
Piccadilly	Earl's Court to Gloucester Road	08.30–08.45	33,216	8,304	25,144	6,286
Circle	Sloane Square to Victoria	17.30–17.45	8,958	2,240	8,493	2,123

A	B	C	F	G	H	I
			Design capacity		Actual number of people	
Line	Busiest section	Time	Hour capacity	Quarter-hour capacity	Hour capacity	Quarter-hour capacity
H&C	Liverpool Street to Moorgate	08.30–08.45	8,958	2,240	8,493	2,123
Metropolitan	Finchley Road to Baker Street	08.30–08.45	35,984	8,991	34,409	8,602
District	Victoria to St. James's Park	08.30–08.45	30,380	7,595	27,085	6,771
East London Line	Surrey Quays to Canada Water	08.15–08.30	6,815	1,704	6,521	1,630

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 2 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 315W, on London Underground, what evidence his Department has obtained to show that the figures for the maximum capacity of London Underground train carriages are compatible with the health and safety of passengers. [154399]

Mr. Hill: The health and safety of passengers is the responsibility of London Underground and it is the Underground's top priority. I understand that the capacity of London Underground carriages is not itself considered to be a health and safety issue. However, London Underground recognises the possible safety implications of overcrowding. Access to platforms, and therefore trains, is restricted whenever necessary on safety grounds.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money has been provided by the Government since May 1997 to London Underground; and if he will make a statement. [154450]

Mr. Hill: We have provided £1.9 billion of funding to London Underground since May 1997. Government funding has supported total investment in the Underground between 1997–98 and 2000–01 of some £3.4 billion.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce a conclusion to his negotiations with Transport for London concerning the PPP for the London Underground. [154990]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced last month that he had agreed to work together with the Commissioner of Transport for London, Bob Kiley, and with London Underground, on developing mutually acceptable modifications to the Public Private Partnership. Mr. Kiley has said in discussions with the Government that he seeks the unified management control of key underground operations, mainly through keeping the maintenance of track and signalling within London Underground. The 55-point plan that he is now discussing with us provides for that control within the overall structure of the PPP.

There are inevitably some technical issues still to be worked out but I believe that there is now a real basis for an agreement to allow the PPP competitions to proceed to a satisfactory conclusion. Discussions are being taken forward as quickly as possible so that we can get on with the PPP competitions and the massive investment which the Underground so urgently needs.

Devon Way, Stafford

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what guidance he has given the Highways Agency *(a)* generally and *(b)* specifically relating to Devon Way, Stafford, for consultation with residents before trees that screen trunk roads are removed; [154259]

(2) how many trees the Highways Agency removed from the land between the M6 motorway and Devon Way at Stafford on 8 March and for what reasons. [154258]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. David Kidney, dated 22 March 2001:

REMOVAL OF TREES ON M6 AT DEVON WAY

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked Tim Matthews to reply to your two Parliamentary Questions about the removal of trees on land between the M6 and Devon Way, Stafford. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews.

Following complaints about the condition of the trees from a local resident, site inspections showed that some of the trees were in a poor state and needed cutting down or pruning. Three trees were cut down on the 8th March and a fourth one shortly afterwards. Further works are required to this area of mature planting and these will be carried out soon.

During the site visits we spoke to a number of residents who generally supported what we were doing but I am sorry that we were unable to talk to them all.

I can assure you that we are only removing trees that are dead or dying on safety grounds, or pruning those which overhang adjacent gardens and are causing a nuisance. We intend to provide some new planting at this location with low-level shrubs at the rear of the gardens graduating to woodland species closer to the motorway.

There is no specific guidance for consultation in these circumstances but we do as a rule advise those likely to be affected. In this instance we were responding to the wishes of a number of local residents. I can only apologise for the fact that not everyone was happy.

If you would like any additional information please contact Peter Adams at our Birmingham office. His telephone number is 0121 678 8215.

Nesscliffe Bypass

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress made to build the Nesscliffe A5 road bypass and on the anticipated completion date. [154466]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 22 March 2001:

PROGRESS ON A5 NESCLIFFE BYPASS

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked Tim Matthews the Chief Executive to reply to your Parliamentary Question about progress on the A5 Nesscliffe Bypass. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews.

Good progress is being made with the statutory procedures, which are now close to completion. The Compulsory Purchase Order has been confirmed and the legal challenge period is due to expire on 29 March 2001. We have begun the procurement process with the aim of inviting tenders in June for a Design and Build Contract. We hope to award the contract in December this year. Work should start on what we expect to be a 21 month contract in early Spring 2002. All being well, the bypass should be open to traffic in late Autumn 2003.

We are confident that we will meet this programme but we do have to bear in mind the current restrictions imposed by the Foot and Mouth situation on access to the countryside. This is particularly relevant given the essential ecological surveys that must be carried out at specific times of the year. We will keep this situation under close review..

If you would like any additional information please contact Stephen Edwards at our Birmingham office. His telephone number is 0121 678 8360.

A329M Closure

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the reason was for the time taken by *(a)* the Environment Agency to respond to the accident and spill on the A329M on 12 March and *(b)* the police to clear the road; and for what reason the police closed the road for most of that day; [154278]

(2) if he will make a statement on *(a)* the traffic delays caused by the closure of the A329M on 12 March and *(b)* the Environment Agency's role in the closure. [154277]

Mr. Meacher: I understand that due to the spillage of diesel fuel and a subsequent six-vehicle accident the Thames Valley police closed the A329M at 23.54 pm on 11 March and re-opened it approximately three hours later. During the intervening period, the Thames Valley police, assisted by the Environment Agency, were involved in mopping up the diesel fuel and removing the six vehicles involved in the accident, which was made more difficult at the time by severe weather conditions. At the scene of such an accident the police have a duty to ensure that the safety of the public, the preservation of life, the rescue of the injured and the gathering of evidence to support the prosecution of serious traffic offences take precedence over any problems caused by traffic delay or congestion. The police are of course conscious of delays that can ensue from such accidents and they work with the Highways Agency and local radio stations to minimise disruption to traffic. Once the Thames Valley police were satisfied that it was safe to re-open the road, they did so at approximately 3.00 am on 12 March.

Following an initial telephone call from the Thames Valley police, Environmental Protection Officers from the Environment Agency arrived at the scene approximately 50 minutes from first notification of the incident, to find that diesel fuel was flowing from the road into the roadside drains. The Agency's officers isolated the surface drains using sawdust and soil from the verges and made a request to the local authority for gulley suckers to empty the roadside drains as soon as possible. The Agency's officers checked ditches on both sides of the M4, identifying areas where these drained to the Emm Brook. After a thorough examination, the Agency officers could find no evidence to suggest that any diesel fuel had entered either the ditches or the Emm Brook.

Car Number Plates

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on flags printed on car number plates. [154312]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* In March 2000 the Government announced that legislation would be introduced to allow motorists to display the GB national identifier and the European circle of stars on car number plates on a voluntary non-mandatory basis. This would enable citizens to dispense with the requirement to display a separate GB sticker when travelling in Europe. The option of a separate GB sticker remains. There are no plans to permit the display of any other symbols or flags on number plates.

Driving Instructors

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the policy of the Government are concerning the enforcement of the provisions of Part V of the Road Traffic Act 1988 which requires driving instructors teaching for money to hold an approved driving instructors' certificate; and under what circumstances exceptions are made to this policy. [154735]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The universal practice is for the Driving Standards Agency to use the Vehicle Inspectorate to investigate alleged cases of illegal driving instruction on its behalf. The inspectorate, in liaison with the agency, is responsible for pursuing prosecutions.

Departmental Policies (Stourbridge)

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to *(a)* Stourbridge and *(b)* the metropolitan borough of Dudley the effects on the area of his Department's (i) local government and (ii) transport policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154731]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The principal funding that this Department have provided to Dudley metropolitan borough in which Stourbridge falls since 2 May 1997 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Stourbridge. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

The £55 million Dudley southern bypass was completed in 1999.

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02[1]
Revenue Support Grant[2]	87.24	97.44	102.52	98.35	108.29
Income from National non-Domestic Rates[2]	68.22	71.10	76.84	86.71	84.78
Housing Investment Programme[3]	5.37	4.41	4.42	10.97	3.20
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	18.68	16.62	15.54	14.52	0.00
Capital Receipts Initiative	1.04	3.35	3.42	0.00	0.00
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.05	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00
Capital Challenge	4.26	3.37	4.77	0.00	0.00
Major Repair Allowance	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	14.05
SRB Funding[7]	5.31	4.60	5.29	3.35	18.54
Neighbourhood Renewal[4]	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.76
ERDF Funding	2,169.315	4,135.111	5,557.033	7,667.424	3,066.129
ERDF Funding[5]	0.00	0.00	300.000	268.250	0.00
ESF Objective 2	648.439	1,003.649	1,263.193	0.00	0.00
ESF Objective 2[5]	0.000	192.583	0.00	0.00	0.00
Transport Supplementary Grant	3.75	4.85	6.76	2.03	—
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	3.75	4.85	6.76	2.03	—
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	1.58	1.82	1.51	3.61	6.86
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant[6]	0.00	0.08	0.07	0.09	0.11
Rural Bus Challenge Grant[6]	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.42	—

[1] Where known

[2] The amounts of Revenue Support Grant and Income from National non-Domestic Rates shown for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are the revised amounts allocated under "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98 Amending Report 1999" and "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998–99 Amending Report 2000" respectively.

[3] The Housing subsidy figure for 2000–01 is still provisional. The reduction in HIP resources for 2001–02 is due the introduction of the new Major Repair Allowance i.e. a new way of allocating resources for works to council stock; the table shows Dudley's indicative figure for 2001–02.

[4] This is the first year of a 3-year NRF allocation to Dudley. It will be for the emerging LSP to determine how and where it should be spent.

[5] These amounts of ERDF and ESF Objective 2 grant have been identified as approved for projects within the Stourbridge district.

[6] Rural bus payments were made to the WM Passenger Transport Executive, Centro for spending across the metropolitan area.

[7] Details of SRB Projects.

Dudley Foundation For The Future (1995–2002)

The seven-year scheme aims to raise educational attainment, particularly for ethnic minorities; enhance employment and enterprise focusing on assisting small businesses and improving manufacturing excellence; improve housing and the environment and increase energy efficiency. Although generally borough-wide in approach there is some targeting, particularly in the Central Dudley and Brierley Hills areas.

Key Outputs:

5,000 jobs created/safeguarded: 2,800 people obtaining qualifications; 530 new businesses; 4,500 new dwellings.

Costs:

Single Regeneration Budget Total: £13.1 million

Scheme Total: £43.2 million

Wren's Nest Comprehensive Area Regeneration—Dudley (1996–2000)

A six-year scheme from the Dudley Partnership Board. Developed from a Community Vision Conference, this scheme reflects the priorities of residents, local businesses, community organisations and public bodies. The Wren's Nest estate of almost 12,000 people is in one of the most deprived wards in Dudley. The scheme is intended to complement and extend the positive impact of Estate Action in the area. It will add value to that investment by raising skills levels, increasing the confidence and management ability of local people and promoting community safety.

Key Outputs:

90 jobs created/safeguarded plus 17,385 construction jobs, 820 people obtaining qualifications, 950 people obtaining jobs, 540 dwellings improved an 170 completed.

Costs:

Single Regeneration Budget Total: £10.4 million

Scheme Total: £36.6 million

Impact On Employment (1996–2000)

A four-year scheme led by Stourbridge College, in partnership with the local ethnic minority community. The Partnership plans a range of initiatives to enhance confidence and skills within African and Caribbean communities. It will involve local employers more in promoting employment and training opportunities and targeting FE colleges to improve their response to this group by providing good practice models.

Key Outputs:

100 qualifications gained, 140 people obtaining jobs after training and 300 residents accessing employment following advice.

Costs:

Single Regeneration Budget Total: £175,000

Scheme Total: £630,000

Local Jobs For Local People (Dudley) (1998–2000)

This six-year scheme focuses on skilling for job opportunities at Merry Hill and local industrial estates. A training centre will be established offering programmes and child care with links to job vacancies at Merry Hill. Regeneration support will be given to the industrial estates to create jobs, which will also involve the training centres. New Deal support will be in creating opportunities for clients and involving residents who fall outside New Deal parameters.

Key Outputs:

3,100 training weeks; 300 residents accessing employment through training, 5,000 sq.m. new business/commercial floorspace.

Costs:

Single Regeneration Budget: £1.8 million

Scheme Total: £7 million.

Transport Safety Review

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will complete his review of transport safety and report to the House; and if he will make a statement. [155069]

Mr. Hill: In my answer of 9 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 424–25W, to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), I explained our conclusion that it would be wrong to take a view on potentially fundamental changes to the organisation of transport safety until the outcome of Lord Cullen's inquiry into the Ladbroke Grove rail crash was known. I understand that the relevant part of the inquiry is expected to report later this year. A report of the consultation and analysis undertaken by the transport safety review group was placed in the Libraries of the House last year.

Ten-year Transport Plan

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the provision contained in the Ten-year Transport Plan for *(a)* a London east-west rail link, *(b)* the London Cross Rail scheme, *(c)* the Chelsea-Hackney Line, *(d)* the East London Line and *(e)* the West London Line; and if he will indicate the priority he gives to each of these projects. [155068]

Mr. Hill: The Ten-year Plan provides for a significant increase in transport infrastructure investment, including in enhanced rail capacity in London. Specific London rail schemes, priorities, and the resources to be allocated to them, will be decided after discussion between Government, the Strategic Rail Authority and the Mayor of London. To this end, we have set up a high-level group to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the development and taking forward of rail schemes in London.

West Midlands Regional Development Agency

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the performance of the West Midlands Regional Development Agency. [153631]

Ms Beverley Hughes: All the RDA's, including Advantage West Midlands, have made good progress. Advantage West Midlands (AWM) has engaged with all sectors of the local economy to produce a strategy for the region and has agreed with key partners the 60 main actions required to take it forward.

AWM has achieved significant successes. So far this financial year (to February), some 28 companies from abroad have invested in the west midlands, creating 2,100 jobs and safeguarding a further 745. Marconi is moving to a site at Ansty near Coventry and jobs are beginning to emerge at BMW at Hams Hall near Birmingham. AWM has introduced a Regional Venture Capital Fund, the first RDA to do so. It is progressing innovation issues with a very good team of regional partners. It has very clearly defined the region's priority business sectors and is increasingly dovetailing all its activities to support them: the food and drink sector is an excellent example.

In addition, AWM has led the creation of six Regeneration Zones which will focus resources on the areas of greatest need and opportunity—including for the first time, a Rural Regeneration Zone encompassing the Marches.

It has successfully led two emergency Task Forces set up at the behest of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to address crises which have arisen in the region's automotive and ceramics industries. Key recommendations involve the creation of three high-technology corridors along the region's main feeder routes.

Central Railway

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what consultations have taken place since 1 January between his Department and *(a)* regional development agencies and *(b)* regional assemblies about the Central Railway project; [154847]

(2) what meetings have taken place since 1 January between Ministers in his Department and representatives of Central Railway. [154848]

Mr. Hill: None.

Lettings

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the pilot projects to test choice-based lettings approaches; and if he will make a statement. [155394]

Mr. Raynsford: I am pleased to announce that 27 local authority-led pilot projects have today been selected to test different lettings approaches.

The pilots are designed to give new and existing social tenants in England greater choice over their housing and to give local authorities and Registered Social Landlords the opportunity to test new ways of doing that, while continuing to meet housing need.

This is the best way to meet the long-term housing requirements of those who need social housing. The challenge for pilot authorities is to find better ways of responding to need while offering choice, in different housing markets, and across different authorities. We will draw on the pilots to develop a body of good practice for all social landlords.

I am delighted that we received over 90 bids for pilot status. I was particularly encouraged by the readiness of local authorities and RSLs to work together to deliver a choice-based approach. Many bids involved a partnership approach, bringing together some or all of the RSLs operating in the area, and in some cases private landlords as well, to offer as wide a choice as possible to new and existing tenants.

I have been very impressed by the quality of the bids submitted. I have therefore decided to make available a further £2 million, in addition to the £11 million announced at the time of the Spending Review to fund the pilot scheme, in order to support as many good quality projects as possible.

The list of successful lead authorities is set out in the list.

I am also delighted to announce that £3.5 million over two years has been allocated under Round 3 of the Capital Modernisation Fund. This additional money will be used to fund Information Technology development to support choice-based lettings approaches and to promote mobility across the social housing sector.

Successful bids—lead authorities

Bath and North East Somerset borough council
Blackburn with Darwen borough council
Bolton metropolitan borough council
Bradford metropolitan borough council
Brighton and Hove borough council
Camden council
Coventry metropolitan borough council
Croydon council
Derby city council
Ealing council
Eastbourne borough council
Hammersmith and Fulham council
Harborough district council
Haringey council
Herefordshire district council
Kennet district council
Lewisham council
Manchester city council
Mansfield district council
Medway district council
New Forest district council
Newham council
Restormel borough council
Sandwell metropolitan district council
Sheffield metropolitan borough council
Stockport metropolitan borough council
Sunderland metropolitan borough council.

Regional Planning Guidance

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to make an announcement about regional planning guidance for the south-east. [155395]

Mr. Raynsford: On 18 December last year we published draft revised Regional Planning Guidance for the south-east. This put the urban renaissance and protection of the countryside at the heart of the revised regional strategy. It put forward a housing strategy that took no more land than assumed by the regional planning body. We re-consulted on the proposed housing distribution and after careful consideration of all the representations we are today issuing Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9).

In the light of the divergent views expressed on the individual county figures and in the absence of any consistent regional rationale to justify a new distribution, the proposed distribution has not been changed. We acknowledge the concerns expressed during the public consultation but would emphasise that in line with our new 'plan, monitor and manage' approach, the scale and distribution of housing will be subject to review within the next five years in response to monitoring and other information. We do not believe in fixed 20-year housing targets.

The RPG9 document is being distributed to local authorities, Regional Planning Bodies, Regional Development Agencies and others who participated at the Public Examination held in 1999. Copies have also been placed in the Libraries of the House and made available to MPs from the Region. Further copies can be obtained from the Stationery Office at a cost of £18.

Standards Board

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in establishing the Standards Board for England under the Local Government Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [155447]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last month, I appointed Tony Holland as the first chair of the Standards Board for England. I have today appointed Patricia Hughes as Deputy Chair, and John Bowers, Alan Doig, Margaret Pratt, Paul Sabapathy and Roger Taylor as members of the Board. I am in the process of making two further appointments from representatives of local authority elected members and hope to be able to announce these in the near future.

The appointments will provide the Standards Board with a range of expertise and skills from around the country, which will be crucial to the success of its future work. The members will bring wide experience of local government and the public and private sectors to the work of the Board. They will equip the Standards Board with the lay, legal, academic and audit expertise it will need as it faces up to the challenge of the new ethical framework and ensuring the highest standards of conduct in local government.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ethiopia

Mr. McFall: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has for providing development assistance to Ethiopia; and if she will make a statement. [155072]

Clare Short: Since the signature by Ethiopia and Eritrea of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in June 2000, we have been reviewing our development relationship with Ethiopia. As part of this process, we held a seminar to discuss papers commissioned from academia and civil society to help update our understanding of current politics, governance and civil society; the economy; poverty; and food security.

Last November I visited Addis Ababa and discussed these issues with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. We informed him that we intended to focus as a first priority on food security, and undertook to consider whether we could contribute to the development of the private sector in Ethiopia.

Effective support to help reduce poverty in Ethiopia will depend on continuing peace and stability and the full and speedy implementation of the Peace Agreement signed in Algiers last December. We have been encouraged by recent progress. We have supported the peace process through the UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) with a contribution of £535,000 for an emergency survey of mines and unexploded ordnance undertaken by the UN Mines Advisory Service. We are also supporting UNMEE through our assessed contribution to peacekeeping operations.

The overall objective of our assistance will be to support the Government of Ethiopia's Poverty Reduction Strategy. In food security, we will work for long-term sustainable improvements and reduced vulnerability to cyclical drought. We will support the provision of financial assistance through the World Bank, IMF and European Commission. We will also provide technical assistance to strengthen the World Bank's work with the Government on the 2001 Public Expenditure Review and on Food Security, and plan to do so on the Poverty Reduction Strategy process. We are also considering technical support in food security and education to the European Commission.

We also envisage providing support for Food Security (including rural roads). In the private sector we will explore options for facilitating Ethiopia's effective engagement in international markets and ways in which the enabling environment for private investment can be improved. We plan to help strengthen district level road maintenance capacity. We are investigating how to support the Government's poverty monitoring capacity. Other possible areas of intervention include improved governance and support for a more effective civil society.

The implications of HIV/AIDS for Ethiopia's development will be considered throughout the programme. We plan to support the International Partnership Against AIDS in Africa, which is sponsored by UNAIDS.

We will continue to provide direct humanitarian relief and food aid where there is a clear need and where we are well placed to help.

On current plans we expect to spend up to £30 million over the next three years: these figures are indicative and subject to adjustment in the light of developments.

DEFENCE

Army (Scotland)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* establishment strength, *(b)* actual strength and *(c)* level of undermanning in percentage terms of establishment against actual strength was for the (i) Highlanders, (ii) Black Watch, (iii) Royal Scots, (iv) Royal Highland Fusiliers, (v) King's Own Scottish Borderers, (vi) Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, (vii) Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and (viii) Scots Guards on 1 March in each year from 1995 to 2001; what initiatives are under way in Scotland to address issues of recruitment and retention; and if he will make a statement. [154086]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The information requested is as follows.

	Establishment	*Trained strength*	*Percentage ±*
Highlanders			
1995	597	703	17.6
1996	597	648	8.5
1997	659	616	-6.5
1998	658	583	-11.4
1999	658	507	-22.9
2000	658	500	-24
2001	608	494	-18.8
Black Watch			
1995	597	591	-1
1996	597	555	-7
1997	597	514	-14
1998	597	539	-9.7
1999	597	511	-14.4
2000	703	508	-27.7
2001	670	566	-15.5
Royal Scots			
1995	597	543	-9
1996	663	562	-15.2
1997	663	495	-25.3
1998	663	508	-23.4
1999	663	471	-29
2000	597	470	-21.3
2001	608	515	-15.3
Royal Highland Fusiliers			
1995	703	743	5.7
1996	703	617	-12.2
1997	703	595	-15.4
1998	703	621	-11.7
1999	703	581	-17.4
2000	597	626	4.9
2001	607	532	-12.4
King's Own Scottish Borderers			
1995	597	594	-0.5
1996	597	575	-3.7
1997	597	546	-8.5
1998	597	567	-5
1999	597	507	-15
2000	597	549	-8
2001	638	585	-8.3
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders			
1995	597	598	0.2
1996	597	523	-12.4
1997	597	557	-6.7
1998	597	593	-0.7
1999	597	601	0.7
2000	597	598	0.2
2001	609	591	-3
Royal Scots Dragoon Guards			
1995	411	414	0.7
1996	411	373	9.2
1997	411	386	-6.1
1998	411	372	-9.5
1999	411	372	-9.5
2000	411	403	-1.9
2001	499	415	-17
Scots Guards			
1995	597	693	16
1996	597	566	-5.2
1997	597	529	-11.4
1998	597	520	-13
1999	597	531	-11
2000	597	558	-6.5
2001	609	643	5.6

Note:
The figures are at 1 January each year

A revision of the Army's recruitment management structure has brought together the field Army, the Territorial Army and the Army Training and Recruiting Agency's resources and expertise to run coherent recruiting campaigns in each of the UK regions, including Scotland. This co-ordinates local and national recruiting activities to best effect. Specifically in Scotland, the Army has recently awarded a trial one-year contract to a commercial consultancy company who will undertake on the ground recruiting activities, in partnership with the existing recruiting organisation, bringing commercial expertise into this area and utilising the company's wide-ranging contacts and database. The company intends to introduce an innovative programme of promotional and marketing activity, highlighting the wide range of career opportunities that the Army provides. Final selection of recruits will, however, remain firmly with the Army.

Army retention is being tackled as a high priority. Our aim is to maintain good levels of retention through policies that genuinely reflect the priorities of our people and their families, both generally and those on deployment. A raft of measures has already been introduced, including acceptance of the latest pay award, and these appear to be having an impact on retention. These measures are not confined to Scotland, but apply throughout the Army in the UK and overseas.

Racial Discrimination

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures have been taken against those *(a)* responsible for racial harassment of Ian Bannister and *(b)* responsible for setting up a photoshoot with soldiers dressed in Klu Klux Klan regalia and the officers commanding these soldiers. [154067]

Mr. Spellar: The Army has no record of any claim of racial harassment from Ian Bannister. The Royal Military Police are, however, currently undertaking an investigation to examine the circumstances behind the incident with the photograph.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what instructions have been issued to the 2nd Parachute Regiment concerning members posing for photographs with Nazi regalia. [154066]

Mr. Spellar: The Army is committed, through the Chief of the General Staff's Equal Opportunities Directive, to eradicating all forms of discrimination by developing policies, practices, and procedures within the framework of the law which do not tolerate harassment or discrimination of any kind. This policy is reiterated in Commanding Officer's Equal Opportunities Policy Statements and Action Plans.

Armed Forces Pension Scheme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme will be published; what the cause of the delay has been; if the review will consider the use of retrospective legislation as a remedy for the perceived injustices; and if he will make a statement. [154047]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 756W. The review has taken longer than expected mainly because of knock-on effects from delays to the Joint MOD/DSS Compensation Review which proved more complicated than anticipated. Consistent with the long-standing public sector pension policy, there are no plans to introduce changes to the Armed Forces Pension Scheme retrospectively.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 648W, if he will list the private companies identified as purchasers of 10 rifles required by the Saville inquiry; and what efforts have been made to secure the co-operation of these companies with the inquiry. [154132]

Mr. Hoon: The police investigation announced in my answer of 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 648W, has established that, of the rifles required by the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, 19 were sold to private companies. These companies were Alvis Logistics, A. F. Budge and Co. Ltd. and R. E. Trem and Co. Ltd. Every effort has been made to secure the companies' co-operation in consultation with the Bloody Sunday Inquiry.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 648W, what the conclusion was of the MOD police inquiry regarding destruction of evidence pertinent to the Saville inquiry; and what actions have been taken against those responsible. [154131]

Mr. Hoon: The report of the investigation by West Mercia and Ministry of Defence Police into the unauthorised destruction of rifles will be sent to Ministers shortly. When the report has been considered its conclusions and any proposed follow-up action will be made public where it is appropriate to do so. The Bloody Sunday Inquiry has been kept fully informed.

Nuclear Weapon Accident Response Exercises

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names, dates and locations of nuclear weapons convoy exercises in 2001. [153727]

Mr. Spellar: The following nuclear weapon accident response exercises are scheduled to be held during 2001:

Month	*Name*	*Location*
May	NW Convoy Group Standardisation	Lincolnshire
June	Exercise Bowline	Coulport
July	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	Wiltshire
September	MOD Police Nuclear Weapon Convoy Standardisation	To be confirmed
October	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	Suffolk
November	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	Oxfordshire
November	Exercise Senator	Bedfordshire

[1] RAF Station Nuclear Accident Response (NAR) teams provide immediate response forces for the air transportation of nuclear weapons

Low Flying (Wind Farms)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made on the likely effects of siting wind turbines in tactical training areas. [155605]

Dr. Moonie: In principle the Ministry of Defence has no objection to wind farms. The UK has three specially designated Tactical Training Areas (TTA) that are available for authorised military Operational Low Flying (OLF) training. The three TTAs are located in central Wales (LFA7T), north Scotland (LFA14T) and the border region of northern England/southern Scotland (LFA20T). Within these areas military fast jet and Hercules aircraft may operate at heights between 250 ft and 100 ft. In addition, Units make use of these specifically surveyed areas to conduct specialised night training.

Flying down to 100 ft is also authorised over the Electronic Warfare Tactics Range (EWTR), LFA13. The EWTR is a RAF facility made available to other NATO countries on a repayment basis, or under other special arrangements. It is located in the north of England, at Spadeadam, and partially overlays LFA20T, the northern England/southern Scotland TTA. In addition to tactical radar avoidance training, the airspace associated with use of the EWTR is made available for test and evaluation flying, specialised night training and some operational low flying training. Low flying within LFA13 is associated almost entirely with operation of the EWTR.

Conclusions of a study conducted by the RAF Signals Engineering Establishment into the Effects of Wind Generators on Radar Performance were that wind turbines cause interference to primary surveillance radar and harm the ability to detect and track aircraft flying over wind farms. Moreover, the presence of unlit constructions of significant size would be highly dangerous to aircraft flying down to 100 ft.

In the interests of flight safety, the safety of aircrew and members of the public, it is vital that any hazards to low flying aircraft are minimised. Any extraneous distractions or possible reduction in external support capabilities, such as that provided by ground radar, can have a deleterious effect upon aircraft safety, and thus the safety of aircrew as well as those on the ground.

It is, therefore, MOD opinion that obstacles in excess of 100 ft in height, unlit by night and with the ability to cause interference to radar, have the potential to create an acute safety hazard to aircraft engaged in operational low flying training, tactical radar avoidance training, specialised night flying and test and evaluation flying, however, each case has to be considered on its merit.

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153408]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. I am therefore unable to provide a substantive answer in accordance with Exemption 9 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

However, a breakdown of the Ministry of Defence's public relations' expenditure is published in the annual Departmental Performance Report, broken down into categories of RN, Army, RAF and civilian recruitment, public relations, marketing and business support services, Chief of public relations, sales promotion, scholarships and National Employers' Liaison Committee.

Service Personnel (Compensation)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what negotiations are taking place between his Department and the Treasury over compensation payments for service personnel killed and disabled during service with the armed forces; and if he will make a statement. [154046]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 21 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 209W. The proposals contained in the Joint Compensation Review Consultation Document have been fully discussed with Her Majesty's Treasury.

MOD Police

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the statutory basis of the Ministry of Defence Police (Discipline) Regulations 1985 is; and if they mirror those of the Home Department forces. [154409]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence Police (Discipline) Regulations 1985, came into operation on 20 February 1986 following an agreement between the Defence Council and the Police Complaints Authority of the same date. Following the coming into force of the Ministry of Defence Police Act 1987 a further agreement between the Secretary of State for Defence and the Police Complaints Authority was signed on 23 June 1988, which resulted in the Ministry of Defence Police (Discipline) (Amendment) Regulations 1988. These agreements, made in accordance with section 96(1) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, introduced force discipline regulations corresponding to those established by Part IX of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 for Home Department police forces. They also build on the provisions of section 1(4) and section 4 of the MOD Police Act 1987, and the Ministry of Defence Police (Representation at Disciplinary Proceedings) Regulations 1988 (SI 1099/1988) made under it.

The MDP discipline regulations mirrored those of the Home Departments forces until the Home Department forces regulations changed in April 1999. The proposals in clause 32 of the present Armed Forces Bill are designed to enable parity to be restored.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Department's police officers subject to *(a)* complaints and *(b)* disciplinary procedures are investigated under (i) procedures made by statute and (ii) with punishments and appeals procedures set out in legislation. [154407]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence Police complaints and discipline regulations were introduced following an agreement between the Defence Council and the Police Complaints Authority on 20 February 1986. Following the introduction of the Ministry of Defence Police Act 1987, a further agreement between the Secretary of State for Defence and the Police Complaints Authority was signed on 23 June 1988. These agreements, made in accordance with section 96(1) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984,

introduced complaints and discipline regulations corresponding to those established by or by virtue of Part IX of Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 for Home Department police forces. They also build on the provisions of section 1(4) and section 4 of the MOD Police Act 1987 and the Ministry of Defence Police (Representation at Disciplinary Proceedings) Regulation 1988 (SI 1099/1988) made under it.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what grounds the Armed Forces Bill Committee was told on 7 March that a complaint against a Ministry of Defence police officer would be processed by the Police Complaints Authority through exactly the same complaints procedure as with the Metropolitan police and that the arrangements would be absolutely identical. [154406]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence Police complaints regulations are comparable to those of the Home Department police forces. A complaint against an MOD police officer in England and Wales for instance would be dealt with in exactly the same way as a complaint against a member of the Metropolitan Police Service or any other Home Office police force.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what grounds he stated to the Armed Forces Bill Committee on 7 March that in the case of a complaint against his Department's police an MDP officer *(a)* would be subject to the responsibility of the chief constable of the area in question with whom he had made an agreement and *(b)* that police officer would be subject and accountable in precisely the same way as a police officer in the Metropolitan area. [154410]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Under the proposed modest extensions to the Ministry of Defence Police (MDP) jurisdiction contained within the Armed Forces Bill, MDP officers seconded to or providing mutual aid to Home Department police forces would be subject to the control and direction of the chief officer of the receiving force. Complaints against MDP officers on secondment or providing mutual aid to Home Department police forces would be dealt with in exactly the same way as a complaint against a member of the Metropolitan Police Service or any other Home Department police force.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 19–20W, on Porton Down, if staff from his Department have held other meetings with the Medical Research Council regarding advice on an independent epidemiological study for Porton Down volunteers since 14 November 2000; and on what dates each of these meetings took place. [154785]

Dr. Moonie: No other meetings have taken place.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many studies have been undertaken since 1971 by the chemical defence establishment at Porton Down to establish the annual totals of service volunteers who have taken part in experiments at the establishment; and on what dates each of these studies were completed. [154784]

Dr. Moonie: No such formal studies have been undertaken. However, since 1995 the annual reports of the Independent Chemical and Biological Defence Ethics Committee have included the numbers of volunteers who have participated in the Service Programme during the report year. These reports are usually produced in the following April-May.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 19–20W, on Porton Down, what plans his Department has to take on more staff in the Gulf veterans illnesses unit to deal with issues relating to Porton Down volunteers. [154786]

Dr. Moonie: We plan to take on a further member of staff, probably a Higher Executive Officer (Grade C2), to deal with Porton Down Volunteers issues.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he has requested the Medical Research Council to consult the Operation Antler team of Wiltshire police regarding its advice on an independent epidemiological study for service personnel who took part in experiments at the chemical defence establishment at Porton Down. [154768]

Dr. Moonie: No.

US Military Personnel (Compensation)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will send a team of his staff to the United States to evaluate the system under which the US Government provide compensation to former military personnel who have developed illnesses as a result of taking part in chemical warfare experiments. [154793]

Dr. Moonie: I have no plans to do so. The Ministry of Defence has a Liaison Officer in Washington D.C. who can gather information on US arrangements for paying compensation to veterans who participated in trials in the US, should there be a need to do so.

Depleted Uranium (Dundrennan Range)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the damage done to the depleted uranium monitoring rig located offshore at the testing range at Dundrennan. [154199]

Dr. Moonie: The test rig housing the depleted uranium samples was damaged during winter storms. The most likely cause of this damage were the chains securing the buoys marking the rig which impacted repeatedly with the main body of the rig during unexpectedly high sea states. In all some 20.76kg of depleted uranium, the equivalent of four projectiles, were lost and, if not recovered, it is expected that the material will oxidise and disperse in exactly the same way as rounds fired into the Solway Firth from the Kirkcudbright range. The ongoing comprehensive environmental monitoring programme continues to confirm no uranium above naturally occurring background levels.

Royal Logistics Corps

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the rates of pay are for Royal Logistics Corps *(a)* drivers, *(b)* supply specialists, *(c)* ammunition technicians and *(d)* chefs; and what plans he has to increase the rates of pay for those employed on explosive ordnance disposal. [154582]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The rates of pay effective from 1 April 2001 for Royal Logistics Corps drivers, supply specialists, ammunition technicians and chefs are shown in the table. The rates shown are the highest and lowest points of pay scales, which are incremental.

Rank	*Pay range*	*Driver*	*Pay range*	*Supply specialist*	*Pay range*	*Ammunition technician*	*Pay range*	*Chefs*
Pte	Lower	£12,070.55-£16,800.95	Lower	£12,070.55-£16,800.95	n/a	—	Lower	£12,070.55-£16,800.95
L Cpl	Lower	£15,461.40-£18,206.20	Lower	£15,461.40-£18,206.20	Lower	£15,461.40-£18,206.20	Higher	£18,388.70-£22,100.75
Cpl	Lower	£19,812.20-£22,637.30	Lower	£19,812.20-£22,637.30	Higher	£20,575.05-£25,341.95	Higher	£20,575.05-£25,341.95
Sgt	Lower	£22,925.65-£25,889.45	Lower	£22,925.65-£25,889.45	Higher	£25,017.10-£28,199.90	Higher	£25,017.10-£28,199.90
S Sgt	Lower	£25,298.15-£28,904.35	Lower	£25,298.15-£28,904.35	Higher	£28,218.15-£32,109.05	Lower	£25,298.15-£28,904.35
WO2	Higher	£30,966.60-£33,028.85	Higher	£30,966.60-£33,028.85	Higher	£30,966.60-£33,028.85	Higher	£30,966.60-£33,028.85

The trade of Ammunition Technician in the Royal Logistic Corps, whose duties include explosive ordnance disposal, has been subject to the job evaluation process. All ranks in this trade at corporal and above have been assigned to the higher pay range. Those employed on explosive ordnance disposal will, in common with other trades, be eligible under Pay 2000 for the award of annual incremental pay increases subject to satisfactory performance. In addition they will receive annual pay awards as recommended by the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body.

Service Personnel (HIV/AIDS)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the *(a)* RAF, *(b)* Royal Navy and *(c)* Army are suffering from HIV/AIDS; and if he will make a statement. [153171]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Twelve members of the armed forces are currently known to be suffering from HIV/AIDS. As one of the services has only one member known to be suffering from HIV/AIDS, a breakdown by service cannot be provided for reasons of confidentiality. No information is held on members of the armed forces who may be receiving treatment outside the Defence Medical Services.

War Pensions

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Gulf War veterans have been deemed eligible for war pensions due to the effects of the Gulf War; and if he will make a statement. [154048]

Mr. Bayley: I have been asked to reply.

At 31 January 2001, 965 awards of war disablement pension had been made to Gulf War veterans for Gulf War-related illnesses.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Trade Union Rights

14. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what further proposals he has to introduce legislation in relation to trade union rights. [153644]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government have introduced greater rights to trade union membership and representation through the Employment Relations Act 1999 and other initiatives. This legislation needs time to bed down. We therefore have no plans to introduce further trade union legislation during this Parliament.

Energy Prices

16. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking with regard to energy prices. [153646]

Mr. Hain: The Government are taking a number of actions, both nationally and internationally, to promote competitive gas and electricity prices.

Trade Balance

18. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what forecast he has made of the balance of trade in 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [153648]

Mr. Caborn: The Treasury forecast for the balance of trade shows a £26.75 billion deficit in 2001, rising to £33.75 billion in 2002.

Ilisu Dam

19. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will come to a decision on ECGD support for the Ilisu dam. [153650]

Mr. Caborn: We will not make our decision on ECGD support for the Ilisu project until both the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and the Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) have been received and fully assessed.

We have received assurances from the commercial parties that the EIAR, which is their document, will be made publicly available before a decision is taken.

Science

20. **Mr. Hopkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps are being taken to keep Britain at the forefront of scientific advances. [153651]

Ms Hewitt: The Government place great importance on the quality of British science. A strong science base is essential to the knowledge economy. We will increase the

level of funding through the Science Budget by an average of 7 per cent. per year, in real terms, over the next three years. We have taken significant steps to reverse the underfunding of university scientific research infrastructure: and we will increase postgraduate student stipends by 23 per cent. in real terms. We have also, and for the first time, allocated funds for an 'e-science' initiative which will enable the development of very high speed computing for the next wave of science. The UK is a good place to do science and many international companies have R&D centres here.

Metrication

21. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on metrication. [153652]

Dr. Howells: In compliance with metrication legislation made in 1994, four out of five trade weighing machines are now operating in metric units. We fully expect the remaining weighing machines to convert to metric.

Chemical Industry

22. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on prospects for the chemical industry. [153653]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The chemicals industry has consistently outpaced the growth in the economy overall. Forecasts suggest that this pattern will continue for the foreseeable future. The industry does, however, face significant pressures on restructuring, performance and innovation to meet rapidly changing global challenges. The Government will continue to do what they can to help the industry meet those challenges.

Sub-post Offices

23. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of the sub-post office network. [153654]

Mr. Alan Johnson: By accepting all 24 recommendations of the Performance and Innovation Unit's (PIU) report on the future of the post office network, the Government have demonstrated their continuing commitment to maintenance of a nationwide network. We are working closely with the Post Office, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and other stakeholders to implement the PIU recommendations. These measures are designed to modernise and improve Post Office services and to strengthen confidence in the future of the network.

Minimum Wage

24. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of how the increased national minimum wage will benefit people in Scotland. [153655]

Mr. Alan Johnson: We estimate that the increase in the national minimum wage to £4.10 from 1 October 2001 will be of direct benefit to around 120,000 workers in Scotland—6.1 per cent. of all workers in Scotland.

Between April 2000 and February 2001, Inland Revenue enforcement officers visited 363 employers in Scotland and identified around £212,000 in underpayments for workers in Scotland.

The Low Pay Commission's third report, which the Government published on 5 March, contains a thorough assessment of the impact of the national minimum wage thus far and of the likely impact of this increase. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the implementation of the national minimum wage. [154289]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Earlier this month the independent Low Pay Commission produced volume 1 of their third report evaluating the impact of the national minimum wage. The Commission undertook an extensive consultation exercise as part of their work. They received 150 written submissions and took oral evidence from the CBI, the TUC and a number of other organisations to supplement their written evidence. Volume 2 of the third report, which will cover issues of implementation and enforcement, is due in May.

Industrial Clusters

25. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his measures to support the development of industrial clusters. [153656]

Ms Hewitt: The Government recognise the importance of clusters and networks and are working closely with the RDAs to identify and remove barriers to their growth and development. In the White Paper "Opportunity for All in a World of Change", published on 13 February, the Government set out their proposals to promote the growth of successful clusters by asking the RDAs to develop strategies for success for their regions, building on their existing strengths. They will do so with the assistance of a report, "Business Clusters in the UK: A First Assessment", which was also published on 13 February.

Key aspects of clusters policy were discussed at a conference in Nottingham involving Government, RDAs and other stakeholders on 8 and 9 March.

Government funding for cluster development will continue to be provided to RDAs via the Regional Innovation Fund. Continued work on clusters will be undertaken by Lord Sainsbury's Clusters Policy Steering Group.

Steel Production

26. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the prospects for the production of engineering steel. [153657]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The UK companies that produce engineering steels have had to adapt to difficult trading conditions in recent years and have undertaken restructuring in order to remain competitive. This has been a painful process for those involved but it leaves them well placed to continue to supply the home market and maintain exports.

Small Business

27. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the cost to small business of regulations introduced since May 1997. [153658]

Ms Hewitt: Since August 1998, all legislation likely to have an impact on business has been subject to a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA). A series of Command Papers lists RIAs for each six month period, the most recent being No. 4918. RIAs are published and are available from the Libraries of the House.

Miners' Compensation

28. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the progress being made on miners' compensation claims. [153659]

Mr. Hain: Substantial progress has been made but we still need to do more.

In the last few weeks, we have agreed with miners' solicitors how compensation for loss of pension will be handled. This element of compensation amounts to around £400 million. This is the last piece in the jigsaw. This now means that, over the next few months, we will see many full and final offers of compensation made.

And as I said in my earlier reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Mr. Michie), in the last eight weeks alone we have announced a package of measures which will see £million's of additional compensation being brought forward and offered quickly to a whole raft of claimants.

Many of these will not previously have been made an offer. We are also clearing a large backlog of medical reports, which will enable 1,000 claims a week to go forward to have compensation assessed over the next three months. I am also pleased to see the number of respiratory consultants employed on this scheme steadily increasing. We now have 228 in place an increase of almost 25 per cent. from a few months ago. The number of medical assessments carried out per week is now well over 600—an increase of 50 per cent.

All of this is progress on top of the £360 million already paid on miners compensation. We are paying out over £1 million a day on coal compensation.

Work-life Balance

29. **Mr. Tony Lloyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received about the work-life balance. [153660]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Green Paper "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice" sought views on a number of practical options to help working parents. The Green Paper recognises that parents daily juggle work and family life and, recognises that businesses, particularly small employers, need to minimise extra costs.

During the consultation period for the Green Paper, which ended on 7 March, Ministers and officials met almost 300 people and received over 450 written responses to options contained with it. The Government are now considering these responses.

32. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the responses he has received to his Green Paper "Work and Parents". [153663]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The consultation period for the Green Paper "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice" ended on 7 March. During the consultation period officials and Ministers met almost 300 employees, employers and other interested groups and representatives. Additionally more than 450 written responses were received.

The Government announced how they intend to proceed on those issues covered in the Green Paper with financial implications for the state in the Budget on 7 March. These are an increase in the flat rate of Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) and Maternity Allowance; an extension to the period of flat rate maternity pay to 26 weeks; the right to two weeks paid paternity leave for all working fathers and paid adoption leave, paid for the same period and at the same flat rate as SMP. Additionally the Government have doubled the threshold for Small Employer Relief.

All of the options announced in the Budget had strong support throughout the consultation from employees, employers and other interested groups. The responses received during the consultation period will help inform decisions on the remaining options just as they helped inform the initial decisions on maternity and paternity leave.

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the impact of the Green Paper, "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice" on the people in the northern region. [153633]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Following the consultation on the Work and Parents Green Paper, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the Budget increases to maternity pay and leave and the introduction of paid paternity and adoption leave. Based on current figures, we estimate that around 160,000 working men and women in the north-west, north-east and Yorkshire and Humberside will have the opportunity to benefit from these changes alone. Other options put forward in the Green Paper are still under consideration and decision on these will be announced in due course.

Intellectual Property Rights

30. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the law relating to intellectual property rights. [153661]

Dr. Howells: UK law relating to intellectual property rights is continually being updated in response to new developments at international, European and domestic levels. Where relevant European legislation provides specifically for a review, we intend to play a full part in that process.

Business Regulation

31. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to reduce the amount of regulation of small and medium-sized businesses. [153662]

Ms Hewitt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry takes the issue of burdens on business very seriously and is working to ensure that red tape is kept to a minimum, especially for small and medium-sized businesses.

The Department of Trade and Industry announced new proposals to strengthen and improve the employment tribunal system in November 2000. The new measures will help to ease the burden on business caused by weak and ill-founded claims. We are also considering the responses to a consultation on a proposal to exempt small and medium-sized businesses from the requirement to pay merger fees.

The Small Business Service has been set up to work with small firms and Departments to ensure that regulations do not impose unnecessary burdens. The Government have revised guidance on Regulatory Impact Assessments, emphasising the need to think small first in drawing up regulations and to consult with the Small Business Service.

Overhead Power Lines

33. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent assessment he has made of the costs of burying overhead power lines; and if he will make a statement. [153664]

Mr. Hain: Developing technology is unlikely to provide any immediate help in offsetting the cost penalty that goes with burying overhead power lines.

Education (Business Co-operation)

34. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he plans to encourage co-operation between universities, colleges and the business community. [153665]

Ms Hewitt: We have introduced a number of measures to encourage collaboration between higher education and business. We have established the £140 million Higher Education Innovation Fund to support higher education and business interaction—particularly with SMEs—and are supporting university innovation centres, which are regionally based partnerships between large businesses, groups of small businesses and academia. We are also running one further round of University Challenge and Science Enterprise Challenge to further assist the commercialisation of research and help bring business skills into the science curriculum, and will be supporting 20 Business Fellows to lead their academic colleagues in working with business. Collectively, this represents a significant public investment in knowledge transfer. We plan to maintain this investment through a permanent "third" stream of funding to reward and incentivise excellence in knowledge transfer alongside funding for research and teaching.

We are also working towards the target of 1,000 TCS Programmes running at any one time, enabling firms of all sizes to develop their competitiveness by using a graduate to embed new ideas or technology, and we have doubled the number of new starts of Faraday Partnerships so that the national network of at least 24 Partnerships will be in place by 2002. We will also continue to support LINK programmes which encourage businesses to work with the research base in universities and elsewhere. Additionally, we have recently announced a further round of Foresight LINK Awards focused on key Foresight research priorities from Panel reports published last December.

Arms Exports

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce controls on the end-use of arms exported from the United Kingdom in the forthcoming draft legislation on arms export controls; and if he will make a statement. [153647]

Dr. Howells: The Government rigorously assess all export licence applications to determine the risk of any proposed export being misused in contravention of the consolidated EU and national export licensing criteria. Under these criteria we will not issue an export licence where there is a clearly identifiable risk that the equipment could be used for internal repression or external aggression. Applications are also refused if we assess that an unacceptable risk of diversion exists.

We have taken a number of steps to strengthen the process of risk assessment at the export licensing stage. Such improvements have not required a change in the law and there no plans to include specific measures on end-use monitoring in the draft Export Control Bill.

Patent Office

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets he has set the Department's executive agency, the Patent Office, for 2001–02. [155546]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have set the Patent Office the following targets for 2001–02:

Patents

1. To increase performance year on year so that 90 per cent. of search reports are issued within six months of request by 2005–06.

2. To grant 90 per cent. of patents within three years of request.

Designs

3. To register 90 per cent. of designs within 9 months of application.

Trade Marks

4. To register 90 per cent. of processed trade mark class applications, to which no substantive objections are raised or oppositions filed within nine months of application.

5. To achieve by the end of the year a reduction of eight weeks in the average time taken to issue a decision in a trade mark dispute once the case is ready.

Policy

6. To publish details of progress towards key milestones in UK and International policy development in the Annual Report and on our website.

Efficiency Targets

7. To increase output in relation to current expenditure by an average of at least 2 per cent. per annum over the period 1998–99 to 2002–03.

In addition to these key targets:

Finance

The Office will pay 100 per cent. of bills within 30 days of receipt of goods or services or a valid invoice, whichever is the later.

Questions delegated to the Chief Executive

The Chief Executive will reply within 10 working days to all letters from Members of Parliament delegated to her for reply.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the second stage of the quinquennial review of the Patent Office will be completed; and if he will make a statement. [155542]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The second stage of the five-yearly review of the Patent Office has now been completed. The Patent Office has a key role to play as a driver in the knowledge economy.

I am pleased to say that the review found the Patent Office has achieved a remarkable transformation over the last decade and is now extremely customer focused and responsive. The Office's patent granting and other registration functions are well regarded and compare favourably with those of other IPR Offices. Indeed on trade marks, the review found that the Office was thought to be one of the best in the world.

The Patent Office's role has to be seen in an international context, which is evolving. Trade is becoming increasingly international and intellectual property protection has to reflect this. The Patent Office is in the forefront in initiating and promoting development of the international systems. The European Community and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) have both embarked on substantial programmes to achieve harmonisation and there is significant work in progress in the EU in areas such as the proposed Community Patent. The review concludes that the Office should work to make the international routes for patent granting—which SMEs as well as larger companies need—cheaper, faster and more accessible and to reduce duplication of work. There is also a growing need to ensure that copyright can be protected and enforced on an international basis.

The Patent Office has an important part to play in fostering innovation and encouraging technological transfer. The review finds that more could be done to help ensure that inventions achieve successful commercial exploitation. It suggests that the Patent Office should work with the Small Business Service to help small businesses in this respect, such as by helping to match inventors with business partners. This would complement the wider activities of my Department in support of innovation and the knowledge economy.

IT has great strategic and financial importance for the Office. The Office has made good progress in introducing electronic services and a significant further programme is in train.

The Office needs objectives and targets appropriate to this agenda of internationalisation and effective help for small business, allowing delivery through e-communication channels wherever possible.

The demand for patents is outstripping the ability of Patent Offices to deliver, both internationally and in the UK. Reducing duplication of work between offices is thus all the more important. The Patent Office has a wide programme to try to ensure that scarce examiner resource is used to best effect. The report makes recommendations about recruitment strategies for patent examiners, flexible working schemes, training and use of examiners as well as pay.

Obtaining IP rights is only part of the story: small business made clear that effective enforcement of rights is crucial to their value and they found that effective enforcement could be both difficult and costly. The report recommends that the Patent Office should work with others to develop alternative dispute resolution procedures and to help facilitate the greater use of insurance in this field. It could also usefully extend its work to improve awareness of the range of intellectual property rights and how to enforce them. On trade marks and copyright significant action to assist enforcement is already in hand. The report recommends that the Office should consider further streamlining its procedure for handling trade mark oppositions.

The report looks at the Office's use of contractors. It finds that in the case of the London Front Office, there have been gains in terms of cost and efficiency, but the option of bringing the function back in-house should be appraised before a decision is taken whether to continue with contracting out. In the case of accommodation services, the report finds that it is not clear-cut whether these should remain contracted out or be brought back in-house. The Office should undertake an internal benchmark costing, taking into account all the relevant factors, before deciding how to achieve best value.

The report suggests new procedures for the handling of appeals for entry to the patent and trade mark agent profession and on cases of misconduct. It suggests that the Office should encourage multi-disciplinary partnerships, which can offer a "one-stop shop" on a range of issues.

Overall, the review shows what a success story the UK Patent Office has become. The Office is found to set a high example in its responsiveness to customers and open communications with staff, its new IP Portal and its successful involvement in the "New Deal" initiative. Other agencies, and other parts of government, could particularly learn from its example in these respects.

I would like to place on record my appreciation for the efforts the staff and management of the Patent Office have made to bring about these achievements.

Radiocommunications Agency

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes are planned to the service which the Radiocommunications Agency provides to investigate interference to domestic television and radio reception. [155544]

Ms Hewitt: Further to my reply of 9 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 327–28W, I have now reviewed the way that the Agency handles the investigation of domestic television and radio reception problems. With effect from 1 April the Agency will accept complaints about TV and radio reception (subject to certain basic conditions, such as the installation of a satisfactory aerial) and a charge will only be payable if, following an investigation by the Agency, the problem is found to be within the complainant's own installation. That charge will be £50 including VAT. This procedure will allow domestic consumers to report possible interference arising from new broadband telecommunications systems.

Postal Services Commission

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will issue social and environmental guidance to the Postal Services Commission; and if he will make a statement. [155543]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have today, in accordance with section 43(2) of the Postal Services Act 2000, issued guidance to the Postal Services Commission about the making by the Commission of a contribution towards the attainment of the social and environmental policies referred to in the guidance. A draft of the guidance had been laid, in the terms in which it is now being issued, before each House of Parliament on 8 February 2001, in accordance with section 43(4) of the Act. Copies of the guidance have been laid in the Libraries of each House and the guidance is also being made available on the DTI's website www.dti.gov.uk.

The process of giving statutory social and environmental guidance has been developed to provide a means of ensuring that regulators take due account of the Government's social and environmental policies in carrying out their statutory functions. Regulators have a statutory duty to have regard to the guidance.

Debt Taskforce

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the personnel involved in the debt taskforce, its work programme and the preliminary conclusions it has reached. [154813]

Dr. Howells: The debt taskforce I set up to explore the cause and effect of overindebtedness and develop practical solutions for achieving more responsible lending and borrowing is made up of representatives from:

British Bankers Association

Consumer Credit Association

Experian

Finance and Leasing Association

Financial Services Authority

National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux

Office of Fair Trading

Personal Finance and Research Centre.

I have asked the taskforce to look at three key issues:

improving the transparency of information provided to consumers before and when concluding an agreement; including the small print

adoption of core principles of lending practice; including examining an applicant's overall borrowing exposure and ability to repay

requiring clear notification to consumers on free and low interest agreements before the final payment is made.

The taskforce will present its report and recommendations to me in April.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many households in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales, are not receiving direct postal deliveries because of precautionary and mandatory access restrictions connected with the foot and mouth disease outbreak; and what arrangements can be made for the delivery and collection of postal votes in such circumstances. [154829]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been advised by the Post Office that all households in the affected areas have access to its postal services. Arrangements have been made at a local level for the collection and distribution of mail in areas affected by foot and mouth disease or where farmers or landowners have requested that postal staff do not go on their land. These arrangements include:

Handover of mail at the farmer or land owners gate;

Collection by the addressee from the delivery office

Delivery to an alternative address.

A central record of these local arrangements is not available.

Arrangements for the delivery and collection of postal votes would be the same as for ordinary mail.

Textile and Clothing Strategy

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the British fashion industry on its role in the national textile and clothing strategy. [153649]

Ms Hewitt: The Textile and Clothing National Strategy Group, on which the British Fashion Council is represented, made a number of recommendations that relate directly to the role of designers. These are under consideration by the Department and others interested in promoting the sector. As the Minister directly responsible for the sector, I have met representatives of the British Fashion Council on two occasions since November last year to discuss possible further support to designers within the wider context of the strategy.

Conoco Power Station (South Killingholme)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on Conoco Global Power Developments UK Ltd.'s proposal to build a combined heat and gas power station at the Conoco Humber refinery at South Killingholme. [155541]

Mr. Hain: I have today granted consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to Conoco Global Power Developments UK Ltd. for the construction of a 700 megawatt gas-fired combined heat and power station at the Conoco Humber Refinery at South Killingholme in North Lincolnshire. The station has also today been given clearance as a gas-fired station under section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 and planning permission for the station has been deemed to be granted subject to 47 planning conditions agreed with the North Lincolnshire borough council. This consent is an extension to the proposal which was granted consent on 13 November 2000.

The station will supply the energy requirements of the Conoco Humber Refinery and the Lindsay Oil Refinery and is the largest combined heat and power station given approval by the Government. This demonstrates our continued support to promote CHP stations, wherever practicable, and our commitment to reducing emissions of carbon to fulfil the promises we gave at Kyoto.

Copies of the Press Notice and decision letters are being placed in the Library of the House.

Trade Tariffs

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the European Commissioner for Development and *(b)* his European counterparts on (i) the recent amendments to proposals for the everything But arms initiative and (ii) the implications of these proposals for United Kingdom sugar producers; and if he will make a statement. [153556]

Mr. Caborn: The Government welcome the European Union's recent agreement to the everything But arms proposal which has now led to the EU's removal of tariffs from all remaining imports from the 48 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the world, subject to transitional arrangements for bananas, rice and sugar only. This resulted from ongoing discussions held by the Government with other EU member states and the European Commission, an important part of which was consideration of the implications of these proposals both for ACP sugar exporters and UK sugar producers.

It is the Government's view that LDCs, because of their low level of economic development and poor infrastructure, are not in a position to export large amounts of sugar in the short term. This, coupled with the arrangements for tariff quotas for sugar through until 1 July 2009, means that the short term implications for UK sugar producers are negligible.

Companies House

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets he has set the Department's executive agency, Companies House, for 2001–02. [155545]

Dr. Howells: I have set Companies House the following targets for the 2001–02 year.

Operational Targets

To process 99 per cent. of statutory documents within five days of receipt at Companies House

To achieve, on average, a monthly compliance rate for accounts submitted of 95 per cent

To ensure that there is a minimum of 98 per cent. error-free work in current processing

To ensure that 96 per cent. of all forms submitted to Companies House are captured error-free

Question delegated to the Chief Executive

The Chief Executive to reply within 10 days to all letters from Members of Parliament delegated to him for reply

Customer Service and Complaints Handling

To ensure that products and services on Companies House Direct are available for 98 per cent. of the time between the supported hours of 7am and 8pm, Monday to Friday.

To achieve a score of more than 75 per cent. in each quarterly Companies House Customer Satisfaction Survey

To clear up 90 per cent. of complaints within five days.

Financial Targets

To maintain a unit cost reduction of 3 per cent. in real terms on document registration

To achieve, taking one year with another, a 6 per cent. average rate of return based on the operating surplus expressed as a percentage of average net assets

To pay all bills due within 30 days, or other agreed credit terms, on receipt of goods or services or a valid invoice, whichever is later.

Cars (Prices)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to reduce further the price of cars. [153627]

Mr. Byers: Due to action taken by the Government following the Competition Commission report prices have fallen by around 10 per cent. in the past year.

We shall continue to take steps to ensure the public get value for money.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Members' Office Costs Allowances

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Council what has been the percentage increase in hon. Members' Office Cost Allowance since 1997. [154426]

Mrs. Beckett: The OCA increases annually by the RPI percentage rate as at 31 March. Percentage increases in Office Costs Allowance (OCA) since 1997 are:

	Percentage increase	*Allowance (£)*
April 1997	2.6	47,568
April 1998	3.5	49,232
April 1999	2.1	50,264
April 2000	2.6	51,572

Leader of the Opposition's Office

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Council what the percentage change has been in the money supplied to the Leader of the Opposition's office in each year since 1997. [154400]

Mrs. Beckett: The Leader of the Opposition's Office allowance started only in 1999, initially at a level of £500,000 per annum; this increases annually by the RPI percentage rate as at 31 March.

The April 2000 increase was 2.6 per cent., which increased the payment to £513,000.

Government Bills

Mr. Stunell: To ask the President of the Council how many *(a)* clauses there were in Government Bills as introduced and *(b)* Government amendments were tabled, in Sessions (i) 1996–97 and (ii) 1999–2000; and if she will give a ratio between both figures for both sessions. [154286]

Mrs. Beckett: *(a)* Information on the number of clauses and schedules is as follows:

Year	Clauses and Schedules on Introduction	Pages on Introduction	Pages on Royal Assent
1996–97[2]	896	1,044	1,143
1999–2000[3]	2,637	2,796	3,600

[1] The figures exclude Scottish, Consolidated Fund and Appropriation Bills.
[2] House of Commons sat for 86 days and the House of Lords for 79 days.
[3] House of Commons sat for 170 days and the House of Lords for 177 days.

(b) Information on Government amendments could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council when the Appointments Commission will publish the employment status and occupation of applicants for a people's peerage. [154202]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the Appointments Commission has not asked applicants for non-political peerages for information about their occupation or employment status as it did not wish to discourage people with outstanding achievements in areas unconnected with how they might earn their living. However, the Commission wishes to encourage nominations from people in all walks of life and from all parts of the country and will look at the information it has received in this light. I understand that any information that the Commission decides to publish will be in its annual report and on its website.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council when the Appointments Commission will publish its annual report. [154203]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the Appointments Commission plans to publish its annual report in the summer.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Turkey

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on prospects for the Turkish economy. [154451]

Mr. Vaz: The new economic reform programme agreed with the IMF, which is based on fighting inflation, achieving sustainable public finances and enhancing structural reform, will, if vigorously implemented, put Turkey firmly back on the road to realising its full economic potential.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the explanatory statements relating to *(a)* Islamabad reference C4694 and *(b)* Dhaka reference 64550 will be dispatched. [154491]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* In respect of Islamabad reference C4694, the entry clearance officer wrote to the sponsor's solicitor on 5 March 2001 deferring the application for three months to allow the sponsor to commence UK divorce proceedings to dissolve his first marriage. If evidence of the commencement of such proceedings is provided, the entry clearance officer will review the refusal, with a view to the possible authorisation of a fiancée entry clearance. If such evidence is not received, the entry clearance officer will draft the explanatory statement and the case will proceed to appeal.

In respect of Dhaka reference 64550, the entry clearance officer received the notice of appeal on 12 February 2001 and will despatch the explanatory statement within three months of that date.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in maintaining the achievement of clearing the backlog of outstanding correspondence on visa matters. [155445]

Mr. Vaz: As Minister responsible for entry clearance matters, I have been asked to reply on my right hon. Friend's behalf. I am very pleased to be able to inform the House that since my reply to my hon. Friend, the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) on 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 508W, the level of outstanding correspondence on visa matters remains at zero.

Visas

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how many contacts the Minister for Europe and his office have had with the entry clearance unit regarding objections to refusals of visa applications in *(a)* New Delhi, *(b)* Calcutta, *(c)* Bombay, *(d)* Nairobi, *(e)* Auckland and *(f)* Sydney in the last 18 months; [154918]

(2) how many objections to and refusals of visa applications were overruled by Ministers in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999, *(e)* 2000 and *(f)* 2001, broken down by applicants' country of origin; [154917]

(3) on what grounds the Minister for Europe overruled objections to and refusals of visa applications in the last 18 months; if he will list the names of the applicants; and if he will make a statement. [154916]

Mr. Vaz: Figures on ministerial overturns on visa cases were not kept centrally until I became Minister responsible for entry clearance in October 1999. Statistics were then kept at my request. I have overturned 49 decisions to date. In this period there have been over 2 million visa applications of which approximately 140,000 have been refused. I have therefore overturned decisions in 0.0025 per cent. of cases. I have done so on the basis that I am satisfied that the applicants qualified for entry clearance under the immigration rules. It would be inappropriate for me to divulge the names of applicants or details on individual cases on confidentiality grounds.

This is in accordance with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. I can say however that the cases in which I intervened covered a wide range of nationalities. As well as cases from the sub-continent, I have overturned decisions made in a range of countries, from south America, to south-east Asia to north Africa.

Diplomatic Posts

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those diplomatic posts that have been opened over the last four years; and what plans he has to open new diplomatic posts overseas. [155446]

Mr. Robin Cook: Since 1997, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has opened the following posts to support the delivery of the foreign policy objectives I set out on coming to office.

Posts with resident UK-based staff

Banja Luka (Bosnia-Herzegovina) (1997)—British Embassy Office

Chongqing (China) (2000)—Consulate General

Denver (USA) (2000)—Consulate

Dili (East Timor) (2000)—British Office

Gothenburg (Sweden) (2000)—Consulate General

Pristina (Kosovo FRY) (2000)—British Office.

In addition, the British trade office in Hong Kong became a Consulate-General in 1997.

Posts with resident locally engaged staff only

Lomé (Togo) (1998)—Consulate

Calgary (Canada) (1999)—British Trade Office

Fukuoka (Japan) (1999)—Consulate

Ahmedabad (India) (2000)—British Trade Office

Bamako (Mali) (2000)—Consulate

Bhopal (India) (2000)—British Trade Office

Conakry (Guinea) (2000)—Consulate

Goa (India) (2000)—British Trade Office

Hyderabad (India) (2000)—British Trade Office

Port-Au-Prince (Haiti) (2000)—Consular Office

Pune (India) (2000)—British Trade Office.

In addition, the following posts have been upgraded from ones with only locally engaged staff to ones with resident UK-based staff:

Bangalore (India) (1999)—British Trade Office

Nagoya (Japan) (1999)—Consulate

Monterrey (Mexico) (2000)—Consulate.

As a direct result of the additional resources secured in the spending review last year, I am able to announce that we shall open three new embassies with resident UK-based staff in capital cities in the near future:

Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan)

Chisinau (Moldova)

Pyongyang (Democratic People's Republic of Korea).

In addition, we shall upgrade the posts in Bamako (Mali) and Asmara (Eritrea) to UK-staffed posts from the LE posts currently open; and upgrade the post in Lahore (Pakistan) to an entry clearance operation, from a British trade office. Pakistan is a country where we are already well represented, but Lahore is a city where we now need a stronger presence.

Upgrading the post in Bamako will allow HMG to engage further with the Malian Government and to continue with our efforts to secure peace and stability within west Africa.

Upgrading the post in Asmara will be a cost-effective means of engaging more effectively with the Eritrean Government, promoting growing trade opportunities for British business and providing consular and visa services.

Opening in Bishkek will allow HMG to build up a strong bilateral relationship with the Kyrgyz Government and better to promote stability in the strategically important region.

In Chisinau, an Embassy will allow HMG to work with the Moldovan Government, and keep a close watch on the Transdniestria conflict.

In December I announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with the DPRK. Opening an embassy in Pyongyang will allow HMG to engage fully with the DPRK, improving our capacity to analyse political, economic and social developments and to help support recent positive developments in inter-Korean relations.

These new post openings mean that, net of closures, we shall since 1997 have expanded our diplomatic network of posts with resident UK-based staff by 12, in addition to having new locally staffed offices in a further 10 cities (net of closures seven). This strengthening of our global network will enable us better to promote UK interests and a strong world community.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Young Offenders (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long it took from arrest to sentencing to process persistent young offenders in Shropshire *(a)* on 1 May 1997 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [154663]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have information on performance for West Mercia. In 1997 it took an average 155 days from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders in the police force area of West Mercia compared with a national average of 141 days. The latest available West Mercia average is an estimated 114 days for July to September 2000 compared with a national average of 95 days.

Departmental Policies (Truro and St. Austell)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St. Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154535]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of

responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Truro and St. Austell constituency or the immediate locality:

Targeted Policing Initiative

Devon and Cornwall Constabulary were awarded £950,000 under round two of the Targeted Policing Initiative for a force-wide project to tackle violent crime linked to alcohol abuse (Operation Amethyst). The project will provide immediate support to victims of domestic violence at hospital Accident and Emergency Departments. It will tackle on and off-licensed premises selling alcohol to those under the legal age limit. A media campaign will be launched to publicise the negative effects of alcohol. Youth workers will be provided to work with those people misusing alcohol. Other aims of the project include: creating an Alcohol Assessment Stabilisation Programme in conjunction with an arrest referral scheme; management of the licensing environment; creation of a Safety Advisory Group to provide guidance and advice, and provide education about alcohol.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Restormel Borough Council was awarded £70,000 for a mobile system, which will complement the existing town centre schemes in St. Austell and Newquay and private sector facilities allowing crime and anti-social issues to be targeted in an area that is predominantly rural with scattered centres of population. The project aims to significantly reduce vehicle crime, violent crime and youth offending.

Carrick District Council was awarded approximately £644,000 to extend the existing CCTV provision in Falmouth and Truro by providing 25 new cameras and a new monitoring station. The scheme will link the hospital and college sites in Truro. The project aims to reduce overall crime in Truro City Centre and Falmouth Town Centre by 40 per cent. over three years.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

Truro and St. Austell are covered by the Cornwall YOT. The YOT directly provides assessment and intervention work in support of: final warnings; bail support and supervision services; supervision of youth court orders and throughcare and post release supervision for young people sentenced to custody. The YOT also provides responsible officers for child safety and parenting orders. The YOT also manages the delivery of services supplied by other agencies including: drugs misuse assessment and intervention accessed through the RAPIDLY project, which is funded with the assistance of the Youth Justice Board and the Health Action Zone; and the Hot Spot project dealing with young fire setters, which operates as a collaborative venture involving the Fire Service, Dreadnought and Social Services.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Truro and St. Austell to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Violent Offences (Wales)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many reported offences involving violence there were in Wales in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001; and how many of those involved (i) village shops and (ii) village post offices. [154802]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Numbers of recorded violent crimes in Wales by category are given in the table, the most recent published data being for the year ending September 2000. Recorded crime statistics do not generally include the location of offences, and so details of those involving village shops and village post offices are not available. It should be noted that, owing to the change in counting rules on 1 April 1998, figures for recorded crime before and after that date are not directly comparable. For example, from that date, figures for offences of violence against the person additionally include figures for common assault and assault on a constable, among other offences.

Recorded crime in Wales—number of recorded crimes in violent crime categories

Year ending	Violence against the person	Sexual offences	Robbery
March 1998	17,589	1,815	786
March 1999	32,099	1,818	853
March 2000	37,922	1,749	909
September 2000	38,185	1,613	885

Child Curfew Orders

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many child curfew orders have been *(a)* applied for and *(b)* issued in Wales since their introduction; and if he will make a statement. [154805]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The local child curfew scheme was introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and has been available since September of that year. The scheme allows a local authority, after consultation with the police and other appropriate local bodies and following confirmation from the Secretary of State, to set up a scheme under which unaccompanied children up to the age of nine can be banned from a particular area for a specified period at night.

No local authority has applied to the Secretary of State to set up a local child curfew scheme.

Following consultation on why this provision has not been used we are now raising the age of children who can be covered by the scheme to 15, and allowing the police to initiate applications. These changes are being introduced in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. We believe these amendments will encourage the consideration of child curfews as part of local crime and disorder reduction strategies.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* child curfew orders and *(b)* antisocial behaviour orders have been (i) applied for and (ii) issued in Lancashire since their implementation; and if he will make a statement. [154801]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The local child curfew scheme for children of nine and under was introduced by section 14 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and has been in force since September of that year. The scheme allows a local authority, after consultation with the police and other appropriate local bodies and following confirmation from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, to set up a scheme which bans children up to the age of nine from being out late at night (for a specified period between 9 pm and 6 am) otherwise than under the control of a responsible adult.

No local authority has applied to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to set up a local child curfew scheme. We have consulted widely on why this provision has not been used and many useful suggestions are being taken forward. In particular consultations indicated that the age range was too narrow given that children out on the streets late at night are often aged 10 or over.

We are seeking to remedy this by raising the age at which children can be covered to 15. This change is being introduced in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. We are also giving the police the power to initiate and set up a scheme following consultation with the local authority and after confirmation from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. We believe these changes will make the scheme more likely to be used, and play a useful part in local crime and disorder reduction strategies.

The antisocial behaviour order was a new civil order created under section 1 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which has been in force since April 1999. This community based order can be applied for by the police, a local authority or in consultation with each other, against one or several individuals (perhaps a family) whose behaviour is anti-social (ie it causes alarm, distress or harassment to one or more people not in the same household as him/herself).

We understand that at least five antisocial behaviour orders were issued in Lancashire between 1 April 1999 and 31 May 2000. Figures, by local authority area, for the numbers of orders applied for during that period are not held centrally. However from 1 June 2000 the number of such orders applied for and issued is being collected centrally. Provisional data up to 30 September 2000 show two antisocial behaviour orders being applied for in Lancashire, both of which were granted.

Lancet Inquiry

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the total costs of the Lancet and associated inquiries to date, indicating the costs of the witness statements submitted to the CPS, broken down into *(a)* stationery, *(b)* postage, *(c)* clerical, *(d)* officers and *(e)* heating and lighting; and if he will make a statement. [154924]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Chief Constable of Cleveland police that the total police costs of the Lancet and associated inquiries to date is £3,252,000. The total cost is inclusive of salaries, overtime and travel and subsistence costs incurred by officers from Cleveland, Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and West Yorkshire, together with expenditure incurred for rental of premises and office expenses. A total of 3,162 witness statements and interviews have been taken since the inquiry began in November 1997. The Chief Constable informs me that the total costs could be broken down into the categories requested only at disproportionate cost.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the costs to public funds of the suspension of officers during Operation Lancet; and if he will make a statement. [154925]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Chief Constable of Cleveland police that the estimated costs of salaries and related costs up to 31 March 2001 in respect of the eight suspended officers is £870,600.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the total costs of the involvement of Warwickshire police in the Lancet Inquiry; and if he will make a statement. [154927]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Chief Constable of Cleveland police that the total costs incurred to date by officers from Warwickshire Constabulary is £76,300.

Operation Dollar/Operation Eagle

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the costs to date of the *(a)* Operation Dollar and *(b)* Operation Eagle inquiries broken down by (i) wage, (ii) overtime, (iii) expenses, (iv) office accommodation and (v) stationery; and if he will make a statement. [154926]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Chief Constable of Cleveland police that the total costs of Operation Dollar amount to £326,400 broken down as follows: *(a)* wages, overtime and costs: £312,500; *(b)* transport: £8,800; *(c)* subsistence: £3,700; and, *(d)* office expenses: £1,400. Operation Eagle was an internal administrative arrangement by Cleveland police to handle disciplinary issues arising from Operation Lancet and the costs cannot be separately identified.

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the size of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate; and if he will make a statement. [155576]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This has been under consideration for some time as a means of ensuring the efficient and effective implementation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which provides for the protection of animals used for experimental and other scientific purposes. I am pleased to announce that the existing complement of 21 inspectors will be increased to 33 over the next three financial years.

The extra 12 inspectors will result in a substantial and unprecedented level of Inspectorate staffing. This will lead to more inspections to ensure compliance with licence conditions, and will enable applications for authorities under the 1986 Act to be dealt with more efficiently, without compromising the quality of advice offered by the Inspectorate. Furthermore, the Home Office will be able to become more proactive in raising standards of animal care and welfare, and to play a greater role in developing and promoting strategies of "replacement, reduction and refinement".

The cost of the additional inspectors will in due course have to be reflected in licence fees paid by those conducting animal research.

I hope that the scientific community and animal welfare organisations—and the general public—will welcome this important announcement. It is a practical demonstration of the Government's commitment to ensure that, for as long as there is a need to use animals in scientific research, the legislation to protect them is applied to maximum effect.

Police Numbers

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers and civilian staff there are *(a)* in total and *(b)* for each police force in England and Wales for the latest date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [154903]

Mr. Straw: The tables show, for March 1997, March 2000, September 2000 and January 2001, total numbers of police officers and civilians for each police authority in England and Wales, together with changes in numbers since March 1997 and September 2000.

The total number of police officers for September 2000 has been amended from 124,614 to 124,547 as a result of a revision made by the Northumbria police in respect of the figures which they provided for the September returns.

On 31 January 2001 total police numbers, including secondments, in England and Wales were 125,537, an increase of 990 over the revised position at 30 September 2000.

Between 30 September 2000 and 31 January 2001, the number of civilian support staff increased by 565 to 54,598, including secondments. This is the highest number ever recorded. In total, there were 180,135 police officers and civilian staff on 31 January 2001, as compared with 180,169 in March 1997.

The substantial investment provided to the police service through the Crime Fighting Fund, announced in September 1999, and which started operation in April 2000, is now delivering the positive results promised. Police numbers rose by 377 between 1 April and 30 September 2000 and by a further 990 between 1 October 2000 and 31 January 2001, a total increase in 10 months of 1,367. This rise in 10 months is the largest single increase in police numbers during one whole financial year since 1988–89.

On the basis of forces' projections, we expect that police numbers should reach 126,000 by March 2001, 128,000 by March 2002 and record numbers by March 2003.

Police strength

FTE

	Strength				*Number*	
GOR/police force	*31 March 1997*	*31 March 2000*	*30 September 2000*	*31 January 2001*	*Change March 1997 to January 2001*	*Change September 2000 to January 2001*
North East	6,597	6,749	6,820	6,890	294	70
Cleveland	1,459	1,404	1,421	1,426	−33	5
Durham	1,461	1,558	1,581	1,596	136	15
Northumbria	3,677	3,788	3,818	3,868	191	50
North West	17,588	17,153	17,110	17,259	−330	149
Cheshire	2,046	2,011	2,000	2,021	−24	21
Cumbria	1,144	1,084	1,048	1,049	−94	2
Greater Manchester	6,922	6,795	6,767	6,867	−54	100
Lancashire	3,247	3,179	3,215	3,245	−3	30
Merseyside	4,230	4,085	4,081	4,076	−154	−5
Yorkshire and the Humber	11,750	11,200	11,189	11,196	−554	7
Humberside	2,045	1,932	1,905	1,902	−143	−3
North Yorkshire	1,338	1,283	1,293	1,299	−38	6
South Yorkshire	3,159	3,163	3,184	3,190	32	6
West Yorkshire	5,209	4,822	4,806	4,804	−405	−2
East Midlands	8,436	8,206	8,350	8,447	11	97
Derbyshire	1,791	1,777	1,780	1,816	26	36
Leicestershire	1,949	1,993	2,010	2,021	73	11
Lincolnshire	1,196	1,115	1,162	1,190	−6	28
Northamptonshire	1,177	1,117	1,166	1,161	−16	−5
Nottinghamshire	2,323	2,204	2,232	2,258	−65	26

Police strength

FTE

	Strength				*Number*	
GOR/police force	*31 March 1997*	*31 March 2000*	*30 September 2000*	*31 January 2001*	*Change March 1997 to January 2001*	*Change September 2000 to January 2001*
West Midlands	12,290	12,151	12,324	12,416	126	92
Staffordshire	2,211	2,170	2,157	2,138	−73	−19
Warwickshire	926	900	912	942	16	30
West Mercia	2,040	1,887	1,906	1,899	−141	−7
West Midlands	7,113	7,194	7,350	7,438	325	88
Eastern	9,727	9,364	9,515	9,683	−43	168
Bedfordshire	1,094	1,028	1,006	1,031	−63	24
Cambridgeshire	1,302	1,237	1,266	1,309	7	43
Essex[2]	2,961	2,806	2,780	2,859	−102	79
Hertfordshire[2]	1,759	1,767	1,961	1,954	195	−7
Norfolk	1,432	1,381	1,387	1,397	−34	11
Suffolk	1,180	1,145	1,115	1,133	−46	18
London	27,536	26,216	25,415	25,571	−1,965	156
City of London	859	732	720	711	−148	−10
Metropolitan Police[2]	26,677	25,485	24,695	24,861	−1,817	166
South East	15,111	14,971	15,347	15,421	310	75
Hampshire	3,452	3,419	3,435	3,451	0	16
Kent	3,260	3,204	3,239	3,308	48	69
Surrey[2]	1,620	1,785	2,113	2,088	468	−25
Sussex	3,085	2,822	2,812	2,851	−233	40
Thames Valley	3,695	3,740	3,748	3,723	28	−25
South West	9,424	9,313	9,354	9,509	85	154
Avon and Somerset	2,989	2,934	2,941	2,968	−21	27
Devon and Cornwall	2,865	2,841	2,873	2,927	62	54
Dorset	1,284	1,306	1,299	1,339	55	40
Gloucestershire	1,133	1,114	1,142	1,160	28	18
Wiltshire	1,154	1,118	1,099	1,114	−40	15
Wales	6,592	6,632	6,738	6,863	271	125
Dyfed Powys	1,005	1,040	1,045	1,063	58	18
Gwent	1,243	1,264	1,271	1,265	22	−6
North Wales	1,369	1,403	1,393	1,432	63	39
South Wales	2,976	2,926	3,029	3,103	127	74
England and Wales[1]	125,051	121,956	122,163	123,256	−1,795	1,093
Total secondments	2,107	2,214	2,384	2,281	174	−103
Total[4]	127,158	124,170	124,547	125,537	−1,621	990

[1] Northumbria police revised their total police strength figure for September 2000 by a reduction of 67 officers. This figure in this table has been corrected.
[2] As of April 2000, the Metropolitan police force was reduced in size by a transfer of responsibility for policing some areas to the surrounding forces of Surrey, Hertfordshire and Essex. These changes need to be borne in mind when comparing figures for these forces before and after April 2000.
[3] Excluding secondments
[4] Including secondments
Note:
Because of rounding, constituent parts may not necessarily sum to the totals

Civilian Staff[3]

FTE

	Strength				*Number*	
GOR/police force	*31 March 1997*	*31 March 2000*	*30 September 2000*	*31 January 2001*	*Change March 1997 to January 2001*	*Change September 2000 to January 2001*
North East	2,557	2,603	2,583	2,606	49	22
Cleveland	609	595	598	597	−12	−1
Durham	583	590	573	596	13	23
Northumbria	1,365	1,417	1,413	1,412	47	0

Civilian Staff[1]

FTE

GOR/police force	*Strength*				*Number*	
	31 March 1997	*31 March 2000*	*30 September 2000*	*31 January 2001*	*Change March 1997 to January 2001*	*Change September 2000 to January 2001*
North West	6,267	6,994	7,007	7,147	880	140
Cheshire	735	823	870	860	125	−10
Cumbria	451	469	505	577	126	73
Greater Manchester	2,612	2,822	2,845	2,936	324	91
Lancashire	1,126	1,422	1,351	1,343	217	−8
Merseyside	1,343	1,458	1,437	1,430	87	−6
Yorkshire and the Humber	4,762	4,922	4,923	4,897	135	−26
Humberside	718	840	783	789	71	7
North Yorkshire	519	492	533	602	83	69
South Yorkshire	1,291	1,391	1,399	1,307	16	−93
West Yorkshire	2,234	2,199	2,208	2,199	−35	−9
East Midlands	3,555	3,769	4,039	3,964	408	−75
Derbyshire	723	826	865	867	144	2
Leicestershire	755	805	808	807	52	−1
Lincolnshire	521	516	554	552	31	−2
Northamptonshire	554	599	825	691	137	−135
Nottinghamshire	1,003	1,024	987	1,048	45	60
West Midlands	4,819	4,991	5,132	5,302	482	169
Staffordshire	763	858	897	942	179	45
Warwickshire	376	394	388	411	35	23
West Mercia	942	1,043	1,026	1,096	154	70
West Midlands	2,739	2,695	2,821	2,853	114	31
Eastern	4,234	4,485	4,699	4,802	569	103
Bedfordshire	484	490	493	487	3	−6
Cambridgeshire	607	503	543	605	−2	63
Essex	1,199	1,348	1,472	1,452	253	−19
Hertfordshire[2]	818	890	948	952	134	4
Norfolk	603	655	651	684	81	33
Suffolk	522	600	592	621	99	29
London	13,840	10,890	13,382	10,341	−3499	−41
City of London	347	285	235	230	−177	−5
Metropolitan Police[2]	13,493	10,605	10,147	10,111	−3,382	−36
South East	6,399	6,966	7,292	7,357	956	64
Hampshire	1,316	1,443	1,462	1,404	88	−58
Kent	1,384	1,647	1,670	1,756	372	86
Surrey[2]	727	762	865	893	166	28
Sussex	1,149	1,328	1,405	1,448	299	43
Thames Valley	1,825	1,786	1,890	1,855	30	−35
South West	4,122	4,512	4,581	4,690	568	108
Avon and Somerset	1,438	1,436	1,437	1,459	21	22
Devon and Cornwall	1,159	1,343	1,391	1,428	269	37
Dorset	615	686	681	685	70	4
Gloucestershire	435	484	498	499	64	1
Wiltshire	475	563	574	619	144	45
Wales	2,455	2,457	2,686	2,704	248	18
Dyfed Powys	322	359	393	392	70	−1
Gwent	452	498	490	523	71	34
North Wales	476	519	511	506	30	−5
South Wales	1,206	1,081	1,293	1,283	77	−10
England and Wales[3,4]	53,011	52,588	53,524	53,808	797	483
Total secondments	n/a	639	708	790	n/a	82
Total[3,4]	53,011	53,227	54,032	54,598	1,587	565

[1] Excluding traffic wardens

[2] As of April 2000, the Metropolitan police force was reduced in size by a transfer of responsibility for policing some areas to the surrounding forces of Surrey, Hertfordshire and Essex. These changes need to be borne in mind when comparing figures for these forces before and after April 2000.

[3] Excluding secondments

[4] Including secondments

[5] In the March 1997 figures, civilian secondments are counted within the figures for the forces from which they were seconded. The increase of 1,587 civilians between March 1997 and January 2001 takes this into account.

Note:

Because of rounding, constituent parts may not necessarily sum to the totals

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Imports

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many meat inspectors were in place at points of entry for imported meat products in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [152380]

Ms Quin: This information is not held centrally. All meat imported from third countries into the UK must enter at designated UK Border Inspection Posts (BIP) where it is subject to veterinary inspections. The inspection services at the BIP are the responsibility of the local authority. Central Government have no powers to instruct the local authority over the number of inspectors. However, the BIP has to be approved by the Commission, whose inspectors conduct periodic inspections and who have to be satisfied that the inspection services are adequate. If they are not, the approval of the BIP may be suspended.

Meat produced within the EU may circulate freely in the single market, and is not subject to border checks. It is subject to checks at the point of destination within the UK. The Meat Hygiene Service has been instructed to step up levels of inspection at cutting plants and cold stores, to ensure that any increased volumes of imports (which could arise from the effects of the foot and mouth crisis) can be checked for the necessary health marks and correct documentation.

Arable Farming

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the *(a)* average income and *(b)* public subsidy was for arable farmers in England for the last year for which figures are available. [152851]

Ms Quin: The latest year for which figures are available is the year ended February 2000. The average net farm income for cereal farms in England for that year was £11,700 and the average total direct subsidy payment was £37,000. The average net farm income for general cropping farms was £8,000 and the average total direct subsidy payment was £31,500. The total direct subsidy excludes the additional support farmers receive from the consumer, through maintenance of EU agricultural prices above world levels by the CAP.

Hill Farmers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 501W, on hill farmers, what elements combine to give a subsidy of £24,400 per farm. [153536]

Ms Quin: I am sorry that there was an error in my answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 501W, giving the total of £24,400 as the subsidy. The correct average total subsidy paid to full-time LFA cattle and sheep farms in England in 1999–2000 was £29,400. This is made up of £25,400 per farm in livestock subsidies, £3,500 per farm in environmental subsidies and £500 per farm in crop and other subsidies. The rest of the answer remains correct.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 501W, on hill farmers, what the subsidy is for a typical hill farm in England arising from the EU. [153537]

Ms Quin: Less than half per cent. of direct subsidies paid to full-time LFA cattle and sheep farms in England in 1999–2000 did not arise from EU legislation. Although some subsidies such as BSE payments and hill farm compensatory allowances are part funded nationally, they are still part of the CAP.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies (Truro and St. Austell)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St. Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154538]

The Solicitor-General: The Truro and St. Austell constituency falls within the geographical area covered by the Devon and Cornwall Area of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). In November 1999, in line with national policy, this area of the CPS, in liaison with the police and the East and West Cornwall Magistrates courts which cover that constituency, introduced procedures based on the Narey proposals. This means that all adult defendants charged with a criminal offence in Cornwall should make their first appearance before either Truro or Bodmin Magistrates court within eight days. This is in line with the Government's policy of speeding up and modernising the criminal justice system.

On 18 December 2000, the Cornwall office of CPS Devon and Cornwall finalised its structure in line with proposals in the Glidewell Review. This represents a policy of more effective working between the police and prosecutors. A CPS Crown Court Unit based in Truro deals with serious crime at Truro Crown court. The CPS has set as a goal the better handling of serious cases in the interests of justice and the victims. A fast-track procedure began on 15 January 2001 throughout England and Wales. It ensures that offences which can only be tried in the Crown court normally come before a judge within eight clear days of their first hearing in the Magistrates court.

The CPS together with other agencies has been working to speed up youth justice, particularly persistent youth offenders. The time taken for persistent youth cases has fallen in the CPS Devon and Cornwall area from 141 days in 1997 to 65 days in the third quarter of 2000. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the criminal justice system.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office effect the hon. Member's constituency only indirectly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people (i) in England and (ii) from north Somerset *(a)* entered and *(b)* completed higher education courses in each of the past five years. [149901]

Mr. Wicks: The available information is shown in the table. Prior to the reorganisation of local government, north Somerset was included within Avon local education authority and therefore cannot be identified separately prior to 1997–98.

Entrants and completers from higher education courses[1] in HE institutions

Thousand

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Entrants					
Postgraduates:					
England[2]	104.6	105.8	106.0	109.7	110.7
North Somerset[3]	n/a	n/a	0.4	0.4	0.4
Undergraduates:					
England[2]	374.2	366.2	378.0	376.0	389.6
North Somerset[3]	n/a	n/a	1.5	1.3	1.1
Qualifiers					
Postgraduates:					
England[2]	50.2	52.8	55.4	57.6	59.1
North Somerset[3]	n/a	n/a	0.2	0.3	0.4
Undergraduates:					
England[2]	222.6	225.5	225.0	231.9	233.8
North Somerset[3]	n/a	n/a	0.7	0.8	0.8

[1] Full-time and part-time courses excluding the Open University.
[2] Students studying in institutions in England.
[3] Students whose normal home residence is in north Somerset.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152644]

Mr. Wills: Development of departmental logos and branding often takes place as part of the development of advertising and publicity campaigns and costs are not easily separated out. However, where logo or brand development can be isolated, expenditure since May 1997 was:

1997–98

European Social Fund Standards and Effectiveness Unit, New Deal, Rebranding the Employment Service and Jobcentres—£829,000

1998–99

Beacon Schools, Beacon Colleges, Childcare Link, General Teaching Council, National Childcare—£39,900

1999–2000

Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Sure Start, Training Schools, Work-Life Balance, Age Diversity, Community Champions, Individual Learning Accounts, Millennium Volunteers, One—£381,200

2000–01

Children's Fund, Read, Write, Plus (Adult Basic Skills provision), Science Year, The Children and Young People's Unit, National Professional Qualification for Headteachers, Connexions, Employment Zones, Foundation Degrees, Overseas Labour Service, WorkTrain—£189,800.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to enable young people above the age of 16 years to benefit from modern apprenticeships. [154402]

Mr. Wicks: Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are an important part of the new vocational framework for young people in England. Many more young people will benefit from MAs as a result of an entitlement we are introducing to a place for those who have the necessary aptitude, ability and enthusiasm for work-based training. As an aid to this, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently announced plans for an expansion of MA places in England, from 220,000 this year, to 320,000 by March 2004. In addition, both my Department and the Learning and Skills Council will continue to promote MAs, to ensure that Careers Companies and the new Connexions Service are able to provide accurate and up-to-date information about the opportunities MAs offer.

Physical Education

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many physical education teacher vacancies there were in secondary schools, broken down by region, in each year since 1995. [154480]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is as follows:

	January:					
Government Office region	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
North East	2	2	1	1	2	1
North West	0	0	1	5	3	3
Yorkshire and Humber	0	1	2	1	3	1
East Midlands	1	0	0	0	1	2
West Midlands	2	3	3	4	6	5
South West	0	0	1	1	2	1
East	4	4	3	5	2	7
London	6	7	10	13	2	7
South East	4	10	6	4	8	3
Total	19	27	27	34	29	30

The estimated vacancy rate for physical education in each year since 1995 is as follows:

	Vacancy rate
January	
1995	0.2
1996	0.2
1997	0.2
1998	0.3
1999	0.3
2000	0.2

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998. There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

Basic Skills Provision (Inspections)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the continuation of inspections of performance by full-time and part-time education providers in the programme area of basic skills. [154675]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* The Government attach high priority to improving adults' literacy and numeracy skills. On 1 March, we published our national strategy for achieving this in Skills for Life, which set out how regular monitoring and robust inspection will raise standards among basic skills providers and improve the achievement of learners.

From April 2001 'all' providers of adult literacy and numeracy provision funded by the Learning and Skills Council or a local authority will fall within the general arrangements for inspection by Ofsted and/or the Adult Learning Inspectorate, as defined by the Learning and Skills Act 2000. In addition, we will conduct a review of the quality and inspection criteria for basic skills provision.

Curriculum 2000

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the annual cost, and on whom it will fall, of additional external moderation and examination needed to fulfil the requirement of Curriculum 2000. [154676]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* The Government have provided additional funding of £103 million for schools and colleges for Curriculum 2000 in 2000–01. This includes the costs of external moderation and examination.

Post-16 Educational Qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to integrate the award of educational qualifications post-16 with individual pupil records. [154678]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* There are no plans to integrate the award of educational qualifications post-16 with individual pupil records.

School Achievement Awards

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to give recognition to schools with consistently high standards of achievement in both 1997 and 2000; and if he will make a statement. [154741]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* School Achievement Awards are being given for the first time this year. In this first round we are giving priority to improvement. We are also giving excellence awards to schools that achieved better results last year than most other schools in similar circumstances. The Department also recognises sustained achievement in other ways, notably through the Beacon Schools scheme. There are now nearly 600 Beacon Schools across the country and the number is set to grow.

University Students

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the unit of resource per full-time student at English universities in *(a)* cash, *(b)* real terms and *(c)* indexed to a base of 1989 = 100, in (i) 1989, (ii) 1992, (iii) 1997, (iv) 2000–01, (v) 2001–02 and estimated for (A) 2002–03 and (B) 2003–04. [154814]

Mr. Wicks: Information relating to the unit of publicly planned funding per full-time equivalent student at higher education institutions in England is shown in the table:

Publicly planned funding per full-time equivalent higher education student in England (in £)[1] in cash terms, and in real terms at 1989–90 prices

	Cash terms	*Real terms*	*Real terms index*
Outturn			
1989–90	5,350	5,350	100
1992–93	5,060	4,280	80
1997–98	4,580	3,410	64
Planned			
2000–01	4,860	3,380	63
2001–02	5,020	3,410	64
2002–03	5,150	3,410	64
2003–04	5,290	3,420	64

[1] Unit funding per student is rounded to the nearest £5

The Government are investing an extra £1.7 billion in higher education in England over the six years to 2003–04. The increases in publicly planned funding announced last November coupled with planned increases in student numbers imply estimated real terms increases in funding per full-time equivalent student of 0.7 per cent., 0 per cent. and 0.4 per cent. over the next three years.

National Training Organisations

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will make an announcement on the outcome of the consultation on the future national training organisation representation for the telecom industry. [155081]

Mr. Wicks: The consultation ends on 30 March 2001. We will make an announcement on future arrangements as soon as practicable after the end of the consultation period. Details will be published on the internet in accordance with the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Public Consultations.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the annual membership fee of each of the national training organisations. [155082]

Mr. Wicks: NTOs are independent employer-led organisations and it is for them to decide whether they wish to operate a membership arrangement with employers in their sector and if so what the appropriate annual membership should be. The Department does not keep information on the membership schemes that operate.

Pupil Exclusions

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils were excluded from school *(a)* temporarily and *(b)* permanently (i) in each of the London education authorities and (ii) nationally during the past 12 months, broken down by ethnic origin. [155000]

Jacqui Smith: The Department is currently collating information on the number of permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools in England in the school year 1999–2000 and provisional figures will be published in a Statistical First Release in May 2001 (provisional date). The Department does not collect data on the number of fixed period exclusions.

The latest available information, which is for the school year 1998–99, on the number of pupils permanently excluded from school in each of the London education authorities and in England as a whole, broken down by ethnic origin, is shown in the table.

Number of permanent exclusions from Primary, Secondary and Special[1] schools by ethnic origin 1998–99

	Number of exclusions									
	White	*Black Caribbean*	*Black African*	*Black other*	*Indian*	*Pakistani*	*Bangladeshi*	*Chinese*	*Any other ethnic group*	*Total*
City of London	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Camden	14	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	5	19
Greenwich	51	[2]—	5	7	[2]—	0	0	[2]—	12	75
Hackney	15	8	[2]—	6	0	0	0	0	6	35
Hammersmith and Fulham	18	13	6	9	0	0	0	0	[2]—	46
Islington	16	7	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	0	5	28
Kensington and Chelsea	11	6	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	0	6	23
Lambeth	[2]—	23	9	5	0	0	0	0	[2]—	37
Lewisham	20	13	[2]—	20	0	0	0	0	9	62
Southwark	22	48	22	10	0	0	0	[2]—	[2]—	102
Tower Hamlets	13	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	14	0	[2]—	27
Wandsworth	22	30	9	11	0	0	0	[2]—	[2]—	72
Westminster	17	10	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	0	7	34
Barking and Dagenham	35	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	0	[2]—	35
Barnet	19	12	6	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	[2]—	37
Bexley	54	[2]—	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	59
Brent	15	27	14	10	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	6	72
Bromley	74	6	[2]—	0	0	0	0	0	5	85
Croydon	67	46	[2]—	8	0	0	[2]—	0	7	128
Ealing	28	21	6	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	8	63
Enfield	44	15	[2]—	7	0	0	0	0	9	75
Haringey	13	16	[2]—	6	[2]—	0	0	0	[2]—	35
Harrow	20	6	[2]—	7	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	[2]—	33
Havering	37	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	0	[2]—	37
Hillingdon	55	[2]—	0	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	[2]—	55
Hounslow	43	5	[2]—	[2]—	7	[2]—	0	0	8	63
Kingston upon Thames	23	[2]—	0	0	0	0	0	0	[2]—	23
Merton	13	8	[2]—	0	0	0	0	0	[2]—	21
Newham	23	8	8	[2]—	0	[2]—	[2]—	0	9	48
Redbridge	21	6	5	[2]—	[2]—	0	[2]—	0	5	37
Richmond upon Thames	35	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	[2]—	0	35
Sutton	33	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	0	0	0	0	0	33
Waltham Forest	40	25	[2]—	9	[2]—	5	0	0	[2]—	79
England	8,791	593	157	268	71	165	42	6	320	10,413

[1] Includes maintained and non maintained special school
[2] Fewer than 5 pupils

School Meals

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many local education authorities provide *(a)* hot and *(b)* cold meals; [154919]

(2) what consultation he has initiated with schoolchildren about their preferences in respect of school meals and if meals should be hot or cold; [154920]

(3) what guidelines he issues to local education authorities about the nutritional value of hot school meals; [154921]

(4) which authorities have changed school meal provision from hot meals to cold in the last year. [154922]

Jacqui Smith: Information on hot and cold school meal provision is not collected centrally. Under current education legislation, it is entirely up to local education authorities and schools in England to decide on the presentation and content of school meals. However, from 1 April this year, the Government are introducing compulsory minimum nutritional standards for school lunches—the first for over 20 years—along with a new duty to provide paid meals on request. Although there is no requirement that lunches should be hot, all school lunches, whether hot or cold, will have to meet the new standards.

I accept that hot food may be comforting, particularly in cold weather. In our guidance for caterers on the new standards, there is a strong recommendation that some hot food should be available on the school meal menu.

We consulted widely on the new standards, including a sample of schools. My officials have also visited schools and spoken to children to ask their views on school lunches.

Bullying

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on tackling bullying in schools. [154998]

Jacqui Smith: We attach a high priority to helping schools prevent and combat bullying. We want all schools to treat bullying seriously and deal with it promptly and firmly whenever and wherever it occurs. That is why since September 1999 we have required heads by law to draw up measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. To help them do this, last December my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State launched our new anti-bullying strategy. This includes a revised pack for schools, an accompanying video aimed at pupils, a new anti-bullying website and a new public information film to raise awareness. The key message is that pupils should report bullying to someone they trust and not suffer in silence. The Department is also funding an expansion of the Parentline Plus free helpline for parents of victims.

We have, however, made it clear that when necessary Heads can permanently exclude pupils responsible for serious or persistent bullying.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils were recorded as the subjects of bullying at school *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each of the London education authorities over the past 12 months, broken down by ethnic origin. [154999]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not available centrally.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what payments were made by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund over the past year. [151770]

Dr. Reid: I believe my hon. Friend is referring to funds allocated by the Victims Liaison Unit in the Northern Ireland Office which provides support to victims of the Troubles.

In the past year, the Victims Liaison Unit allocated £1 million to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, bringing the total paid to the fund to date to £2 million. The fund will receive a further £3 million over the next three years.

£3 million was also provided for the scheme to core fund victims and survivors groups over a two-year period from 2000–02. To date £2,987,938 has been allocated from this scheme. The allocation of grants to individual groups is shown in the table.

Allocation of grants from core funding for victim/survivors groups grants scheme as at 12 March 2001

£

Group	*Grant*
Aisling Centre	20,900
Alanna Consultancy Associates	1,070
An Crann/The Tree	86,100
Ardoyne Commemoration Project	3,000
Ballymurphy Womens Centre	67,697
BASE 2 (NIACRO)	50,750
CALMS	112,530
Coleraine/Ballymoney Branch Regimental Association UDR	73,660
Colleague Support Group	3,100
Corpus Christi Services	67,046
CRUSE	58,000
Cunamh	92,489
Derry City Council	2,500
FACT	68,780
FAIR	91,500
Fermanagh South Tyrone Terrorist Victims	85,400
Firinne	60,446
Greater Twinbrook and Poleglass Community Forum	3,000
HAVEN	22,600
Holy Trinity Centre	76,600
Institute for Counselling and Personal Development	123,990
Lenadoon Counselling Project	40,000
Lifeways Psychotherapy and Counselling	84,380
Make Your Mark	4,190
New Life Counselling	66,205
NOVA	80,000
Omagh Independent Advice Services	19,986
PAIN	88,718
Psychotherapy and Counselling Network	27,825
Relatives for Justice	99,000
Restorick Group	750
SAVER	5,000
Shankill Stress	126,680
South Down Action for Healing Wounds	87,800
Strabane Befriending and Counselling Association	72,554
Streetbeat Youth Project	54,620
Survivors of Trauma	110,000
Tara Counselling and Personal Development	40,000
The Cross Group	1,550
The Samaritans	8,000
The Wider Circle	30,000
Victims and Survivors Trust	83,950
WAVE	596,572
West Tyrone Voice	89,000

Police Service Recruitment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what reasons underlay his decision not to advertise RUC recruitment *(a)* on Irish state television and radio and *(b)* in Irish language newspapers. [152870]

Mr. Ingram: The Secretary of State did not take decisions in relation to the matter mentioned. Advertising was carried out by the police recruitment agent in accordance with the recommendation of the Patten report.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* phone responses and *(b)* applications have been received in responses to the recruitment campaign for the police service; what assessment he has made of the responses in terms of (i) perceived community origin, (ii) gender and (iii) age; and what the timetable is for the implementation of the Consensia Partnership Scheme. [152867]

Mr. Ingram: The advertising campaign commenced on 23 February 2001. In the region of 20,000 requests have been received for application packs. No assessment of applications received has yet been made in respect of

perceived community origin and gender. This analysis will be carried out following the closing date for the competition, which is 30 March 2001. No analysis will be made in respect of age. The Consensia Partnership aims to identify a pool of qualified applicants in September 2001, from which police trainees will be appointed.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by what process the Consensia Partnership was selected to conduct police recruitment in 2001; how many staff are employed by bodies comprising the Consensia Partnership, broken down by perceived community origin of employees; and if he will make a statement. [152866]

Mr. Ingram: The Consensia Partnership responded to an Invitation to Tender in accordance with EU procurement guidelines. Information about the perceived community origin of the Partnership's employees is not available to the Government or the police. It is a condition of contract that Consensia must comply with equality of opportunity as defined in Northern Ireland law.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Long-term Disability Benefits

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the percentage of *(a)* men, *(b)* women and *(c)* people who are in receipt of long-term disability benefits, broken down by (A) each region and nation of the UK and (B) by the (i) 45 to 49, (ii) 50 to 54, (iii) 55 to 59 and (iv) 60 to 64 age ranges. [154809]

Mr. Bayley: Relevant information for people who receive Disability Living Allowance, the long-term rate of Incapacity Benefit, or Severe Disablement Allowance is in the tables.

Percentage of people aged 45 to 49 who are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, long-term rate of Severe Disablement Allowance

Country/region	All persons	Men	Women
Great Britain	6.9	6.7	7.0
England	6.4	6.3	6.4
North East	10.1	11.0	9.3
North West	9.5	9.4	9.7
Yorkshire and Humber	7.6	7.7	7.4
East Midlands	6.3	5.6	7.0
West Midlands	7.0	6.6	7.5
East	4.7	4.4	5.0
London	5.7	5.9	5.6
South East	3.9	3.9	4.0
South West	4.9	4.9	4.8
Wales	10.6	9.8	11.5
Scotland	9.2	9.1	9.3

Percentage of people aged 50 to 54 who are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, long-term rate of Severe Disablement Allowance

Country/region	All persons	Men	Women
Great Britain	9.6	9.5	9.7
England	8.7	8.6	8.8
North East	14.8	14.9	14.6
North West	13.4	13.7	13.1
Yorkshire and Humber	10.6	10.9	10.3
East Midlands	9.0	9.1	8.9
West Midlands	9.0	8.6	9.5
East	6.2	5.8	6.7
London	7.4	7.6	7.2
South East	5.2	4.9	5.6
South West	7.0	6.7	7.3
Wales	16.3	16.2	16.4
Scotland	13.7	13.4	14.0

Percentage of people aged 55 to 59 who are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, long-term rate of Severe Disablement Allowance

Country/region	All persons	Men	Women
Great Britain	16.2	18.8	13.6
England	14.8	17.2	12.5
North East	24.6	31.0	18.2
North West	22.4	26.7	18.1
Yorkshire and Humber	17.5	20.9	14.2
East Midlands	15.4	17.6	13.1
West Midlands	16.1	18.0	14.2
East	10.1	11.1	9.0
London	13.4	14.4	12.4
South East	8.7	9.5	7.9
South West	11.6	14.3	9.0
Wales	27.3	32.8	21.9
Scotland	21.7	25.2	18.4

Percentage of people aged 60 to 64 who are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, long-term rate of Severe Disablement Allowance

Country/region	All persons	Men	Women
Great Britain	15.1	19.3	11.1
England	14.0	17.7	10.3
North East	23.5	32.2	15.2
North West	21.2	26.8	15.8
Yorkshire and Humber	17.3	22.2	12.7
East Midlands	13.8	17.7	10.0
West Midlands	15.6	18.9	12.3
East	9.2	11.8	6.7
London	12.2	14.5	9.9
South East	8.2	10.6	5.8
South West	10.1	13.2	7.1
Wales	25.6	32.9	18.6
Scotland	18.8	24.4	13.8

Notes:

1. Some people receive Disability Living Allowance in addition to one of the other two benefits.

2. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is responsible for social security in Northern Ireland.

Sources:

1. Client Group Analysis of the Working Population as at August 2000 and Client Group Analysis of the Population over State Pension Age as at May 2000.

2. 5 per cent. sample of beneficiaries and ONS mid-1999 population estimates.

Incapacity Benefits

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will review the therapeutic work rules that apply to incapacity benefits; and if he will make a statement. [155577]

Mr. Bayley: From April 2002 we propose to introduce new rules for people who receive Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance and Income Support based on incapacity who want to undertake some form of paid work which may ease their way back into full-time employment. We are aware of concerns that the current therapeutic work rules may be of limited use where it is difficult to demonstrate that a particular job would be beneficial to a person's medical condition. The current rules also do not help someone who wants to work on a limited basis in order to have social contact if they do not satisfy the therapeutic requirement. This is why we have reviewed the current position and are introducing some improvements.

Under the proposed changes, the therapeutic work rules will cease to exist. Instead we intend to introduce rules which will allow any person receiving incapacity benefits to:

(a) work for less than 16 hours a week and up to £60.50 for up to six months; with a six month extension for those working with a Personal Adviser, Job Broker or Disability Employment Adviser;

(b) work for maximum earnings of £20 a week with no time limit and no hours limit.

Claimants who undertake sheltered work or are undergoing a hospital treatment programme which includes work, will, as now, be able to earn up to £60.50 a week (April 2001 rates) with no limit on the number of hours they work.

We believe that these rules are much fairer than those that currently exist. Because we are opening up the rules to anyone on incapacity benefits we are giving more people the opportunity of trying paid work. This, together with our other measures to help people find suitable work, will enable people to move off benefits and into work. Also, by allowing all claimants to do some paid work without time limit, we will be encouraging those who are otherwise excluded to take part in activities which will help them feel part of, and play a more active role in, their local community. Additionally, of course, there are the rules which we already have in place to allow claimants to try full-time work or training and return to benefit at the same rate if they have to give up that work or training.

These changes do not affect the position whereby people receiving Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance may do unpaid voluntary work for an unlimited period.

Winter Fuel Payments

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many representations he has received concerning delays in payment of Winter Fuel Payment since May 1997; [153583]

(2) how many people received their Winter Fuel Payment on time in *(a)* 2000 and *(b)* 1999; [153582]

(3) how many people have experienced delays in payment of Winter Fuel Payment lasting over *(a)* one month, *(b)* three months, *(c)* six months and *(d)* 12 months. [153584]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Miss Anne McIntosh, dated 21 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking how many representations he has received concerning delays in payment of Winter Fuel Payment since May 1997; how many people received their Winter Fuel Payment on time in (a) 2000 and (b) 1999; and how many people have experienced delays in payment of Winter Fuel Payment lasting over (a) one month, (b) three months (c) six months, and (d) 12 months.

The information is not available in the format requested, but I hope the following explanation of when payments were made might be helpful.

The Winter Fuel Payment scheme was introduced in the winter of 1997/1998 as one of the Government's initiatives to tackle fuel poverty in Great Britain.

In the first three winters of the scheme (1997/1998, 1998/1999 and 1999/2000) around 10 million people were eligible in each winter and paid automatically, where entitlement was established. These payments were made within the expected timetable.

In response to a European Court of Justice ruling in December 1999 the Government decided to equalise the age from which the Winter Fuel Payment is payable. The majority of people from age 60 could now benefit from the payments.

Following the court ruling, people who were newly eligible for a payment last winter, and were not in receipt of a social security benefit during the relevant qualifying week, apart from Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit or Child Benefit, should have made a claim for their payment.

Last winter around 11 million payments, where entitlement was established, were made automatically before Christmas, as was the intention. So far we have also made payments in respect of successful claims determined by 12 January 2001. It is up to the individual to decide when and whether to make a claim. We are still receiving and processing claims for winter 1999/2000 payments. Claims for winter 2000/01 must be received before 31 March 2001.

Although the ruling was given in December 1999 it applied from the beginning of the scheme and payments in respect of past winters are being paid to those who are now entitled. People who think they are eligible for a payment for past winters must make a claim for their payments. There is no time limit for making claims for past winters.

I hope this is helpful.

Medical Examinations

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many medical examination reports were graded A, B and C in each of the last three years in each of the three Sema contract areas; and if he will make a statement. [153573]

Mr. Bayley: Medical Services conduct a national programme of audit on a random selection of cases. This yields results that are statistically significant by contract area, at benefit level and on a quarterly basis. Viewed across all areas of work carried out by Medical Services, an analysis of this audit shows the following results:

	Grade		
Contract area	*A*	*B*	*C*
September 1998 to August 1999			
North	78.8	14.0	7.4
South West	82.6	12.1	5.4
South East	78.4	16.9	4.8
September 1999 to August 2000			
North	78.0	15.6	6.4
South West	81.6	12.5	7.0
South East	74.2	19.6	6.3

Contract area	Grade A	Grade B	Grade C
September 2000 to February 2001			
North	77.9	15.2	6.9
South West	83.6	10.7	5.7
South East	80.0	13.9	5.3

Note:
Figures may not add up to 100 per cent. because of rounding up or down to one decimal place.

It should be noted that during 1999, Medical Services were refining their quality audit system, and as a result applied more stringent quality criteria. This is a factor in any apparent deterioration in performance between 1998–99 and 1999–2000.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements he has made with Sema to ensure doctors making medical examinations are given reports on *(a)* appeal outcomes and *(b)* grading of their medical reports; and if he will make a statement. [153575]

Mr. Bayley: In response to the recommendations of the Social Security Select Committee (SSSC) in its report on Medical Services, the Department of Social Security's Chief Medical Adviser and the President of the Appeals Service are establishing a formal process for feedback on the quality standards of medical reports in appeal cases. Interim arrangements for feedback have been in place since July 2000 and five cases have so far been referred.

All cases referred to the Chief Medical Adviser are forwarded to Sema for information, further investigation and remedial action with the doctor concerned, if appropriate.

Sema Medical Services monitor the quality standards of medical reports of all their doctors on a rolling programme, to volumes which are statistically significant over a three-month rolling period. The outcome of monitoring is recorded, and feedback given to each individual doctor on his or her performance. Where this has fallen below the standard expected, the doctor is given appropriate advice by an experienced full-time colleague; if necessary, arrangements are made for remedial training.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of doctors have completed the required training in *(a)* mental health, *(b)* disability awareness and *(c)* musculo-skeletal examinations in each of the last three years in each of the three Sema contract areas; and if he will make a statement. [153557]

Mr. Bayley: These training modules were all developed during 2000 (year two of the contract). Training in these topics has been delivered in 2000 and 2001. The proportion of doctors who are currently carrying out work on the Benefits Agency contract and who have completed the training are as follows:

Percentage of doctors who have completed the required training

	Contract area		
	North	South East	South West
Assessment of people with mental health problems	91	85	86
Behaviours, attitudes and sensitivities for dealing with people with disabilities	89	85	86
Clinical skills in the assessment of musculo-skeletal problems	92	87	91

Any doctor who started with Sema Medical Services before 31 December 2000 will have completed their training by the end of June this year.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of DLA applications were decided after *(a)* medical examination and *(b)* scrutiny in each Sema contract area in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [153574]

Mr. Bayley: This information is not available.

Doctors

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many doctors have been *(a)* suspended, *(b)* required to retrain and *(c)* had their contracts terminated by Sema in each of its three contract areas in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [153576]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

	1–9-1998 to 31–8-1999	*1–9-1999 to 31–8-2000*	*1–9-2000 to 28–2-2001*
North			
Suspended	2	3	6
Retrained	2	22	14
Terminated	17	11	4
South East			
Suspended	0	0	2
Retrained	5	5	5
Terminated	6	4	0
South West			
Suspended	0	0	4
Retrained	15	17	6
Terminated	8	9	4

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Policies

Ms Perham: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if she will make a statement. [152033]

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Slough constituency, the effects on Slough of her Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [146931]

Mr. Stringer: The policy recommendations in Cabinet Office reports relate to England as a whole and it is therefore not possible to say what their specific impact is on a particular constituency. Additionally any policy changes arising from Cabinet Office units, such as the Social Exclusion Unit and the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit, reports are implemented by the appropriate Government Department, rather than by the unit itself.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Creative Industries

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the distribution of employment in the creative industries in the regions and nations of the UK, indicating the number employed in these industries *(a)* as a percentage of the total employed in the UK and *(b)* as a percentage of the total employed in each region and nation of the UK. [154810]

Mr. Chris Smith: Estimates of the distribution of employment in the creative industries in the regions and nations of the UK are shown in the table.

Employees and self-employed people working in creative industries

	As percentage of total employed in all industries in UK	*As percentage of total employed in all industries in the region and nation*	*As percentage of total employed in all creative industries in UK*
United Kingdom	4.8	4.8	100.0
Great Britain	4.7	4.9	98.8
England	4.3	5.1	90.2
North East	0.1	2.9	2.4
North West	0.4	4.0	9.3
Yorkshire and Humberside	0.3	3.3	5.8
East Midlands	0.2	3.4	5.2
West Midlands	0.3	3.3	6.1
East of England	0.4	4.6	9.3
London	1.3	10.3	26.3
South East	0.9	6.1	18.7
South West	0.3	4.0	7.1
Wales	0.1	3.1	2.9
Scotland	0.3	3.2	5.7
Northern Ireland	0.1	2.3	1.2

Source:
Labour Force Survey (average autumn 1999 to summer 2000; not seasonally adjusted), Office for National Statistics, and Creative Industries Mapping Document 2001, Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice was given by NMEC to the Hinduja brothers in respect of matters relating to the applicability of VAT to their donation to the faith zone of the millennium dome. [153735]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* In seeking to recognise the charitable status of the Hinduja Foundation, the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) sought the advice of its tax consultants, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). NMEC passed on to Mr. S. P. Hinduja's office advice it received from PwC in December 1998 on the normal basis in such circumstances that neither NMEC nor PwC were liable or responsible for any reliance the Hindujas placed on that advice. In essence the advice indicated that if the terms of the Hinduja Foundation's contribution mirrored that of the sponsorship agreements drawn-up for commercial sponsors of the Dome then VAT would apply. In early February 1999 NMEC submitted to the Hinduja Foundation a donor agreement that mirrored agreements drawn-up for the other charitable trusts contributing to the faith zone. At that time the donation was not liable for VAT.

Departmental Policies (Clwyd, South)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Clwyd, South constituency, the effects on Clwyd, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [151911]

Mr. Chris Smith: Through their commitment to public service broadcasting, the Government have helped to foster an environment in which a creative, commercially successful broadcasting industry provides a wide range of UK-made, high-quality, original programmes catering for all viewers and listeners. We have ensured a secured funding base for the BBC and S4C, while giving them the freedom to develop commercial operations which complement and support their public service remit. We have made it clear in the Communications White Paper that public service broadcasting will continue to have a key role to play in the digital future.

The Government have also introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November last year. Information on the number of beneficiaries by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 census indicate that there were approximately 4,800 people aged 75 or over living in the Clwyd, South constituency.

My Department sponsors the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which continues to promote Britain effectively as an attractive tourist destination for overseas visitors. The BTA's successful marketing activities are aimed at bringing benefits to all parts of the UK, including Clwyd, South.

According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, there have been 112 national lottery awards to Clwyd, South, totalling £2,021,757 since 2 May 1997. Twenty five Millennium Award Winners have been identified from Clwyd, South and between them they have received grants totalling £75,188.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Asylum Appeals

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many adjudicators are available to her Department to deal with asylum appeals; and how many she plans to have available by 1 April *(a)* 2001, *(b)* 2002, *(c)* 2003 and *(d)* 2004. [154846]

Jane Kennedy: There are currently 76 full-time and 226 part-time adjudicators available to hear asylum appeals. It is planned to have the following number of adjudicators available to hear asylum appeals by:

(c) April 2001—76 full-time and 323 part-time.

(d) April 2002—80 full-time adjudicators and 383 part-time.

There are currently no plans to extend recruitment beyond the 2002 level. The number of adjudicators is, however, under constant review to ensure that sufficient are available to meet incoming appeals. The Immigration Appellate Authority is working closely with the Home Office to ensure that any changes in workloads are identified at an early stage.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the average *(a)* cost and *(b)* duration is of training someone to serve as an adjudicator for immigration and asylum appeals. [154843]

Jane Kennedy: The average cost to the Immigration Appellate Authority of training an adjudicator to serve on both immigration and asylum appeals, excluding travel costs, is currently £2,248 per adjudicator. The average time taken by the authority to train an adjudicator is currently five and a half days.

This answer excludes any subsequent training offered to adjudicators by the Judicial Studies Board.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what qualifications are required of a person recruited to serve as an adjudicator for asylum and immigration appeals. [154844]

Mr. Lock: Immigration adjudicators may be appointed by the Lord Chancellor on a full or part-time basis.

Schedule 3(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, stipulates that an adjudicator must hold a seven-year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990 (i.e. a right of audience qualification in relation to all proceedings in any part of the Supreme Court or all proceedings in the county or magistrates courts); or be an advocate or solicitor in Scotland, or a barrister or solicitor in Northern Ireland, of at least seven years' standing; or have such legal and other experience as appears to the Lord Chancellor to make him or her suited for appointment as an adjudicator.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the average unit cost to her Department is of an asylum appeal. [154845]

Jane Kennedy: The average cost of an asylum appeal to the Lord Chancellor's Department at the end of February 2001, including accommodation and overheads, was £1,289.

Libel

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many libel actions arising from e-publications, websites and list serve subscription services have been started in the past two years; what proportion were settled in advance of a hearing; and what proportion were found *(a)* for and *(b)* against the plaintiff. [154539]

Mr. Lock: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Restrictive Practices (QCs)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Office of Fair Trading's recommendations concerning restrictive practices in the legal profession with particular reference to the QC system. [153628]

Mr. Lock: The Report by the Director General of the Office of Fair Trading, on competition in the market for professional services, raises a number of complex issues which need to be considered. The Government will issue a consultation paper in due course inviting comments.

HEALTH

North Cheshire Health Authority

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what resources have been allocated to North Cheshire health authority for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000 and *(d)* 2000–01. [148850]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 February 2001]:* The final cash-limited allocations to North Cheshire health authority for the past four years are shown in the table.

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	166.7
1998–99	183.5
1999–2000	208.1
2000–01	228.7

Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) on what date Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority joined the Paddington Regeneration Partnership; [151261]

(2) what fees and benefits Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority has received from the Paddington Regeneration Partnership; [151327]

(3) how many meetings of the Board of the Paddington Regeneration Partnership have been attended by members of the Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority and on what dates; [151259]

(4) which board members and officers of Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority have served on Paddington Regeneration Partnership and received emoluments from it; [151326]

(5) on what dates the Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Trust and the St. Mary's Paddington NHS Hospital Trust applied to Westminster city council for outline planning permission for the construction of a new cardio-thoracic hospital alongside St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington. [151457]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority, together with St. Mary's Hospital National Health Service Trust, joined the Paddington Regeneration Partnership from its inception in January 1998. The Paddington Regeneration Partnership's stated aims are to establish Paddington as a premier business and residential district of London, facilitating sustainable economic vitality for the area and ensuring the products of regeneration benefit the surrounding communities.

The health authority and St. Mary's Hospital NHS Trust joined the Paddington Regeneration Partnership board to ensure that the benefits of regeneration and the potential substantial investment in the area are shared by the surrounding communities and promote the interests of the health service and its delivery in the area.

The health authority representative on the Paddington Regeneration Partnership was an assistant director, not a board member, although for six months of the period in question he acted at that level. He attended meetings of its Board on 15 occasions between 18 June 1998 and the present time. The dates were: 18 June 1998, 2 July 1998, 16 July 1998, 10 September 1998, 12 November 1998, 10 December 1998, 14 January 1999, 8 April 1999, 6 May 1999, 9 September 1999, 9 December 1999, 8 June 2000, 6 July 2000, 11 January 2001, 8 February 2001.

No member or officer of Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority has or will receive any emolument from the Paddington Regeneration Partnership Board. No fees or financial benefits have been or will be received.

The application for the building of a Paddington Basin Health Campus was submitted to Westminster city council on 29 June 2000.

NHS Expenditure (North-west)

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* planned and *(b)* actual expenditure was in the NHS in the north-west in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000. [151874]

Mr. Denham: The planned and actual expenditure in the National Health Service in the north-west from 1997–98 up until 1999–2000 is as follows:

£ billion

	Planned expenditure	*Actual expenditure*
1997–98	3.68	4.11
1998–99	4.01	4.51
1999–2000	4.61	5.27

Notes:
There are three main factors to consider in reviewing these figures:
Unlike the actual figures shown, planned expenditure collected at the beginning of the year does not include expenditure on services that are treated as non-cash limited;
Secondly, significant allocations are received during the year, after plans are submitted. These allocations comprise new money to the NHS, and also changes to the way in which funding to NHS trusts is provided; and
One-off items of expenditure can effect comparisons with related plans and previous years.

Specialist Health Services

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in respect of how many NHS specialist health services a person's health authority postcode affects the type of treatment that is available. [152684]

Mr. Denham: Our policy is to secure access to specialist services which is based on the patient's clinical need, not on the patient's postcode.

NHS Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, (1) pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 47–48W, if he will list the NHS hospital trusts which have submitted full business cases since January 1999; and which have since been approved by the NHS Executive; [153122]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 47–48W, on computer systems, if he will list the NHS hospital trusts which were the subject of full business cases for computer systems submitted in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000. [153123]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information requested is given in the table. The table includes one full business case (for the scheme at Kettering General Hospital National Health Service Trust) which was not given in my answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 47–48W.

Name of NHS Trust	*Type of investment*	*Year full business case submitted for approval*	*Whether full business case has been approved*	*Date of approval (where relevant)*
Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust	Patient Administration System and some Departmental systems	1999	Yes	December 1999
Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Trust	Order Comms/Results Reporting and Departmental systems	1999	Yes	February 1999
Morecambe Bay Hospitals NHS Trust	Patient Administration System	1999	Yes	January 1999
Royal Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust	Integrated Patient Management System	1999	Yes	August 1999
Bury Health Care NHS Trust and Rochdale Healthcare NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	2000	No, but decision imminent	n/a

Name of NHS Trust	Type of investment	Year full business case submitted for approval	Whether full business case has been approved	Date of approval (where relevant)
Calderdale Healthcare NHS Trust	Picture Archiving and Communication System	2000	Yes	November 2000
Kettering General Hospital NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	2000	No	n/a
Luton and Dunstable Hospital NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	2000	Yes	December 2000
North Durham Health Care NHS Trust	Picture Archiving and Communication System	2000	Yes	August 2000
Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust	Patient Administration System	2000	Yes	September 2000
South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records and Picture Archiving and Communication System	2000	No	n/a
Tameside Acute Services NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	2000	No	n/a

The full business cases for the schemes at Morecambe Bay Hospitals NHS Trust and Royal Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust were first received in their Regional Offices of the NHS Executive in December 1998.

West Country Ambulance Service

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the extent to which the West Country Ambulance Service has met its response times targets in each of the last 10 years; if he will provide a statistical breakdown in relation to response times in *(a)* Somerset, *(b)* South Somerset and *(c)* the Yeovil constituency in this period; and if he will make a statement. [153377]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* Information about ambulance response times for each National Health Service ambulance trust and nationally for 1991–92 is contained in the Department's statistical bulletin "Patient Transport Services 1981 to 1991–92, Summary Information from Forms KA32 and KA34". Information for 1994–95 is contained in the Department's statistical bulletin "Ambulance Services, England 1994–95". Information for the period 1995–96 to 1999–2000 is contained in the Department's statistical bulletin "Ambulance Services, England 1999–2000". Copies are in the Library.

Our policy is to save more lives by providing faster, more responsive and effective emergency ambulance services. In July 1996, we announced revised standards for ambulance service responses to immediately life-threatening incidents where more rapid intervention would have a significant impact on saving lives.

Clinical evidence indicates that 1,800 lives could be saved each year in people under 75 years of age suffering heart attacks through the achievement of the standard that immediately life-threatening emergency calls (Category A calls) should be responded to 75 per cent. of the time within eight minutes irrespective of location. We are determined that every NHS ambulance trust must achieve the 75 per cent. milestone as quickly as possible.

North Cheshire Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were invited for interview for chair of the North Cheshire Hospitals NHS Trust; how many of those invited for interview lived in Runcorn and Widnes; and if the acting chair of Halton Hospital NHS Trust was invited for interview. [153771]

Mr. Denham: Five people were invited for interview for the post of chair at the new North Cheshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust, two of whom lived in the Runcorn and Widnes areas. The names of the candidates involved are held in confidence. The Department always attempts to ensure that the non-executives appointed to NHS boards represent the communities they serve. This will remain a prime consideration in the appointments made to the board of the newly merged North Cheshire Hospitals NHS Trust.

Correspondence

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will investigate the reasons for the delay in responding to letters from the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey relating to constituents; and if he will make a statement. [153965]

Mr. Denham: The delay in replying to the right hon. Member's letters of both 29 February 2000 and 14 June 2000 resulted from both administrative problems and the original correspondence being lost within the Department.

The delay in reply to the right hon. Member's correspondence of 29 February concerning Mrs. Clay was due to administrative problems within the Department. The delay to the correspondence of 14 June 2000 concerning constituent Mrs. Clay was due to the original correspondence being lost within the Department. Replies to both letters have been sent. I know that the Permanent Secretary/Chief Executive of the National Health Service has written to the right hon. Member to apologise for the unacceptable delay involved in both these cases. New operational procedures have been introduced in the Department to ensure that this sort of delay should not happen again.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood, for answer on 26 February 2001, relating to proposed hospital development in Paddington. [154842]

Mr. Denham: I replied to the hon. Member's questions today.

Respiratory Problems (Doctors)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* registrar and *(b)* consultant physicians practising in respiratory problems there are in England; and if he will make a statement. [154191]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

Hospital medical staff within the respiratory medicine specialty, England at 30 September 2000

	Number
Consultant	440
Registrar group	240

Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest ten
Source:
Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Nurses

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the setting of staffing levels in nursing, with particular reference to the DRAGON method. [153792]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Staffing levels in nursing are a matter for local determination. The Department has not made an assessment of the DRAGON method.

NHS (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much new *(a)* capital, *(b)* revenue and *(c)* total funding has been invested in the National Health Service in Liverpool since May 1997. [154465]

Mr. Denham: The data available, which are provided in the table, are in complete financial years which start from 1 April 1997.

	Revenue		Capital		Total	
	£000	Percentage	£000	Percentage	£000	Percentage
1997–98	25,670	6.79	16,071	133.93	41,741	10.69
1998–99	32,920	8.15	15,498	55.21	48,418	11.21
1999–2000	39,393	9.02	17,319	39.75	56,712	11.80
2000–01	23,699	4.98	33,445	54.93	57,144	10.64
2001–02	121,682	32.17	82,333	686.11	204,015	52.27

Total capital and revenue resources

Capital and revenue sources taken together provide an analysis of total resources invested in Liverpool over the period 1996–97 to 2000–01.

Revenue resources

The table shows the annual increases in NHS income by value and in percentage terms taken from the published accounts of the individual trusts in Liverpool. The 2000–01 figure is based on the most recent forecasts produced by the individual organisations. Non NHS income has been excluded from the information provided.

Note:

The health authority increase over the same period, excluding secondary care which is already included above, is £2.2 million which is an increase of 33.32 per cent. between 1997–98 and 2000–01. The trust increments do not all relate to investment by Liverpool health authority or services specifically for Liverpool residents, particularly in the case of tertiary centres and specialist services in acute hospitals where services are provided for a much larger catchment area.

Capital resources

The table shows the annual increases in capital investment in Liverpool trusts since 1996–97.

Note:

Percentage relative to block capital issued to Liverpool trusts in 1996–97 of £12 million.

Wigan and Bolton Health Authority

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was allocated to the Wigan and Bolton health authority in each of the last 10 years; and if he will indicate the distance from target for health expenditure that each annual allocation represents. [154543]

Mr. Denham: The allocations to the Wigan and Bolton health authority since 1996–97 have been listed. Wigan and Bolton were represented by separate health authorities prior to 1996–97.

	Allocation £000	Target £000	Distance from target £000	Percentage
1996–97	247,380	256,701	09,321	3.63
1997–98	258,518	267,613	09,095	3.40
1998–99	273,219	287,141	13,922	4.85
1999–2000	373,322	385,390	12,068	3.13
2000–01	401,902	414,252	12,350	2.98
2001–01	441,616	454,575	12,959	2.85

Waiting Lists

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* the status is and *(b)* how many patients are on, each of (i) live waiting lists, (ii) planned waiting lists and (iii) suspended waiting lists; and if he will make a statement. [154566]

Mr. Denham: At January 2001 there were 1.039 million people waiting for admission to hospital, 119,000 fewer than at March 1997. The published waiting list only includes those who are ready for treatment. Patients who are planned admissions will initially be admitted from the waiting list, but will also require subsequent planned episodes of care. Patients are only "suspended" if they are unfit for treatment. The number of patients suspended at end December was 76,660[1].

Information is not collected centrally on the numbers of patients awaiting planned sequences of care.

[1] This figure is the Trust based total

Source:

KH07A quarterly return

Free Eye Tests (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many pensioners have benefited from free eye tests in Shrewsbury and Atcham since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [154656]

Mr. Denham: Eligibility for National Health Service sight tests was extended to all those aged 60 and over from 1 April 1999. Figures for the number of over-60s who have received free eye tests in particular areas are not collected centrally.

However, there was an increase of around 40,000 in the total number of sight tests paid for by Shropshire health authority in the 18 months following April 1999 compared to the 18 months before April 1999. It is fair to assume that the majority of this increase was due to newly eligible people aged over 60 obtaining NHS sight tests.

Source:

Department of Health—General Ophthalmic Services Activity Statistics

Hospital Building Costs

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average cost of building a new district general hospital is. [154172]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* Each hospital development is unique, reflecting local requirements and circumstances. We are therefore unable to give an overall average cost. The capital value would be dependent on many factors, such as location, with the land and construction costs varying considerably, with inner London prices at over 25 per cent. higher than in many other parts of the country. Other factors include the geography and nature of the site chosen, and whether it is new build on an existing hospital site, a greenfield site or a major refurbishment project.

Hepatitis C

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how he plans to build on the strategic approach to hepatitis C. [155540]

Yvette Cooper: The Department of Health is setting up a steering group with the following terms of reference:

To oversee development of the Department's strategic approach to hepatitis C by bringing together issues relating to prevention, control and treatment and to produce a document within the year, for consultation with the NHS, professional bodies and the voluntary and community sectors.

The proposed membership of the group is as follows:

Steering group membership

Chairman

Professor Howard Thomas, Imperial College School of Medicine, London and Chairman, Advisory Group on Hepatitis

Members

Jim Camp, Needle Exchange Forum

Ms Hannah Cinamon, Health Promotion England

Professor Chris Day, Medical School, Newcastle University

Ms Jo Guy, Hepatology Nurse Specialist, Southampton General Hospital

Dr. Paul Hatton, Consultant in Communicable Disease Control, Leeds Health Authority and member, Advisory Group on Hepatitis

Ms Lorraine Hewitt, Action on Hepatitis C and member, Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

Nigel Hughes, British Liver Trust

Dr. Will Irving, Department of Microbiology, University of Nottingham and member, Advisory Group on Hepatitis

Grant McNally, National Drug Users Development Agency

Dr. Mary Ramsay, Public Health Laboratory Service Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

Professor Gerry Stimson, Centre for Research on Drugs and Medicine, Imperial College School of Medicine, London

Professor John Strang, Director of the National Addiction Centre, Maudsley Hospital, London and member of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

Ms Monique Tomlinson, Mainliners

Dr. Martyn Wake, General Practitioner, south west London.

TREASURY

Children (Northern Region)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children there are in the Northern Region. [155046]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Fraser Kemp, dated 22 March 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the number of children resident in the Northern Region (155046).

ONS produce statistics for Government Office Regions. In 1999 the estimated number of children (0–15 years) in the North East Government Office Region was 519,000.

Population Statistics (Wales)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people aged over 65 years were resident in Wales in 1997; and how many are resident today. [154817]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 22 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of persons aged 65 and over in the resident population of Wales in 1997 and today (154817).

Below is a table showing the information requested for mid-1997 and mid-1999 which is the most recent year for which a population estimate is available.

Estimated resident population of Wales aged 65 years and over

	Thousand
	Number
Mid-1997	478.5
Mid-1999	479.1

Pensions (Annuities)

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of removing the requirement for people to purchase an annuity with their retirement pension fund. [154419]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) on 21 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 236W.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review the rules on the conversion of tax supported money purchase pension funds into annuities and publish his conclusions. [154777]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to Sections 5.66 to 5.69 of our Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report published on Budget Day which sets out our views on annuities.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason the rate of tax on the pension fund of a person who dies before purchasing an annuity is set at its present rate; and if he will make a statement. [148738]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Contributions to, and the investment build up of, pension funds benefit from deferred taxation to encourage people to save for a secure retirement income that will last for life. Where, following the death of a personal pension scheme member during income drawdown, the remaining pension fund capital is paid to a beneficiary, it is subject to a tax charge of 35 per cent. This charge broadly recovers the pension scheme tax reliefs given earlier on fund contributions and investment growth.

With-profit Bonds

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance his Department has issued to insurance enterprises on the potential effect on reserves of with-profits bonds. [154804]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The reserving requirements for with-profits bonds are set out in the Insurance Companies Act 1982 and in subsequent regulations, and in the equivalent legislation for friendly societies.

Financial Services

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to take steps to allow financial services company representatives to sell the products of other companies; and if he will make a statement. [155067]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I welcome yesterday's announcement by the Financial Services Authority of their conclusions on the work they had undertaken in their Consultation Paper 80, "Reforming Polarisation: First Steps".

That Consultation Paper was issued following the exchange of letters with the FSA Chairman, Sir Howard Davies, at the time of the pre-Budget report, when I welcomed their proposals for polarisation reform.

The FSA will seek views later this year to inform its continuing wider review of polarisation.

Insurance Providers (Solvency)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times in each year since 1992 his Department issued advice to insurance providers on possible breaches of solvency requirements. [154806]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Solvency requirements for insurance companies are set out in the Insurance Companies Act 1982 and in subsequent regulations, and in the equivalent legislation for friendly societies.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to freeze national insurance and income tax payments for zoos closed due to the foot and mouth outbreak. [154069]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* There are currently no such plans, but the Government keep all taxes under review.

In his statement to the House, the Minister for the Environment announced a preliminary package of measures to alleviate the immediate financial hardship of small businesses in rural areas which have been badly hit by the sudden decrease in visitors and other knock-on effects of the foot and mouth outbreak.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the estimated annual cost to the UK economy would be if foot and mouth disease became endemic; [154083]

(2) what estimate he has made of the total cost to the UK economy to date of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [154081]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* Government policy is to eradicate foot and mouth disease from the UK. All efforts are being made to achieve this. It is not possible at this stage to make a robust assessment of the economic impact.

Pension Plans (Tax Relief)

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the total annual cost to the Treasury was of providing tax relief on personal pension plans at *(a)* the starting rate, *(b)* the standard rate and *(c)* the higher rate in each of the last three years; [151767]

(2) how many people paid into personal pension plans and how many schemes attracted tax relief at *(a)* the starting rate, *(b)* the standard rate and *(c)* the higher rate in each of the last three years. [151766]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answers 1 March 2001]:* Estimates of the cost of tax relief for contributions to personal pensions and such information as is available on the number of contributors by rate of income tax are given in the tables.

	Number of employees[1] making contributions to personal pensions
Approximately	3 million[2]
Of which:	
higher rate taxpayers	200 thousand

[1] Based on aggregate information provided by plan managers and survey data

[2] All benefit from repayment of basic rate tax claimed by their pension provider including those who are non-taxpayers or pay tax at less than the basic rate

Number of self-employed[1] making contributions to personal pensions

Thousand

Rate of income tax	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Non-taxpayers	150	160	110
Starting[2] rate	180	30	60
Basic rate	680	800	800
Higher rate	250	250	260
Total	1,260	1,240	1,230

[1] Based on relief claimed on tax returns. 1999–2000 and 2000–01 figures are provisional

[2] 20 per cent. lower rate 1998–99; 10 per cent. starting rate 1999–2000 and 2000–01

Cost of tax relief for personal pension schemes

£ million

Source of contributions and rate of income tax relief	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Employees' contributions			
Basic rate	550	580	590
Higher rate	270	290	310
Employers' contributions[1]			
Basic rate	300	300	300
Higher rate	140	150	160
National Insurance rebates[2]			
Basic rate	175	271	287
Contributions by the self-employed			
Starting rate[3]	30	5	5
Basic rate	210	240	240
Higher rate	490	520	550

[1] On the basis that under present arrangements employers' contributions are not taxable as a benefit in kind of the employees. Figures assume that the proportion related to higher rate taxpayers is the same as that observed for employees' contributions.

[2] Basic rate tax relief in respect of the employees' part of the National Insurance rebate received by around 3.7 million employees with appropriate personal pensions.

[3] 20 per cent. lower rate 1998–99; 10 per cent. starting rate 1999–2000 and 2000–01.

Public Sector Wage Bill

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of total managed expenditure was directly attributable to the public sector wage bill in the last five years for which figures are available. [151303]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The figures are available from the national accounts produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Further detail can be found in table 11.2 of ONS's "United Kingdom National Accounts 2000" (the Blue Book) tables 11.2 (paybill) and 11.4 (total managed expenditure).

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155285]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Chichester, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 504, or 41 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 77 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 63 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 251 young people in Chichester constituency gain valuable skills and experience—138 (55 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle-income families. In August 2000, 1,400 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 25,500 in Chichester, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 16,400 in Chichester.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what impact he estimates the new Children's Tax Credit will have on the incomes of working families. [155127]

Dawn Primarolo: The new Children's Tax Credit will be worth up to £520 a year or £10 a week for hard-working families when it is introduced from April.

Mapeley Ltd.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 569W, whether the technical details have now been finalised; and if he will announce the date upon which the contract is to begin. [155098]

Dawn Primarolo: The technical details have been finalised. The contract was signed on 6 March and is on schedule to commence as planned on 2 April 2001.

Departmental Policies (Ynys Môn)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information

relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154935]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Ynys Môn, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 631, or 24 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 74 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 41 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,091 young people in Ynys Môn constituency gain valuable skills and experience—580 (53 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,300 families in Ynys Môn constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 14,600 in Ynys Môn, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,100 in Ynys Môn.

Departmental Policies (Ceredigion)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154934]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Ceredigion, along with the rest of the United Kingdom is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 384, or 24 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 73 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 26 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 704 young people in Ceredigion constituency gain valuable skills and experience—341 (48 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,800 families in Ceredigion constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 13,700 in Ceredigion, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 8,800 in Ceredigion.

Departmental Policies (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154933]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 179, or 14 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 77 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 53 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 443 young people in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency gain valuable skills and experience—253 (57 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,000 families in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 10,600 in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 6,400 in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy.

Departmental Policies (Caernarfon)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154932]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Caernarfon, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 708, or 30 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 90 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 57 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 818 young people in Caernarfon constituency gain valuable skills and experience—497 (61 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,000 families in Caernarfon constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 13,400 in Caernarfon, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 8,900 in Caernarfon.

Tax Liabilities

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number and *(b)* the proportion of taxpayers in 2000–01 who have income tax liabilities from (i) dividends income and (ii) savings income; and what the mean and median of liabilities are; [149606]

(2) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number of people in 2000–01 who have income tax liabilities from dividends income of less than £50 and *(b)* the number and proportion of taxpayers who do not have liability to income tax from dividends income; and if he will make a statement; [149604]

(3) what estimate he has made of the *(a)* number of people in 2000–01 who have income tax liabilities from savings income of less than £50 and *(b)* the number and proportion of taxpayers who do not have liability to income tax from savings income; and if he will make a statement. [149605]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Estimates for 2000–01 are given in the table.

2000–01 Liabilities

	Million
	Number
(1a) The number of taxpayers who have income tax liabilities from dividends income of less than £50	5.5
(1b) The number and proportion of taxpayers who do not have liability to income tax from dividends income	20.5 (73%)
(2a) The number of people who have income tax liabilities from savings income of less than £50	14.75
(2b) The number and proportion of taxpayers who do not have liability to income tax from savings income	8.5 (30%)

2000–01 Liabilities

	Number (Million)	*Proportion of all taxpayers (Percentage)*	*Mean tax liability from savings/ dividends (£)*	*Median tax liability from savings/ dividends (£)*
(3i) Taxpayers with income tax liabilities from dividends income	7.5	27	370	6
(3ii) Taxpayers with income tax liabilities from savings income	19.5	70	240	12

These estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes (SPI) and are consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget report.

Some investment income data from the SPI are based on estimated rather than reported values so are less reliable than other elements of the survey.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 23 March 2001

DEFENCE

Service Pensions

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the review of compensation arrangements for Gulf War veterans will examine the seven-year rule on eligibility for war pensions; and if he will make a statement. [154049]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer which my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 756W. The Ministry of Defence Consultation Document on the Joint Compensation Review is not confined to arrangements for Gulf veterans, but seeks views on the general eligibility for claims under a new compensation scheme. We will give careful consideration to all views put forward during the consultation phase. The proposals resulting from the review do not envisage changing the eligibility for claims under the DSS administered War Pension Scheme.

Foot and Mouth

Sir John Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what troops and equipment he has available for assisting in the destruction of animals infected with foot and mouth and the containment of the disease. [155041]

Mr. Spellar: The armed forces are supporting the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food by co-ordinating the disposal of carcases in areas worst hit by the outbreak, and in providing a small number of vets and logistic support at MAFF HQ.

Although the situation is being constantly monitored and necessary adjustments made, the details, as of midday 22 March, are as follows:

Four vets from the Royal Army Veterinary Service are assisting, with one located in the MAFF headquarters in London, and the other three deployed as required.

One logistics liaison officer, based in MAFF headquarters in London is to provide advice and help co-ordinate logistics support.

Thirty Royal Military Police personnel have deployed to Exeter to form a headquarters, from where they will provide a command and control function for mobile teams engaged in the co-ordination of disposal in Devon. There are 15 such mobile teams comprising a further 30 personnel from the Royal Military Police.

Thirty personnel of the Prince of Wales' Own Regiment have deployed to Carlisle, from where they will provide a command and control function for mobile teams engaged in the co-ordination of disposal in Cumbria. There are 20 such teams, comprising a further 40 personnel drawn principally from 42(NW) Brigade.

The Green Howards have deployed to Worcester to form a headquarters from where they will provide a command and control function for mobile teams engaged in the co-ordination of disposal in Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Staffordshire and Herefordshire. The precise requirement for the mobile teams is currently being scoped but they will be manned by the Green Howards.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 8 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 633W, on malaria, and his subsequent letter, how many service personnel of the 200 deployed to Sierra Leone without anti-malarial treatment have since been diagnosed with malaria; to which regiments they belong; and if he will make a statement. [155073]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 27 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 609–10W. There are no more than 10 personnel who have contracted malaria among the group who deployed without anti-malaria tablets. These personnel were from 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment and 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment.

Service Pay

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many enlisted personnel left each of the three services in the last 10 years, citing pay as the reason for leaving; and if he will make a statement; [153981]

(2) how many service personnel at officer rank left each of the services in the last 10 years, citing pay as the reason for leaving; and if he will make a statement. [153983]

Mr. Spellar: Information is not available as to the specific reasons why each individual leaves the armed forces prematurely. Each service does, however, run leaver surveys. In the past three years these surveys have indicated that, more often than not, it is the cumulative effect of several factors rather than a single item that has the most impact on retention. From these surveys it is possible to say that dissatisfaction with pay is not one of the most influential factors in an Officer's or Other Rank's/Rating's decision to leave.

MOD Police (Housing)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the outstanding total of backdated claims is from *(a)* serving and *(b)* former MOD police officers in respect of (i) rent allowances and (ii) housing allowances; and if he will make a statement. [155120]

Dr. Moonie: There are no outstanding backdated claims from serving or former Ministry of Defence police officers in respect of rent or housing allowance.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the London borough of Hackney. [155728]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of the London borough of Hackney and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

The reports main conclusion is that the standard of service provided to benefit claimants over the past three years has been very poor. The council contracted out its Benefits and Revenues services in 1997 and the BFI reports that flaws in the contract coupled with a failure to invest sufficient resources in the client side management, has contributed to the present situation.

Inspectors found that a poorly designed claim form, considerable backlogs and very poor processing performance was having an effect on other parts of the service leading to significant delays and a sharp increase in the numbers of complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The report notes that some measures were introduced to improve customer service. But the effectiveness of these measures is being seriously undermined by long waiting times and inefficient use of the caller centre.

Inspectors found that since April 1999 Hackney has failed to comply with the requirement to notify claimants of their benefit entitlement and subsequent changes. The report also noted major concerns in the prevention and recovery of overpayment. In 1999–2000 the HB debt was £17.8 million.

The report notes the introduction of a strong management structure of the council's counter fraud unit and a number of good practices. But limited resources were resulting in poor quality fraud investigations and a failure to make full and proper use of all investigative practices and powers.

The report notes, however, that a new Managing Director took up post during the BFI inspection and its clear that considerable effort is being put in to address some of the significant weaknesses in performance.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Glasgow city council. [155729]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Glasgow city council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Overall, inspectors found a number of weaknesses and poor standards of performance in benefit administration and counter fraud work that needed immediate attention. They also identified inconsistent and ineffective work practices and substantial delays with appeals and review boards.

The BFI notes the council's lack of effective performance standards and targets, inadequate management information, weaknesses in checks and controls, the poor management in the recovery of benefit overpayments and inadequate standards in fraud investigations.

The report notes that the council was preparing for the possible bulk transfer of its council housing stock to the private sector. Should this go ahead, the implications for the delivery of benefits service are enormous.

The report concludes that BFI has serious concerns about Glasgow's performance in managing and delivering a secure benefits service. More positively, however, the report notes that the council has recognised the significant challenges it faces and is committed to and already acted upon a number of BFI's recommendations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Sheffield city council. [155730]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Sheffield city council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Inspectors found a number of weaknesses and poor standards of performance in benefit administration and counter fraud work. Performance is failing to meet contractual expectations in a number of key areas.

The report notes the council is struggling to cope with significant backlogs of work which are resulting in lengthy delays in claims processing and reduced customer services. The council has introduced measures to resolve the backlogs and some progress is being made towards restoring an effective benefits service.

Benefits administration needs to be improved with regard to verification, overpayment classification and implementation of effective qualify checking controls. Although some weaknesses were found in the control and management of overpayments work Inspectors found the council to be pursuing recovery of debts effectively.

The report notes that although there is some good counter fraud work, it is not focused and management controls are largely ineffective and provide little assurance. Inspectors found investigation work to be of poor quality and insufficient to tackle the estimated level of fraud in the council's area.

Inspectors were pleased to find effective corporate policies and measures were in place to encourage an anti-fraud and corruption culture.

The report concludes that the council has shown a positive commitment towards improving its performance and is developing an action plan to address the issues raised by the inspection. Some remedial action had already taken place by the time the inspection finished.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Child Support

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many of the additional staff posts allotted to the Independent Case Examiner in September 2000 have been filled; [154510]

(2) what plans he has for clearing the backlog of Child Support Agency cases awaiting investigation by the Independent Case Examiner; [154509]

(3) on what basis it was decided to advertise the job of the Independent Case Examiner on a part-time rather than full-time basis. [154511]

Angela Eagle: The office of the Independent Case Examiner (ICE) has already recruited two extra staff. A further four staff members will be in post by the end of April 2001, and two more in May 2001.

All cases referred to the ICE are dealt with as quickly and effectively as possible. Cases are dealt with in the order they are received to ensure that all customers receive a similar service. In exceptional circumstances, such as where a customer's health is being affected by their case, it will be dealt with more urgently.

The current Independent Case Examiner, Mrs. Anne Parker, was appointed on a part-time basis and the intention is that her replacement will also be part-time.

Benefit Payment

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will commission research into the practice of commercial operators paying out cash, subject to a substantial charge, for benefit and Housing Benefit cheques; and if he will take action on the findings. [154508]

Angela Eagle: We have no plans to commission research into commercial cheque cashing services.

No benefit recipient should have to pay for benefit cheque encashment. The facility exists for people without a bank account to return crossed girocheques to their local Benefits Agency office and have them replaced by lower value girocheques which can be encashed at a Post Office.

Most high street banks now offer basic accounts which are free to open and run. These are available to the majority of benefit recipients and can be used to clear crossed benefit cheques or Housing Benefit cheques issued by local authorities.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how changes in Government spending since 1997 have affected the incomes of *(a)* poorer pensioners and *(b)* pensioners with low levels of savings. [154281]

Mr. Rooker: Information regarding income gains over the Parliament for poorer pensioners is available in "The Pension Credit: A consultation paper" (Cm 4900). As the document sets out, by next April 1.7 million of the poorest pensioner households will on average be at least £15 a week better off and half of the poorest pensioner households will on average be over £20 a week better off as a result of tax and benefit measures introduced by the Government since 1997.

The information requested regarding pensioners with low levels of savings is not available.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the level of expenditure on Winter Fuel Payments has been in each year since their introduction; and what the projected level of expenditure is in each year to the end of the public expenditure planning horizon. [155158]

Mr. Rooker: The information for expenditure to date is in the table.

Winter Fuel Payment

	Expenditure
1997–98	£200 million
1998–99	£200 million
1999–2000	£900 million
2000–01	£1.7 billion

Single Room Rent

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he has consulted the Social Security Committee on his proposed broadening of the definition of the single room rent; [155293]

(2) if he will list the organisations that commented on the proposals relating to single room rent; and how many of these *(a)* supported abolition, *(b)* favoured abolition above a broadening of the definition, *(c)* supported broadening the definition and *(d)* supported no change to the current definition; [155295]

(3) which organisations his Department consulted in relation to the proposed new regulations to broaden the definition of the single room rent. [155294]

Angela Eagle: We have fulfilled our statutory obligation to consult the Social Security Advisory Committee and the Local Authority Associations on our proposal to broaden the definition of the Single Room Rent.

The Social Security Advisory Committee was content for our proposal to proceed without the Committee conducting a public consultation exercise. The Local Authority Associations favoured abolition of the Single Room Rent, but they welcomed our proposal as a step in the right direction.

Our proposal is designed to better reflect the accommodation which is available in the market, based on advice from the Rent Service.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155373]

Mr. Rooker: Information on cancelled and postponed meetings is not held centrally.

Income Support (Torbay)

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the level of Income Support take-up among pensioners in Torbay. [154291]

Mr. Rooker: Estimates cannot be produced below national level.

HEALTH

National Cancer Institute

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what degree of independence the National Cancer Institute will have from cancer charities; [154642]

(2) if funding for the National Cancer Institute will emanate from Government. [154643]

Mr. Milburn: The National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI), announced today, is a partnership between all the United Kingdom Health Departments, the Medical Research Council, the Cancer Research Campaign, the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research, the Marie Curie Research Institute and the pharmaceutical industry. The greatest benefit for patients is likely to be achieved if all the main funders of cancer research work together to ensure the best use of research resources.

The NCRI will be established from 1 April. It will provide the focus for cancer research conducted across the UK, and provide strategic oversight of that research. It will take the lead in identifying where further research initiatives are indicated and are most likely to lead to progress. It will also co-ordinate research into cancer genetics in the UK.

But the NCRI will not be a single, large "bricks and mortar" facility. It will have a core staff of about six people, and total running costs of about £500,000 a year. All the partners have agreed to contribute. The details have to be worked out, but the Government are prepared to underwrite the costs in the first instance so that the NCRI can make progress without delay.

Government Grants (Central London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list each category of grant, and the amount of each grant, paid by his Department to *(a)* Westminster and *(b)* Kensington and Chelsea in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000 and (iv) 2000–01; and what the projected figure is for 2001–02. [146310]

Mr. Denham: The tables provide a list of the grants paid by the Department of Health to the two local authorities Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster city council for the periods required.

The grants are as follows:

AIDS Support Grant

Paid to local authorities to support social care provision for those with severe HIV disease or an AIDS diagnosis.

Asylum-Seekers Accommodation Grant (Adults)

From the 1999–2000 financial year the Special Grant for Asylum Seekers (adults) became the responsibility of the Home Office. The background to these payments was that in 1996, changes in Department of Social Security benefit legislation left some asylum seekers destitute and unable to claim financial support. The then Government introduced Special Grants, administered by the Department of Health, to local authorities towards meeting the cost of providing accommodation for destitute asylum seekers under either the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989. The Special Grant was split between single adults, families and unaccompanied children. Under the conditions of these grants, local authorities have been reimbursed for the direct costs they have incurred in supporting asylum seekers.

Children and Adolescent Mental Health

The CAMHS Mental Health Grant started in 1999–2000. It is envisaged that similar sums to those paid for 1999–2000 and 2000–01, will be available in 2001–02 with an additional amount which has yet to be determined—which will be the local authorities share of the national CAMHS MHG.

Children's Services (Quality Protects)

The Secretary of State launched the Quality Protects Programme for Health in September 1998. Initially providing funding of £375 million over three years, the programme is intended to improve the management and delivery of social services for children. In October 2000, the Secretary of State for Health announced that the programme would be extended from a three to a five year programme, matched by an increase in the Special Grant from £120 million in 2000–01 to £290 million by 2003.

Community Care Special Transitional Grant

This grant was paid to local authorities in England from 1993–99 to enable them to meet their new responsibilities under Part III of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 which was fully implemented in April 1993. Implementation required local authorities to establish arrangements to assess people's needs for community care services. It also placed new duties on social services authorities to purchase independent sector residential and nursing home care for those people who required public support to enter such homes. Social services authorities now assess an individual's needs for services and in the light of that assessment decide whether or what services should be provided.

Drug and Alcohol Specific Grants

The background to the grant is covered in the circular LAC (2000) 19 which was issued at the end of September 2000.

Improving Management Information: Invest to Save

No information was available within the time available to complete the response to this inquiry.

Mental Health Grant

This grant is available to local authorities to facilitate the development and improvement of community-based mental health services.

Persons' from Abroad Children's Grant—(Families with Children)

The background is the same as for the adults' grant described above.

Promoting Independence—Carers' Grant

This grant became available from 1999–2000.

Promoting Independence—Partnership Grant

Grant first became available in 1999–2000.

Promoting Independence—Prevention Grant

The purpose of this grant is to help local authorities develop, with other relevant agencies, particularly health authorities, preventive strategies aimed at slowing down or preventing deterioration in individuals, who have been assessed as at risk of losing independence and who are able to benefit from lower level interventions, which will prevent or significantly delay admission to residential or nursing care or to hospital and/or improve quality of life. The assessment process should identify possible problems and possible risks that could lead to dependency. This would include risks associated with the home including the danger of falling and accidents resulting therefrom.

The Promoting Independence Grant (£196 million)

This grant subsumes the partnership and prevention grants. The figures provided in the table are indicative and subject to parliamentary approval.

Secure Accommodation—Capital

No information available, no facility in these authorities.

Secure Accommodation—Revenue

No information available.

Training Support Programme

The TSP is paid to local authorities on a 70 per cent. funded grant with authorities contributing 30 per cent. of the total costs. All local authority staff working in and supporting services for adults and for children are eligible for training supported by the TSP. The aim of the TSP is to improve the quality, and management of social services provision to families, individuals and local communities, by encouraging a planned approach to training.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children's Grant

From the financial year 2000–01 the Special Grant for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children became the responsibility of the Home Office.

Specific and special grants: Westminster

£

Description	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
AIDS Support Grant	800,000	770,000	810,000	798,000	n/k
Asylum-Seekers Accommodation Grant	3,846,920	[2]5,074,631	[3]n/a	[3]n/a	[3]n/a
Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services	n/a	n/a	26,000	26,000	n/k
Children's Services (Quality Protects)	n/a	32,500	755,373	1,234,000	3,215,578
Children's Social Services Grant	—	—	—	—	—
Community Care Special Transitional Grant	2,304,652	2,170,586	n/a	n/a	n/a
Drugs and Alcohol Specific Grants	61,744	27,421	0	0	n/a
Improving Information Management	—	—	—	—	—
Invest to Save	—	—	—	—	—
Mental Health Grant	586,048	556,901	805,663	903,647	1,006,384
Persons from Abroad Children's Grant	2,752,307	3,753,040	[3]n/a	[3]n/a	[3]n/a
Promoting Independence: Carers Grant	n/a	n/a	137,108	383,688	[4]553,972
Promoting Independence: Partnership Grant	n/a	n/a	1,754,966	1,500,289	[5]1,979,005
Promoting Independence: Prevention Grant	n/a	n/a	146,487	222,372	n/k
Secure Accommodation (Capital)	—	—	—	—	—
Secure Accommodation (Revenue)	—	—	—	—	—
Training Support Programme	215,091	198,259	195,665	[6]320,532	n/a
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children	441,179	1,879,200	2,695,400	[3]n/a	[3]n/a

[1] Projected
[2] After repayment by LA
[3] Home Office
[4] Indicative—subject to parliamentary approval
[5] Includes Prevention Grant
[6] Allocations only

Specific and special grants: Kensington and Chelsea

£

Description	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
AIDS Support Grant	890,000	760,000	722,000	816,000	n/k
Asylum-Seekers Accommodation Grant	2,326,374	4,603,767	[2]n/a	[2]n/a	[2]n/a
Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services	n/a	n/a	20,000	20,000	n/k
Children's Services (Quality Protects)	n/a	32,500	560,122	916,000	2,389,814
Children's Social Services Grant	—	—	—	—	—
Community Care Special Transitional Grant	1,509,005	1,413,818	n/a	n/a	n/a
Drugs and Alcohol Specific Grants	68,378	53,222	0	0	n/a
Improving Information Management:	—	—	—	—	—
Invest to Save	—	—	—	—	—
Mental Health Grant	470,073	536,109	700,324	760,289	829,585

Specific and special grants: Kensington and Chelsea

£

Description	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Persons from Abroad Children's Grant	1,312,224	1,549,540	[2]n/a	[2]n/a	[2]n/a
Promoting Independence: Carers Grant	n/a	n/a	95,156	270,497	[3]393,084
Promoting Independence: Partnership Grant	n/a	n/a	1,161,961	1,002,149	[4]1,324,496
Promoting Independence: Prevention Grant	n/a	n/a	103,047	157,006	n/k
Secure Accommodation (Capital)	—	—	—	—	—
Secure Accommodation (Revenue)	—	—	—	—	—
Training Support Programme	162,939	160,877	162,056	[5]187,160	—
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children	255,613	646,924	1,540,000	[2]n/a	[2]n/a

[1] Projected
[2] Home Office
[3] Indicative—subject to parliamentary approval
[4] Includes Prevention Grant
[5] Allocations only

Accidents

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* fatal accidents and *(b)* accidents requiring an overnight hospital stay there have been in each of the last 10 years. [152602]

Ms Stuart: The number of deaths resulting from fatal accidents in England for 1989 to 1999 is shown in the table.

Year of registration	*Number of deaths*
1989	10,672
1990	10,880
1991	10,193
1992	9,644
1993	9,608
1994	9,628
1995	9,372
1996	9,643
1997	10,157
1998	9,774
1999	9,970

The number of accidents requiring an overnight hospital stay of one night or more in a National Health Service hospital in England for 1990–91 to 1999–2000 is shown in the table.

	Number of admissions
1990–91	578,065
1991–92	582,474
1992–93	601,465
1993–94	611,502
1994–95	624,533
1995–96	400,371
1996–97	458,632
1997–98	462,211
1998–99	445,152
1999–2000	459,034

Note:
Changes in diagnosis coding from 1995–96 mean that data are not directly comparable over the 10 years from 1990–91 to 1999–2000

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153412]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 133–36W.

Major advertising spend on individual campaigns is shown in the table.

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
Ambulance Services	0.40	—	—	—	—
Antibiotics	—	—	—	0.17	—
Blood donation	0.38	0.60	1.70	[2]0.22	—
Children's services	—	—	—	—	0.60
Drugs	—	—	—	0.34	—
Flu	—	—	—	—	0.23
Maternity	0.10	—	—	—	—
National Health Service including nurse recruitment	1.43	1.30	4.90	4.21	4.90
NHS Direct	—	0.12	0.78	1.20	1.15
Organ donation	—	—	0.77	0.47	0.49
Prescription fraud	—	—	0.38	—	1.40
Sexwise/teenage pregnancy	—	—	—	0.39	1.01
Smoking	—	—	—	[3]6.18	8.66
Travel safe	0.85	—	—	—	—
Walk-in centres	—	—	—	—	0.30
Winter	—	—	—	1.07	2.35

[1] Planned
[2] The Department's spend on blood donation advertising reduced in 1999–2000 because most of this activity was funded directly by the National Blood Authority, who took over full responsibility for this expenditure on 1 April 2000.
[3] Prior to 1999–2000 advertising on smoking was undertaken by the health education authority (HEA).

The figures for the total spend on advertising including promotional campaigns for the Department for the financial years 1996–97 to 2000–01 are shown in the table.

£ million

Financial Year	Advertising expenditure
1996–97	2.50
1997–98	2.27
1998–99	8.63
1999–2000	14.83
2000–01[1]	21.09

[1] Planned

Total spend on advertising by the HEA for the years 1996–97 to 1999–2000 and could not be broken down by campaigns is shown in the table.

£ million

Financial Year	Advertising expenditure
1996–97	9.5
1997–98	7.5
1998–99	5.2
1999–2000	2.4

Medical Negligence

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been allocated for medical negligence; how much has been top sliced from allocations to health authorities to pay for it in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [155109]

Ms Stuart: The allocation for medical negligence, top sliced from health authorities (HA), for the forthcoming year and the last three years is shown in the table.

£ million

2001–02	[1]498
2000–01	[2]349
1999–2000	120
1998–99	100

[1] The budget for 2001–02 of £498 million includes £65 million transferred from HA baselines for the transfer of liabilities for the existing liabilities scheme from HAs

[2] Final figures for 2000–01 and 2001–02 are not yet available.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155360]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

Parliamentary Questions

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to questions tabled by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North on 16 January (Ref. 146310) and 5 March (152273). [155292]

Mr. Denham: I replied to my hon. Friend's question tabled on 16 January today. I shall let her have a reply to her other question as soon as possible.

Security and Communications Expenditure

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent in the current and preceding two years on CCTV and other security improvements in hospitals in the south-west; and how much on improved ambulance communications in Avon. [155375]

Ms Stuart: As part of the national programme to improve accident and emergency services funded from the Capital Modernisation Fund in 1998–99 and 1999–2000, £417,000 was invested in providing improved security for staff and patients through the provision of CCTV systems in a number of hospitals across the region. £8,000 was spent separately at Crewkerne and Wincanton hospitals. Other schemes funded in this programme included investment on CCTV and security improvements, however, it is not possible to identify separately the expenditure on this element in these schemes. Other improvements to hospital security will have been made locally from National Health Service trusts' block capital allocations.

In 1999–2000, Avon Ambulance Service NHS Trust received £190,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund for the introduction of an automatic vehicle location system to help improve ambulance response times, and a mobile data system which will provide the platform for telemedicine for better diagnosis and care of patients.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Non-food Crops

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made with appointments to the Government-industry forum on non-food uses of crops since the Adjournment debate on non-food crops in Westminster Hall on 11 January. [155720]

Ms Quin: I am pleased to announce the following appointments to the forum: Mr. Robert Margetts CBE as Chairman, Professor Dianna Bowles, Dr. David Carmichael, Mrs. Pamela Castle, Dr. Paul Ekins, Dr. Ray Marriott, Dr. Richard Miller and Mr. Andy Taylor. In addition, there will be one member each from MAFF, DTI and DETR and MAFF will also provide a full-time secretary, and two technical advisers.

The terms of reference of the forum are:

To provide strategic advice to Government and industry on the development of non-food uses of crops. In particular:

To keep under review technological developments and market opportunities for non-food uses of crops.

To make recommendations on policy affecting non-food uses of crops and on R&D priorities.

To publish an annual report.

The forum will hold its first meeting as soon as possible.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what level of total agrimonetary compensation was *(a)* applied for and *(b)* received in each of the last 10 years. [151828]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The UK was first eligible for agrimonetary compensation following currency movements during 1996. Agrimonetary compensation applied for since then is shown in the table. In each case, payment has been made as soon as possible following approval by the European Commission.

£ million

Year	*Applied for*
1997	85
1998	48
1999	396
2000	100

[1] Includes second and third annual instalments of compulsory agrimonetary compensation; one notification covered all three years' payments, from 1999 to 2001

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Minister announced on 28 February that he intended to draw down a further £156 million of agrimonetary compensation for beef, sheep and dairy farmers, subject to Commission approval.

EU Floods Compensation

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what money he has applied for from the EU to reclaim agricultural land affected by flooding; and if he will make a statement. [152293]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* At our request, the European Commission has agreed a number of changes and flexibilities in CAP scheme rules to protect payments to British farmers affected by flooding this winter, details of which have already been announced. EU funding was discussed as a possibility under the England Rural Development Programme but the views of rural stakeholders expressed in consultations were that restoration from flooding was a lower priority in this long-term programme than measures to conserve and improve the environment and to assist the creation of a more productive and sustainable rural economy.

Illegal Livestock Exports

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what investigations he has carried out to determine how many consignments of sheep and lambs have been illegally exported from England and Wales to the Irish Republic during the last 12 months. [153030]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Exports of sheep from England and Wales to another member state are required to be covered by export health certification under harmonised EU conditions. Under normal circumstances, additional border checks constitute an illegal impediment to trade. However, since the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, surveillance at Holyhead Port has been increased. We are not aware that there have been any illegally exported consignments nor have any been reported to MAFF by the Irish Authorities.

Less than 1 per cent. of sheep legally moved between Great Britain and Ireland as a whole went direct to the Republic of Ireland between 1 February 2000 and 31 March 2001. A significant proportion of trade to the Irish Republic goes via Northern Ireland. Suspicions of illegal trading of sheep, involving misleading certification, arose there last year; increased port surveillance and tracing of animals to their final destinations were put in place and the trade had in consequence virtually stopped by January 2001. Any evidence submitted to us of illegal consignments between England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland would be carefully investigated.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many geographical locations are associated with the outbreaks of foot and mouth disease announced to date. [153841]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* As of 19 March there are 14 areas within the United Kingdom which are covered by "infected area" restrictions.

These are as follows:

Parts of:

1. Essex, Kent and Suffolk
2. Devon and Cornwall
3. Gloucestershire, Gwynedd, Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, Powys, Shropshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire.
4. Gwynedd and Anglesey
5. Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire
6. Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire
7. Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland
8. Kent
9. Cumbria, Durham, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Northumberland, North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, Scottish Borders, South Lanarkshire and Dumfries and Galloway
10. Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, Cheshire, Warwickshire and West Midlands
11. Somerset
12. Hampshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire
13. Dumfries and Galloway
14. County Down and County Armagh.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the different locations affected by the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Chaddesley Corbett, Worcestershire. [153843]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* As of 19 March, two premises in this area have been affected with foot and mouth disease. They are Longmore Farm and The Woodlands, Chaddesley Corbett, Kidderminster. Details of newly affected premises are listed on the MAFF website and provided to Members of Parliament on a daily basis.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he is examining to help other rural businesses, besides farming affected by the foot and mouth epidemic. [154029]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Rural Taskforce has been set up to look urgently at the wider effects of the foot and mouth outbreak on the rural economy. My statement to the House on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 192, outlined some preliminary measures to alleviate the immediate financial hardship of small businesses in rural areas. The taskforce will continue to look at this issue and I will make further announcements in due course.

Livestock Movements

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures his Department is taking to ensure that hauliers do not breach new regulations concerning the length of time over which animals can be transported. [155257]

Mr. Morley: Owing to the foot and mouth disease outbreak, movements of FMD susceptible livestock may only take place under licence. We expect all hauliers to take seriously their obligations not to spread the disease. But we will nevertheless arrange for a high proportion of longer distance movements to be supervised and accompanied. In addition, checks are made by the police and local authorities to ensure compliance.

TREASURY

Finance Bill

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Finance Bill will be published; and if he will make explanatory notes on the Bill's clauses available to hon. Members. [155578]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The Finance Bill will be published on Friday, 30 March. Explanatory notes on the Bill's clauses will be placed in the Vote Office and the Libraries of both Houses that day. Members of the public will be able to obtain copies of the explanatory notes from the Treasury; these will also be available on the Treasury's website http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what information on purchasers of stakeholder pensions the Inland Revenue will ask providers of such pensions to provide; and if this information will allow the Inland Revenue to determine whether the target market for such pensions is being reached. [154773]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Information requirements for stakeholder and personal pensions are laid out at Part 17B of the Inland Revenue Personal Pension Schemes (including Stakeholder Pension Schemes) Guidance Notes—IR76 (2000). I have arranged for a copy to be laid in the House of Commons Library.

These requirements, supplemented by surveys and with other information held by the Inland Revenue, will enable take up of stakeholder pensions to be monitored.

Partnerships UK

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans for Partnerships UK. [155722]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Partnerships UK was launched in June 2000 to build upon the success of the Treasury Taskforce and to provide a permanent and sustainable centre of expertise to continue the Treasury Taskforce's role in developing and expanding the Government's PPP programme.

The Treasury is currently seeking private investors for a 51 per cent. stake in Partnerships UK. The Treasury's aim is to raise at least £22.5 million through a sale of the shares on a competitive basis to qualifying institutions. Each potential qualifying investor is being invited to invest between £1 million and £5 million.

An Information Memorandum has been distributed to qualifying institutions in connection with this Offer for sale. Further information on the sale can be obtained from the publication copy of the Information Memorandum, which has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Census

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what arrangements have been made to review the procedures for safeguarding the security and confidentiality of information to be collected in the 2001 Census in England and Wales. [155723]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's White Paper on the 2001 Census, published in March 1999, gave assurances that the well-established traditions of maintaining confidentiality of information collected in the census would be upheld for the 2001 Census, and that the Census Offices would undertake reviews of the confidentiality and security arrangements for the 2001 Census and would publish the outcome of such reviews before the Census.

Independent reviews of the physical security arrangements for processing the 2001 Census information and the measures to protect the statistical confidentiality of the data were undertaken last year. The outcome of the reviews, including a joint statement from the Registrars General for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, is being published today by the Office for National Statistics, the General Register Office for Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

The Government are satisfied that the measures and procedures in place will protect the security and confidentiality of the 2001 Census.

The Report is available via the National Statistics website www.statistics.co.uk. Paper copies will subsequently be available on request to ONS, and copies of the Report have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Statistics (Northern Region)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what percentage of the workforce is unemployed in the Northern Region; [155045]

(2) what percentage of the workforce in the Northern Region was unemployed *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available; [155049]

(3) how many people were *(a)* unemployed and *(b)* unemployed over two years in the Northern Region (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [155050]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Fraser Kemp, dated 23 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent questions about the number of unemployed, those unemployed for over two years and the percentage of the workforce that was unemployed in the Northern region in 1996 and at the latest date for which figures are available (155045, 155049 and 155050).

Government Office Regions (GOR) are now used as the standard classification for regional analysis of statistics. The one used for the Northern Region is the North East GOR.

For the North East Government Office Region, the table overleaf shows the total number of International Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployed, those unemployed for over two years and ILO unemployed as a percentage of those economically active in autumn (September-November) 1996 and autumn 2000.

These figures are obtained from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), in which unemployment is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It counts as unemployed people who are (a) without a paid job (b) available to start work within the next two weeks and (c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained.

ILO unemployment in the North East Government Office Region: autumn 1996 and autumn 2000; not seasonally adjusted

	1996	*2000*
Unemployed (thousand)	115	90
Unemployed over two years (thousand)	40	15
Unemployed as percentage of economically active	9.6	7.5

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many mothers in the Northern Region whose youngest child is aged under one year are in employment. [155048]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Fraser Kemp, dated 23 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about mothers in the Northern region whose youngest child is under one and who are in employment (155048).

Government Office Regions (GORs) are now used as the standard classification for regional analysis of statistics. The one used for the Northern region is the North East GOR.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) sample of mothers in employment in the North East GOR, whose youngest child was less than one year old in autumn (September-November) 2000, is too small to provide a reliable estimate of the size of this population.

People aged 16 or over are classed as in employment by the LFS if they have done at least one hour of paid work (as an employee or self-employed) in the week prior to their LFS interview or if they have a job that they are temporarily away from. People who do unpaid work in a family business and people on Government-supported training and employment programmes are also included following the International Labour Organisation (ILO) guidelines.

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of mothers in the Northern Region returned to work when their youngest child was *(a)* under six months, *(b)* six to 12 months, *(c)* one to three years and *(d)* over three years in each of the last five years. [155047]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Fraser Kemp, dated 23 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the percentage of mothers in the Northern region who returned to work when their youngest child was of a specified age. (155047)

Government Office Regions (GORs) are now used as the standard classification for regional analysis of statistics. The one used for the Northern region is the North East GOR.

The table overleaf shows information on mothers in employment with a child aged under one year in the North East Government Office Region. This is taken from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The other information requested is not available.

Percentage of mothers whose youngest child is less than one-year-old who are in employment: North East region: autumn 1996 to autumn 2000; not seasonally adjusted

	Percentage[1]
1996	39
1997	47
1998	45
1999	50
2000	[2]

[1] Percentages are based on those mothers in employment as a percentage of all mothers with youngest child under one year.
[2] Sample size too small for reliable estimate.

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Parliamentary Questions

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will respond to questions tabled on 26 February 2001, Ref. 0823W/00/01 and 0824W/00/01. [155162]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I shall write shortly.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155368]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is not held centrally.

European Investment Bank

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he supported the recent conversion of the venture capital division of the European Investment Bank to the European Investment Fund; and what the reasons were for the change. [151754]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The transfer of the EIB's venture capital operations to the EIF was part of a rationalisation of activities in the context of the

acquisition by the bank of a majority shareholding in the EIF. The EIF is now the venture capital arm of the EIB Group. The UK supported this and is one of the main beneficiaries of its financing activities.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the priorities of the European Investment Bank; what his policy is on them; and what other priorities Her Majesty's Government have been pressing the bank to take on board. [151750]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The task of the EIB is set out in Article 267 of the EC Treaty.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which meetings of the European Investment Bank and the European Investment Fund are open to citizens from the European Union. [151756]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Meetings of the governing bodies of the EIB and EIF are not open to the public.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which European Union institution is responsible for overseeing the accounting practices of the European Investment Bank; what authority, in this regard, is held by the European Court of Auditors; on what grounds the European Court of Auditors can access the financial records of the European Investment Bank; when this has been done; and for what reason. [151753]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The accounting practices of the EIB are overseen by an independent Audit Committee which is accountable directly to the Board of Governors (EU Finance Ministers). The Court of Auditors has access to the bank, in accordance with an agreement under Article 248 of the Treaty.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the projects and the companies involved that have benefited from investment by the European Investment Bank in the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [151752]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested is available in the Annual Reports of the EIB. The report for 1999 is available in the Library; the report for 2000 will be published in the summer.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the value is of the European Investment Fund; what percentage of shares in the EIF is held by the European Investment Bank; what other shareholders there are in the European Investment Fund; and what proportions of the fund they hold. [151755]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information is available on the EIF's website at www.eif.org.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in each of the last 10 years, what proportion of investment made by the European Investment Bank was made *(a)* within the EU, *(b)* within accession countries and *(c)* outside those countries. [151751]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information is available in the Annual Reports of the EIB. The report for 1999 is in the Library. The report for 2000 will be published in June. The hon. Gentleman may also refer to EIB's website at www.eib.org.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money the UK has contributed to the European Investment Bank in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [151749]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Between 1991 and 1996 the UK paid 145,834,734 euros in direct subscriptions to the EIB. Since 1996, no payments have been made by member states to the EIB.

Retention System

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to phase out the retention system in respect of construction works procured by central Government; and if he will make a statement. [155265]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A review of contracts is planned this year as part of the OGC's ongoing performance-related Achieving Excellence in construction initiative.

GC/Works/1 (1998), the Government standard form of construction contract and its associated sub-contract, allows Departments to forgo retentions as part of their commercial agreements with suppliers. Retentions do not feature in Defence Estate's Prime Contract conditions.

The move to performance-based partnering type contracts will reduce the need for retentions in the future. The NAO report "Modernising Construction", published in January 2001, gave strong endorsement to the partnering approach, as a means of achieving best value.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Ronald Maddison

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Solicitor-General for what reasons the Attorney-General requested further information from Her Majesty's Coroner for Wiltshire and Swindon regarding his request for a fresh inquest into the death of Ronald Maddison; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the request from Her Majesty's Coroner for Wiltshire and Swindon regarding this case. [154769]

The Solicitor-General: Her Majesty's Coroner for Wiltshire and Swindon applied for the Attorney-General's consent for an application to the High Court for another inquest into the death of Ronald Maddison. The Coroner has been asked to provide a summary of the evidence given at the original inquest in May of 1953 and to provide the new evidence which suggests that the verdict of misadventure (nowadays termed "accident") at the original inquest was incorrect.

The procedure for ordering another inquest in these circumstances is governed by section 13 of the Coroners Act 1988. Only the High Court may order another inquest to be held. The Attorney-General's consent is required for the application to the High Court for another inquest.

The Coroner is currently away on holiday. I will inquire of him when he returns and if he has no objections I will place his request in the Library.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

New Electricity Trading Arrangements

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will designate the start of trading under the New Electricity Trading Arrangements. [155719]

Mr. Hain: On the advice of the Chief Executive of the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry today designated 00:00 hrs on 27 March 2001 as the time and date for the start of trading under the Balancing and Settlement Code, which commences the New Electricity Trading Arrangements.

Operating Aid

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if an annual increase in pre-tax profit will cause operating aid to be terminated; and what recovery mechanism exists. [154478]

Mr. Hain: Under the UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme, aid is payable to loss-making production units only in respect of losses incurred through the production of qualifying (industrial) coal. Thus any reduction in such losses will reduce the level of aid payable, and any mine making an actual net profit before subsidy in any given financial year will not be eligible for subsidy in that year. However, the level of subsidy payable is not directly affected by the overall level of profits or losses made by the applicant company as a whole.

Applications for aid, and payments of aid if European Commission approval is given, are made on the basis of forecast losses. However, once each of the applicant company's relevant financial years encompassing the subsidy period is over, there will be a reconciliation process in which the forecasts are compared with actuals for the applicant production unit in that subsidy period. If actual losses have been less than forecast, any consequent overpayment of aid will be set off against any further subsidy payments due or otherwise recovered.

Animal Experiments

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total amount of money spent on medical research *(a)* using animals and *(b)* using alternatives to animals by (i) Government and (ii) industry in 2000–01. [153373]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* It is impossible to put a precise figure on medical research spend that has required either the use of animals or alternatives to animals. All experimental work with animals is subject to approval by the Home Office. The majority of medical research projects do not involve any animal procedures. It is not possible to determine how many of these projects could have been pursued using animal experiments, and would have been issued licences, if the alternative approaches had not been available. Once alternatives to a specific experimental method have been successfully developed and shown to be effective, the Home Office will not issue a licence to conduct the same type of work using animals. All experiments using animals must satisfy the strict regulation of the 1986 Act.

Secondly, where research projects depend on some animal experimentation, it is not possible to disaggregate easily the animal-related and other costs of medical research projects. For example, a research group studying how a mutated gene contributes to cancer might gain much information by studying individual cells in a laboratory, but might also need to examine how the gene contributes to disease in a whole animal, such as a mouse, to gain full understanding of the problem.

Hawley Group

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the conclusions of the Hawley group; [154590]

(2) what plans he has for the future role of the Engineering Council; and if he will make a statement; [154591]

(3) if he will place a copy of the report by the Hawley group in the Library; [154592]

(4) what assessment he has made of the impact of the work of the Hawley group on the engineering and technology base and the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement; [154593]

(5) if he will make a statement on the involvement in the Hawley group of *(a)* Ministers and officials in his Department and *(b)* officials in the Office of Science and Technology; [154594]

(6) what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have held on the outcome of the work of the Hawley group since 1 February; and if he will make a statement. [154595]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The Hawley group was established at the instigation of my noble Friend the Minister for Science and Innovation in October 1999. The group was chaired by Dr. Robert Hawley, Chairman of the Engineering Council, and consisted of representatives from the Engineering Council, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Education and Employment. My noble Friend received regular progress reports from Dr. Hawley throughout the course of the Hawley Review and also chaired public events on 23 May 2000 and 14 February 2001. DTI officials on the group were closely involved in the development of the review and they consulted colleagues within the Department, including those in the Office of Science and Technology, on a wide range of issues. Significant contributions were also received from officials in the DETR.

The Hawley group report entitled "Making the Best of Valuable Talent" was published in December 2000 and contained some 43 recommendations for re-positioning the Engineering Council to meet the needs and aspirations of an increasingly diverse and non-traditional engineering community. The report was circulated widely for discussion within the engineering community and the initial response proved most favourable. During the consultation exercise my noble Friend spoke directly to a number of senior representatives of the engineering community, from industry and from many of the engineering institutions, to seek their views on the contents of the report. All were strongly supportive.

The culmination of the consultation process was a public event held at the Institution of Electrical Engineers on 14 February 2001 which was attended by senior representatives of the engineering profession, engineering industry, academia and Government. The meeting voiced its overwhelming support for the broad thrust of the report and gave a mandate for the Engineering Council to evolve into the Engineering and Technology Board. The Hawley group ceased to exist as of the end of the meeting and a series of six working groups have now been established to carry forward the process of change.

We have consistently expressed our support for the aims of the Hawley Review and welcomed the proposals outlined in the Hawley report. However, ownership of the process remains firmly with the engineering community itself and the shape and remit of the new Engineering and Technology Board is a matter for them alone. We are, of course, willing to provide continued support and encouragement during the transitional phase and DTI and DfEE officials will be taking an active role in a number of working groups.

The Engineering and Technology Board is due to come into existence in October 2001 and it will, therefore, be some time before a sensible assessment can be made of the impact of the new arrangements on the engineering and technology base in the UK. However, the Hawley group, led by Dr. Robert Hawley, can take a great deal of credit for initiating a wide ranging and radical assessment of the current structures within the engineering profession and encouraging a much needed debate on the future of engineering.

A copy of the Hawley report has been placed in the Library of the House.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with Regional Development Agencies regarding clearance by the European Commission of Regional Venture Capital Funds. [155253]

Ms Hewitt: Officials in the Small Business Service wrote to the Regional Development Agencies, and other interested parties, to inform them of the European Commission's call for comments on the UK's Regional Venture Capital Fund programme, and the UK Government's view on the issues raised by the Commission.

National Radiological Protection Board

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment the National Radiological Protection Board has made of the study by Sir Richard Doll on a potential cancer link to overhead power line transmission; if he will make it his policy to *(a)* apply the precautionary principle and *(b)* impose (i) a buffer zone around the houses or (ii) a rerouting to avoid houses built under the proposed Lackenby to Shipton power line; and if he will make a statement. [154787]

Mr. Hain: Sir Richard Doll's Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation published its report "Extremely low frequency Electromagnetic Fields and the Risk of Cancer" on 6 March 2001. (Documents of the NRPB Vol 12, No 1, 2001). Copies have been placed in the Library of the House. The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB), an independent body set up under statute and who provide scientific advice to Government issued a response statement which can be found on the NRPB website www.nrpb.org.uk.

The report states that any possible risk of childhood leukaemia relates to those exposed at relatively high levels of domestic exposure but that these are not necessarily associated with proximity to overhead transmission lines. The NRPB consider that the report provides no additional scientific evidence to require a change in the guidelines to limit exposure to extremely low frequency electromagnetic fields.

The Government will consider carefully the recommendations of the NRPB and commission appropriate research with regard to that which is already under way. In the light of the available evidence and the advice from the NRPB it is too soon to state whether particular approaches will be taken.

The advice of the NRPB is welcomed and will be considered in a Government response to a European Union Recommendation on limiting public exposure to electromagnetic fields.

With regard to the proposed Lackenby to Shipton power line, this has been routed away from communities and individual dwellings on grounds of general amenity and was the subject of an environmental assessment and statement at the public inquiries. There are no houses under the proposed line. The existing 275kV line from Lackenby to Norton—30 km long (around the south and west of Middlesbrough) will be dismantled after the construction of the new 400kV line. There are 5,000 homes within 200 metres of the line to be dismantled compared with 250 homes within 200 metres of the new line. There is therefore a considerable net benefit in terms of general amenity.

Company Accounts

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many days leeway are allowed before a fine is imposed for late submission of company accounts after the due date. [154583]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The Companies Act allows no leeway for companies filing their accounts late after the due date.

The scale of late filing penalties, the class of company against which these are levied and the time periods involved are set out in the table.

Scale of penalties

£

	Public companies	*Private companies*
Not more than 3 months late	500	100
More than 3 months but not more than 6 months late	1,000	250
More than 6 months but not more than 12 months late	2,000	500
More than 12 months late	5,000	1,000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Motorway and Trunk Road Accidents

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many crossover accidents on *(a)* motorways and *(b)* trunk roads there have been in each year since 1992–93. [154470]

Mr. Hill: The table shows the number of accidents involving vehicles crossing over the central reservation.

Accidents involving vehicles crossing the central reservation

Year of accident	Motorways	Trunk roads
1992	60	222
1993	52	177
1994	66	181
1995	57	162
1996	52	152
1997	76	144
1998	52	119
1999	55	129

Note:
Trunk roads in this table include only trunk A roads

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many fatalities have resulted from crossover accidents on *(a)* motorways and *(b)* trunk roads in each year since 1992–93. [154469]

Mr. Hill: The table shows the number of fatalities that were involved in accidents involving vehicles crossing over the central reservation.

Fatalities in accidents involving vehicles crossing the central reservation

Year of accident	Motorways	Trunk roads
1992	11	32
1993	10	28
1994	14	32
1995	9	19
1996	3	16
1997	17	22
1998	8	21
1999	12	30

Note:
Trunk roads in this table include only trunk A roads

Crash Barriers

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is for the use of concrete crash barriers; and if he will make a statement. [154471]

Mr. Hill: The criteria for the provision of concrete crash barriers are contained in the Highway Agency's departmental standard TD 19/85 "Safety Fences and Barriers" and Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works Volume 1, Specification for Highway Works Series 400. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

Barriers are procured by competitive tender and unless local circumstances indicate, both steel and concrete barrier types may be used otherwise.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the costs per kilometre are of *(a)* installing and *(b)* the whole life maintenance of (i) corrugated steel crash barriers, (ii) steel wire barriers and (iii) concrete crash barriers. [154473]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. David Amess, dated 23 March 2001:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill has asked Tim Matthews, Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to reply to your recent Parliamentary question about the costs of crash barriers. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews.

It is difficult to quote precise costs for any of these types of barrier as they will be influenced by both site conditions and the market forces prevailing at the time.

However, the latest information available indicates that combined costs for both supply and installation of normal containment crash barriers are as follows:

Single sided corrugated steel barriers cost between £28k and £37k per kilometre, with the difference being accounted for by both the frequency of supports and the type of foundations used.

Steel wire rope safety barriers cost between £13k to £21k per kilometre, again with the difference being accounted for by both the frequency of supports and the type of foundations used.

Concrete barriers (operating at the same level of containment as both corrugated steel and steel wire rope barriers) cost approximately £45k per kilometre.

No whole life maintenance costing has been undertaken for any of these products and therefore it is not possible to answer part (b) of your question.

If you would like any further information about this matter, please contact Brian Hill, in Room 4/30, St. Christopher House, Southwark Street, London SE1 0TE (telephone 020 7921 4936).

Travellers

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 7 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 248W, on travellers, what steps have been taken to recover the cost of measures taken, from those who occupied the site at Willington, Derbyshire; and what representations the Highways Agency has made to his Department concerning the legal framework available to prevent and to reduce the impact of occupations of this kind. [154432]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. Mark Todd, dated 23 March 2001:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked Tim Matthews to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about action taken to recover costs incurred by the Highways Agency in clearing waste, erecting barriers, and maintaining security from its site at Willington, Derbyshire following its occupation by travellers. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews. You also asked what representations the Highways Agency has made to DETR concerning the legal framework available to prevent and to reduce the impact of occupations of this kind.

We very much regret such occupations of this nature but no recovery action has been taken because the instigation of Court action to have Travellers removed, and the subsequent recovery of costs is extremely difficult.

No representations have been made to DETR. Ministers consider the existing legal framework and guidance to be adequate provided the powers are used early enough. They were not used on this occasion because the Travellers moved on of their own accord. Research is now under way to monitor the effectiveness of current guidance and what more might be needed. Consideration will be given to issue revised guidance on particular points such as fly tipping.

Abandoned Vehicles

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to review the operation of the mechanisms available for the removal and disposal of abandoned vehicles from *(a)* public land and *(b)* certain categories of private land. [154714]

Mr. Hill: We are currently considering the arrangements for the removal and disposal of abandoned vehicles from public and private land as part of a review of the current legislation covering abandoned vehicles.

Train Speed Restrictions (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the temporary speed restrictions in force on railways within Scotland on 13 March, indicating *(a)* their location, *(b)* normal line speed, *(c)* temporary line speed, *(d)* length of track affected, *(e)* date of imposition and *(f)* planned date of lifting. [154558]

Mr. Hill: As of 13 March, 38 temporary speed restrictions as identified in the National Recovery Plan were in place on five of the eight strategic route groupings of Railtrack's network in Scotland. These were:

the West Coast Mainline;

the East Coast Mainline;

Edinburgh to Glasgow,

Glasgow and Edinburgh to Aberdeen and Inverness;

South West Scotland; and

Strathclyde.

These 38 speed restrictions had a total length of 6.14 miles. Of these eight (1.05 miles) had a speed restriction of 20mph, a further 15 (2.55 miles) were up to 40mph and a further 15 (2.54 miles) up to 60mph. Normal line speeds on these routes are typically between 35mph and 105mph.

The speed restrictions were all imposed since the Hatfield accident and are scheduled for removal at various dates over the coming weeks. Railtrack is in regular dialogue with ScotRail and other train operating companies to ensure this work is completed with minimum disruption to passengers and freight customers.

In addition, as with other parts of the network, routes in Scotland will continue to be affected by other speed restrictions needed to maintain safe operation in adverse operating conditions and to enable normal maintenance activities to be completed. Some of these additional restrictions are imposed because of gauge corner cracking.

Manchester Airport Company

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what approval was required from the Government for the recent takeover of Bournemouth and East Midlands airports by the Manchester Airport Company. [154710]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The purchase of the shares in the two companies required the consent of my right hon. Friend under section 30(1) of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, with which local authorities may establish and maintain airports, and under section 20(3) of the Airports Act 1986 with which they may acquire shares in airport companies which they do not already control. Manchester city council applied for consent on behalf of Manchester airport's 10 shareholder authorities, and the issuing of the consents to the city council empowered the airport company, which is a subsidiary of the city council, to purchase the shares. The consents were issued without prejudice to any regulatory approval which might be needed.

In addition my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was required to consider whether to refer the proposed purchase to the Competition Commission under the mergers provisions of the Fair Trading Act 1973 for a full investigation. He took a decision not to do so, in accordance with the recommendation of the Director General of Fair Trading. The primary consideration in the Director General's advice, and in the decision whether to make a reference, was the likely effect of the proposed purchase on competition in the market for airport services.

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes in the last 12 months the Government have made to the financial guidelines of Manchester airport. [154711]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: None.

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the purchase of East Midlands airport and Bournemouth airport by the Manchester Airport Company. [154709]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The New Deal for Transport White Paper (Cmnd 3950) stated that the Government's

> "new air transport strategy will consider how . . . regions and their airports, for example in the north and midlands, might work together to realise the potential of airports away from the congested south east of England".

While the sale by National Express of their UK airports has taken place before the completion of our new air transport strategy my right hon. Friend, in considering the application for the necessary consents, noted that the proposed sale to Manchester airport was the result of competitive tendering and judged that it was likely to bring benefits of the type summarised above.

Departmental Policies (Truro and St. Austell)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St. Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154536]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal funding that this Department has provided to Restormel and Carrick district councils in the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 is shown in the tables. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Truro and St. Austell constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Carrick district council					
Revenue Support Grant[2]	2.998	2.824	2.821	2.694	2.927
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	2.684	2.722	2.926	3.248	3.231
Housing Investment Programme	[1]1.357	1.324	1.092	[4]2.885	[5]3.390
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	2.793	2.307	2.122	[6]2.152	—
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.206	0.631	0.677	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.054	0.038	0.000	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.006	0.006	0.006	[6]0.006	[6]0.006
Capital Challenge (Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	0.077	0.625	0.498	0	0
Restormel borough council					
Revenue Support Grant[2]	4.386	3.784	3.836	3.672	4.057
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	2.863	2.870	3.110	3.476	3.477
SSA Reduction Grant (SSA Review)	0.000	0.252	0.055	0.000	0.000
Housing Investment Programme	[1]1.047	1.005	1.007	[4]2.123	[5]1.063
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	2.383	2.514	2.053	[6]n/a	[6]n/a
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.212	0.630	0.564	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.080	0.080	0.000	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.007	0.007	0.007	[6]0.007	[6]0.007
Cornwall county council					
Revenue Support Grant[2]	129.412	133.560	139.493	135.599	146.727
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	93.491	98.020	107.287	122.050	120.054
Transport Supplementary Grant	3.474	1.205	[3]1.631	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	3.474	1.205	1.631	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0.875	0.994	2.472	7.138	14.920
Rural Bus Challenge Grant[7]	0	0	0.157	0.845	n/a
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	1.098	1.115	1.221	1.559
Capital Challenge (Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	2.057	2.830	3.013	0	0

[1] Where known
[2] The amounts of Revenue Support Grant and Income from National Non-Domestic Rates shown for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are the revised amounts allocated under "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98 Amending Report 1999" and "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998–99 Amending Report 2000" respectively.
[3] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from the previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98.
[4] Single Housing Pot introduced from 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP.
[5] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02, with the introduction of a new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in a sound condition. Carrick's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £2.03 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation above. Restormel is a transfer authority and is not entitled to MRA.
[6] Restormel borough council completed the transfer of its housing stock in February 2000.
[7] Rural Bus Challenge figures represent awards—actual spend profiles for schemes may cover more than one year.
[8] Provisional
[9] Estimated

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)

Truro and St. Austell constituency is not included in awards that have been made since May 1997. Parts of the constituency are included in two SRB schemes, Cornwall Developing in Partnership approved in Round 1 and CHEERS (Restormel) in Round 3. Funding provided for these schemes since 1997–98 is included in the table as follows:

£ million

SRB scheme	*Cornwall Developing in Partnership*	*CHEERS (Restormel)*
1997–98	1.196	0.043
1998–99	1.218	0.219
1999–2000	1.466	0.181
2000–01	1.323	0.256
2001–02[1]	1.540	0.258

[1] Where known

European Funding

Truro and St. Austell constituency was included in the South West Objective 5b programme that closed for new applications at the end of 1999. Major projects in the constituency which have received funding since 1997–98 include Eden (£10.5 million), Truro College IT Centre (£2.3 million) and Lemon Quay Redevelopment, Truro (£0.5 million).

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have been designated an Objective 1 area, of which Truro and St. Austell constituency is a part, and stands to benefit from £315 million of European Funds over the next seven years.

AOA Environmental Guidance Manual

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to monitor observance of the AOA environmental guidance manual. [154828]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Airport Operators' Association environmental guidance manual is a private publication designed to assist airports by offering guidance on improved environmental performance. What use is made of the guidance is a matter for individual airports. We have no plans to monitor observance of the guidance.

Construction Industry

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to local authorities on the phasing out of the retention system in respect of new contracts for construction work; and if he will make a statement. [155264]

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to abolish cash retentions in the construction industry; and if he will make a statement. [155297]

Mr. Raynsford: I do not think it appropriate to consider abolishing retentions, or to demand that central or local government clients no longer use them. Retentions are symptomatic of a lack of trust between clients, contractors and sub-contractors that is common in construction. This goes to the heart of the issues raised by the Construction Task Force in its report, "Rethinking Construction".

There are significant signs of a shift in the construction industry towards a more co-operative and collaborative approach. If clients and suppliers can build a culture of trust throughout the supply chain, this may lead to a corresponding change in practice on retentions.

Leading central Government construction clients are moving towards performance based partnering contracts encouraged by revised guidance on procurement from the Office of Government Commerce which should reduce the need for retentions in future.

The Local Government Task Force, which was formed to promote "Rethinking Construction" in local government, has concluded that retentions are not compatible with collaborative approaches such as partnering. The Task Force will encourage authorities to replace retentions with robust quality control assurance systems.

Waste Strategy 2000

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he is making in implementing his commitments contained in Waste Strategy 2000 to curb junk mail. [155107]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: My officials have had a number of meetings with representatives of the direct mail and promotions industry and other interested parties to discuss a producer responsibility initiative. Some progress has been made and I am hopeful that a voluntary scheme to increase the recycling of "junk mail" can be agreed.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155374]

Mr. Meacher: The information requested is not held centrally. We would not expect cancellation or postponement of meetings and conferences to be necessary unless in a venue involving contact with susceptible livestock or land used by such livestock, and my Department and its agencies will continue supporting rural businesses in line with the Government's guidelines.

Empty Homes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many houses, broken down by region, have been empty for *(a)* less than 12 months, *(b)* 12 months to three years and *(c)* three years and over; and what percentage of empty homes are eligible for reduction in VAT on conversion costs. [155160]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The available information on empty residential property in England at the beginning of 2000–01 is given in the table.

Robust estimates are not available of the number of empty homes that will be eligible for the adjustment to the zero VAT rate for the sale of empty homes, nor for the reduced rate for the refurbishment costs of empty homes, but estimates produced in conjunction with the Empty Homes Agency suggest that around 60 per cent. of all long term empty properties (defined as those empty for more than 12 months) in England will be eligible. No estimates are available at a regional level.

A separate Budget measure was introduced to lower the rate of VAT for dwelling conversions which lead to a different number of dwelling units. This applies to all dwelling conversions, whether the property was previously empty or not, and is expected to lead to a net increase of around 1,000 dwellings a year.

Vacant dwellings in England by region at the start of 2000–01

	Dwellings vacant for:		
Tenure category	*12 months or less*	*More than 12 months*	*Total vacant dwellings*
England			
Local authority	65,700	21,500	87,200
Registered social landlords (RSL)	30,300	7,200	37,500
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	16,000
Private sector	421,300	201,900	623,200
All	n/a	n/a	763,900
North East			
Local authority	7,400	2,600	10,000
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	2,100
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	700
Private sector	23,800	13,300	37,100
All	n/a	n/a	49,900
Yorkshire and Humberside			
Local authority	11,900	3,500	15,400
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	2,400
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	1,300
Private sector	52,900	27,700	80,600
All	n/a	n/a	99,700
East Midlands			
Local authority	5,200	900	6,100
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	2,600
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	1,800
Private sector	38,100	19,400	57,500
All	n/a	n/a	68,000

Vacant dwellings in England by region at the start of 2000–01

Tenure category	Dwellings vacant for: 12 months or less	More than 12 months	Total vacant dwellings
East of England			
Local authority	3,500	500	4,000
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	1,900
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	1,600
Private sector	44,700	18,000	62,700
All	n/a	n/a	70,200
London			
Local authority	8,700	4,200	'12,800
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	7,300
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	1,700
Private sector	57,300	26,100	83,400
All	n/a	n/a	'105,200
South East			
Local authority	3,100	400	3,500
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	3,600
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	2,500
Private sector	52,900	24,900	77,800
All	n/a	n/a	87,400
South West			
Local authority	2,400	400	2,800
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	2,700
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	2,300
Private sector	40,100	16,200	56,300
All	n/a	n/a	64,100
West Midlands			
Local authority	10,100	2,800	12,900
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	4,400
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	900
Private sector	38,700	23,000	61,700
All	n/a	n/a	79,900
North West			
Local authority	13,400	6,200	'18,500
Registered social landlords (RSL)	n/a	n/a	10,500
Other public sector	n/a	n/a	3,200
Private sector	72,700	33,400	106,100
All	n/a	n/a	'138,300

n/a = data not available

' Excludes LA dwellings situated in another local authority district

Source:

DETR Housing Investment Programme returns

Lacock Post Office

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Lacock Post Office is eligible for the tax and rates relief announced on 20 March. [155345]

Mr. Meacher: The Lacock Post Office already receives 50 per cent. mandatory rate relief under the existing village shop rate relief scheme. This scheme gives 50 per cent. mandatory relief to the sole general store or post office in a qualifying small rural settlement. I understand that North Wiltshire District Council has increased this relief to 80 per cent. under the discretionary powers which enable billing authorities to top up the mandatory relief to 100 per cent.

Water Framework Directive

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in implementing the EC Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC). [155721]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We have today published jointly with the National Assembly for Wales our "First Consultation Paper on the Implementation of the EC Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC)". The paper, which is the first in a series of planned consultations, marks the first stage in translating the Water Framework Directive into practical action in England and Wales. The paper invites views on our proposed approach to some initial questions and also provides an introduction to the Directive's provisions. I have placed copies of the paper in the House Libraries.

WALES

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152648]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Wales Office spent £2,728 on the design for a logo and associated art-work after its creation as a separate Department in 1999. The logo and house-style for the Wales Office, its predecessor Department, was put in place before 1997. Information on other logos commissioned by the Welsh Office or its associated agencies is not available centrally.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155370]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None of the meetings arranged by my Department were in infected areas and access was entirely by metalled roads. In these circumstances, there was no need to cancel or postpone them.

My Department has no agencies and has not arranged any conferences.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been paid by his Department to *(a)* accountancy and *(b)* legal firms in each year since 1 May 1997 in relation to PFI projects. [153264]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* From the best information available, I list the money paid to accountancy and legal firms by my Department since 1 May 1997 in relation to Private Finance Initiative projects. All figures are excluding Value Added Tax.

	£
Accountancy	
1 May 1997–31 March 1998	'90,046
1 April 1998–31 March 1999	'294,855
1 April 1999–31 March 2000	436,802
1 April 2000–8 March 2001	675,389

	£
Legal	
1 May 1997–31 March 1998	[1]191,361
1 April 1998–31 March 1999	[1]792,452
1 April 1999–31 March 2000	1,813,643
1 April 2000–8 March 2001	980,142

[1]Excludes Quantum project (Prison Service Information Technology (IT) project) costs as these cannot be separately identified for the years in question.

Since 1999–2000, the Home Office has embarked upon a number of new major projects to modernise its IT systems, for example the Sirius and Quantum programmes, and its future accommodation the Home Office Central London Accommodation Scheme project (HOCLAS) which accounts for much of the year-by-year increases in costs.

£

Project/area	*1 May 1997—31 March 1998*	*Financial year 1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Accountancy firms				
Quantum	—	—	52,554	—
HOCLAS	87,871	294,855	332,048	427,064
Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO)	2,175	—	—	—
Immigration Nationality Directorate (IND)	—	—	52,200	248,325
Total	90,046	294,855	436,802	675,389
Legal firms				
United Kingdom Passport Agency (UKPA)	64,019	56,813	150,612	76,009
Quantum	—	—	321,984	108,567
Youth Justice Board (YJB)	52,224	291,070	26,066	—
HOCLAS	25,808	188,999	347,124	170,631
Information Technology 2000	—	—	446,079	288,533
Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO)	49,310	—	—	—
Immigration Nationality Directorate	—	—	13,020	29,454
Prison Service	—	255,570	508,758	306,948
Total	191,361	792,452	1,813,643	980,142

Representation Costs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the costs of the change in the number of elected representatives in the United Kingdom since 1997. [153406]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* There has been no change in the number of elected representatives to Parliament at Westminster. The costs of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly are a devolved matter and are funded from within the budgets of the devolved Administrations.

Extradition

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many extradition requests were *(a)* completed and *(b)* not completed, with non-completed cases, broken down by nature of reason for non-completion, in each of the last five years. [154639]

Mr. Straw: Information is not available for the full period or in the form requested. The position in relation to completed cases is as follows:

Extradition cases completed 1997–2000

Year	*Requests made to United Kingdom*	*Requests made by United Kingdom*
1997	70	45
1998	90	59
1999	75	57
2000	77	40

As at 31 December 2000, 205 requests to the United Kingdom were outstanding. They fell into the following categories:

	Number
Awaiting a decision on the issue of an Authority to Proceed	8
Before the courts	69
Awaiting a decision as to surrender	29
Others	99

Notes:

1. In the last of these categories were cases in which a fugitive has yet to be traced and arrested; and/or where we were in touch with the requesting jurisdiction. It also included cases where the fugitive was unable to be surrendered because he was serving a domestic sentence.
2. A reliable statistical breakdown in this form for earlier years is not available.

A further 99 extradition requests made by the United Kingdom to other countries were outstanding on 31 December 2000. Exact information is not available as to what stage each case had reached in the various jurisdictions to which those requests were made.

The figures provided do not include cases governed by the provisions of the Backing of Warrants (Republic of Ireland) Act 1965. Those are not collected centrally.

Coroner System Review

Mr. Khabra: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has decided on the terms of reference for the fundamental review of the coroner system. [155718]

Mr. Boateng: In consultation with ministerial colleagues, it has been decided that the terms of reference should be as follows.

In respect of England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

1. To consider the most effective arrangements for identifying the deceased and for ascertaining and certifying the medical cause of death for public health and public record purposes, having regard to proposals for a system of medical examiners.
2. To consider the extent to which the public interest may require deaths to be subject to further independent investigation, having regard to existing criminal and other statutory and non-statutory investigative procedures.
3. To consider the qualifications and experience required, and the necessary supporting organisations and structures, for those appointed to undertake the duties for ascertaining, certifying and investigating deaths.
4. To consider arrangements for the provision of post mortem services for the investigation of deaths.
5. To consider the consequences of any changes arising from the above for the registration service and the role of coroners under the Treasure Act 1996, and to consider where departmental responsibilities for the arrangements should be located, having regard both to coherence for bereavement services and effective accountability.

We are now considering who should carry out the review and I hope to make a further announcement shortly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Funding (Chatham and Aylesford)

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide details of the financial assistance given to schools in the Chatham and Aylesford constituency since 1997. [154912]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Education Statistics (Northern Region)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children there were in infant classes of over 30 children in the Northern Region in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [155095]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table.

Class size data were published in a Statistical Bulletin "Class Sizes and Pupil Teacher Ratios in England 2000" on 20 December 2000, copies of which are available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed from the Department for Education and Employment statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics. Figures from this release show that in September 2000, there were just 30,000 infants in classes of over 30 compared with 485,000 in January 1998. Just 2 per cent. of infants are now in such classes compared with 29 per cent. in January 1998.

Number of pupils in infant classes over 30 in the north-east region

	Number
January 1996	20,999
January 1997	23,717
January 1998	25,906
January 1999	15,305
January 2000	7,279
September 2000	898

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much capital investment there has been in primary schools in the Northern Region since 1996. [155096]

Jacqui Smith: The table shows a breakdown of central Government capital investment of £314,026 million in all schools in the Northern Region from 1996–97 to 2000–01. Information at primary school level is not readily available.

These allocations include £88.060 million investment made so far in schools under the New Deal for Schools programme.

The New Deal for Schools was introduced as a new additional programme targeted specifically at addressing the backlog of urgent repairs in school buildings that had built up after 18 years of under funding under the previous Administration. It has been in addition to other capital funds made available in the Northern Region.

Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.5 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £8.5 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Central Government capital investment in Northern Region

£000

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	17,989	18,639	18,629	21,171	27,754
Supplementary Credit Approvals	3,085	5,165	5,122	14,826	11,499
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	5,774	4,675	2,277	3,314	5,048
Schools Renewal Challenge Fund	910	—	—	—	—
New Deal for Schools	—	5,698	15,970	29,412	36,980
School Security Grant	—	741	923	933	925
Removal of Outside Toilets	—	—	621	—	—
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	—	812	—	—
Class Size Initiative	—	—	2,232	2,990	916
Schools Access Initiative	142	—	73	75	86
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	—	6,330	7,203	9,172
Early Excellence Centres	—	—	22	404	657
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	—	394	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	—	1,896

Central Government capital investment in Northern Region

£000

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	—	19,805
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	—	1,852
Nursery Provision	—	—	—	—	628
Secondary Learning Support Units	—	—	—	—	257
Total	27,900	34,918	53,011	80,722	117,475

Note:
Northern Region defined as the Government Office Northern Region including Darlington, Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Redcar and Cleveland, South Tyneside, Stockton on Tees and Sunderland local education authorities.

New Deal

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what mechanism exists for determining whether direct displacement of existing employees has taken place in firms participating in the New Deal. [155063]

Ms Jowell: Displacement is monitored by a combination of macro-economic assessment and employer surveys. Recent research undertaken by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) and the Policy Institute found little evidence of displacement. New Deal has already placed 274,000 young people and almost 70,000 older long-term unemployed people into jobs. Unemployment is at its lowest for 25 years and employment is at its highest ever.

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 18 to 24-year-olds in Battersea have entered *(a)* voluntary work, *(b)* work experience, *(c)* education and training and *(d)* unsubsidised employment through the New Deal in the last year. [154790]

Ms Jowell: For the period January 2000 to December 2000 in the constituency of Battersea there have been seven starts to the Voluntary Sector Option and 17 starts to the Full Time Education and Training Option. 115 young people have started an unsubsidised job during the same period.

All New Deal options contain an element of work experience and training. There have been 29 starts to options during the year 2000.

Minimum Income Guarantee (Battersea)

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people on the New Deal 50-plus in Battersea he estimates will benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee from April; and if he will make a statement. [154830]

Ms Jowell: For the Employment Service district of Wandsworth, which covers Battersea constituency, an estimated 100 people are likely to find work with the help of the Employment Credit between April 2001 and March 2002 and so benefit from the New Deal 50 plus Minimum Income Guarantee.

Training Programmes

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will undertake a review of the contract awarded by the Employment Service for Adult Training for 1 April; and if he will make a statement; [155019]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of chamber of commerce-run training programmes which are likely to close after the takeover of contracting arrangements by the Employment Service. [155020]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mark Neale to Mr. Hilton Dawson, dated 22 March 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your questions about the contracts which we are awarding for adult training from April 2001 and the number of Chamber of Commerce training programmes which are likely to close after the take-over by the Employment Service of contracting arrangements for the Government's Work Based Learning for Adults (WBLA) programme. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on Mr. Lewis' behalf.

It may help if I explain that the White Paper "Learning to Succeed" announced that responsibility for the Government's WBLA programme would transfer to the Employment Service from Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) with effect from April 2001. At the same time the Government has also taken the opportunity to redesign WBLA, in order to better align the training it provides with the needs of employers in each local area. The objective is of course to increase the programme's effectiveness in helping unemployed people to improve their employability and to secure jobs.

To deliver the best possible training provision of local relevance, the Employment Service ran a full scale competitive tendering round for contracts to deliver WBLA. At the same time, in order to ensure continuity of training for all those unemployed people who are participating in WBLA at the point of its transfer to the Employment Service in April, we have offered all existing providers contracts to support the completion of those courses.

Clearly, any competitive tendering round will result in winners and losers. I am aware of instances where organisations currently involved in the delivery of WBLA training programmes have not been successful in winning new contracts. I am however confident that, where this has happened, there are sound reasons for it. We have evaluated tenders submitted by organisations wishing to contract for WBLA using clear national criteria which are intended to ensure that successful tenderers are those organisations which can demonstrate the highest quality and who can offer our clients the best opportunities for progression into employment.

In regard to the Chamber of Commerce training programmes, we are currently in the process of notifying those bidders who have succeeded in winning contracts and offering those who have not the opportunity to seek feedback on the reasons why other organisations have been selected ahead of them.

We do not as yet have a full picture of all the outcomes of the contracting round. That said, we are aware that Chambers of Commerce, like other organisations with a national presence, will have been successful in some areas of the country and unsuccessful in others. Where Chambers have not succeeded in winning contracts for the areas in which they currently deliver WBLA, they will have been offered contracts which enable them to complete training courses for those people who are participating in WBLA on 26 March 2001.

We appreciate that it will be disappointing for those organisations who have not won contracts. As an accountable organisation we will always respond fully and fairly when such organisations write to us to state their case. As I have said, I am confident that the contracting process has been properly conducted, but we would re-examine any individual case raised by an unsuccessful organisation. If we were not satisfied both that the contracting process had been fairly conducted and that the outcomes were reasonable in all the circumstances, we would take appropriate action.

I should however make clear that the Employment Service's approach is intended to ensure that those organisations who do succeed in winning contracts are those best placed to deliver the highest quality service for our clients and maximise their changes of finding work.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure that adequate provision is made for adult training in Lancaster after 1 April. [155021]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The range and quality of training for unemployed people aged 25 and over is being enhanced across the country next year. We are investing £200 million in improving the New Deal 25 plus. From April it will provide flexible, individually-tailored help, including training and work experience, to all those who have been unemployed for 18 months or more. In England, a re-designed Work-Based Learning for Adults programme will provide a range of job-focused training for those who have been out of work for shorter periods of time. At the same time we are investing heavily in training to help those who need to improve their literacy and numeracy. Taken together, these measures will greatly improve the help on offer to adults who need to improve their skills in order to find work.

Truancy

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support is available to schools to reduce the levels of truancy. [155725]

Jacqui Smith: Truancy has a damaging impact on the educational and life chances of children. We are determined to tackle it. Over the next three years we are investing at least £500 million in projects tackling truancy and school exclusion and other initiatives to get children back into school and learning. In addition, we are giving schools in Excellence in Cities areas funds to recruit Learning Mentors, who can directly help children at risk of truancy.

To enable schools to reduce truancy further it is vital that they have accurate and speedy information to monitor attendance of pupils. Where schools have introduced electronic registration of attendance, independent evaluation has shown that truancy can be reduced by 10 per cent. in the first two years. I am very pleased to announce an additional £11.25 million from April 2002 from the Government's Capital Modernisation Fund to introduce electronic registration systems in schools for recording pupil attendance.

Our aim is to ensure that at least 500 secondary schools with poor attendance levels will be able to benefit from this additional funding. The extra money is an important element in our overall drive to reduce truancy in school and get all our children learning and preparing for adult and working life.

Correspondence

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to the letter dated 7 February from Professor Rebecca Boden, a constituent, of Malmesbury. [155335]

Mr. Blunkett: A reply will be issued today.

Employment Service Overheads (New Deal)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, Ref. 141694, *Official Report*, columns 205–06W, what costs have been incurred by the Employment Service in relation to *(a)* project design, *(b)* implementation, *(c)* marketing, *(d)* publicity and *(e)* limited refurbishment of some offices for the individual New Deals. [151518]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Employment Service funding to date for the project design, implementation, marketing and publicity for all of the New Deals is about £73 million. Around £37 million has been made available to finance the capital costs of refurbishing existing ES offices.

Employment and Training (Doncaster/Wakefield)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the value was of his Department's financial support for employment and training since May 1997; and if he will list individual projects indicating the value of Government funding in the Doncaster/Wakefield employment district. [149071]

Mr. Blunkett: My Department has invested substantially in employment and training. My Department does not normally present aggregate figures for expenditure on these programmes. Table 1 shows the Department's spending on employment programmes including Work Based Learning for Adults. It shows spending on certain training programmes including Work Based Training for Young People. Separately, it also shows expenditure on New Deals and other programmes funded by the Windfall Tax. The New Deals offer help and support, including skills training, to people looking for work.

The table does not include expenditure on further education, some £3.5 billion in the current year, which includes funding for vocational education and training.

Table 1

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]	*2000–01*[1]
Employment programmes, including:	1,499	1,338	1,409	1,502
Work Based Learning for Adults	382	272	289	318
Other training programmes	903	950	1,015	1,192
New Deals and other programmes funded by Windfall Tax	50	235	480	665

[1] Estimate

Source:

These figures are taken from the Departmental Annual Report 2000 and Budget 2001

Table 2 shows total estimated expenditure since April 1997 on employment programmes and New Deals in the Doncaster and Wakefield Employment Service districts. Due to organisational changes, data for 1997–98 are not available. Due to boundary changes, expenditure for 2000–01 on DfEE Mainstream programmes and the New Deals are not comparable.

Table 2: Estimated expenditure on DfEE Mainstream employment programmes, New Deal programmes in the Doncaster and Wakefield Employment Service districts

£ million

	Payments made in			
Employment measures	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
DfEE Mainstream programmes	n/a	5.7	5.8	5.6
New Deal	n/a	6.0	8.0	5.3
New Deal and Mainstream totals	n/a	11.7	13.8	11.08
Employment Zone	—	—	0.3	2.2

[1] Forecast

Source:

Figures provided by the Employment Service

Table 3 shows expenditure figures for training programmes in the Wakefield Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and the Doncaster part of the Barnsley and Doncaster TEC. The TECs' figures for Strategic activity/ Discretionary Projects may include expenditure other than training.

Table 3: Estimated payments to the Training and Enterprise Councils in the Wakefield and Doncaster areas supporting training activities

£ million

	Payments made in			
	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
Work Based Training for Young People	9.4	7.8	8.2	9.5
Work Based Learning for Adults	3.7	1.5	1.8	2.1
Competitiveness	0.6	0.7	0.5	0.6
Strategic activity/Discretionary Projects	1.6	1.5	1.7	1.4
Total TEC payments	15.3	11.6	12.3	13.6

[1] Forecast

Source:

Figures provided by the Wakefield and Barnsley and Doncaster TECs

Nortel Networks, Paignton

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what extra resources will be made available to the South Devon Employment Service as a consequence of the redundancies announced by Nortel Networks, Paignton. [154292]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Adrian Sanders, dated 20 March 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning what extra resources will be made available to the South Devon Employment Service as a consequence of the redundancies announced by Nortel Networks. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on Mr. Lewis' behalf.

In answer to your specific question, all the local agencies, including the Employment Service, the Regional Development Agency and the Government Office are working closely with Nortel to establish the specific help that is needed by the employees. Following a meeting held on 23 February these agencies are in the process of preparing a bid for additional funding via the Rapid Response Fund. By way of background the Rapid Response Fund is held centrally by the Department for Education and Employment and was set up by the Government in 1998. The specific purpose of the Fund is to provide the additional resources necessary to support Large Sale Redundancies in situations such as this.

In the longer term the Employment Service may also be able to offer additional support to Nortel employees through the Job Transition Programme. This service is being developed from April to assist employees facing redundancy and is intended to supplement the help available under the Rapid Response Fund.

May I take this opportunity to assure you that the Employment Service in South Devon will continue to work with Nortel to provide every assistance to the company and their employees.

I hope this is helpful.

Funding (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much new *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue funding has been made available to schools and colleges in (i) Liverpool and (ii) Liverpool, Riverside since May 1997; and what the total amount of Government funding of education in Liverpool has been in these years. [154427]

Jacqui Smith: The information showing the schools in the Liverpool, Riverside constituency which benefited under the New Deal for Schools is shown in Table A. These allocations formed part of the £16.873 million investment made so far in schools in Liverpool local education authority under the New Deal for Schools programme.

The New Deal for Schools was introduced as a new additional programme targeted specifically at addressing the backlog of urgent repairs in school buildings that had built up after 18 years of under funding under the previous Administration. It has been in addition to other capital funds made available to Liverpool local education authority.

In total, since 1997, Liverpool local education authority has received some £147.253 million of funding for capital investment in school buildings as shown in Table B.

Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.5 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £8.5 million in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

I refer my hon. Friend to the letter sent to her by the Secretary of State of 16 February for details of increases to revenue funding for schools in Liverpool. An extract covering the revenue funding allocated is shown in Table C. Information at constituency level is not readily available.

Since 1997, the Further Education Funding Council has allocated £19.37 million of capital grant to the projects at the City of Liverpool Community College listed in Table D. Revenue funding for the college since 1997 is shown in Table E.

The total amount of Government funding in schools and colleges in Liverpool since 1997 is shown in Table F.

Table A: New deal for schools—allocations to schools in the Liverpool, Riverside constituency

Year	*School*	*Project details*	*Grant awarded (£)*
1997–98	St. Michael in the Hamlet Primary	New build 2 form entry school	'1,275,000
	Pleasant Street Primary	First stage of new build school	'1,275,000
'1998–99	St. Michael in the Hamlet Primary	Completion of new school	675,000
	Pleasant Street Primary	Phase 2 of new build school	800,000
	Matthew Arnold Primary	Replacement school	1,641,000
1999–2000	32 Primary schools	Development cost of PFI bid	'100,000
2000–01	Morrison Junior	Replacement building	2,021,071
	Abercromby Nursery	Part of 117 school package for roof replacements	'5,000,000
	Lidderdale Infant		
	Mersey View Special		
	Our Lady Immaculate Catholic Primary		
	Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Primary		
	Our Lady of Reconciliation Catholic Primary		
	St. Anne's Catholic Primary		
	St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Primary		
	St. Charles' Catholic Primary		
	St. Finbar's Catholic Primary		
	St. Gerard's Catholic Primary		
	St. Nicholas' Catholic Primary		

' Denotes total allocations made to package projects covering more than one school Liverpool local education authority will be able to advise the value of projects at schools in the Liverpool, Riverside constituency which benefited from these allocations

Table B: All capital allocations to Liverpool local education authority

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	4,957	6,832	5,954	4,968
Supplementary Credit Approvals	3,134	2,738	2,360	1,330
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	5,809	5,137	1,406	2,272
New Deal for Schools	1,275	4,016	2,738	8,844
School Security Grant	131	162	169	165
PFI Credits	—	—	—	74,300
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	155	—	—
Class Size Initiative	—	85	221	154

Table B: All capital allocations to Liverpool local education authority

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	979	1,050	1,649
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	66	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	295
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	3,528
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	296
Nursery Provision	—	—	—	78
Total	15,306	20,104	13,964	97,879

Table C: Revenue funding allocations—Liverpool local education authority

£ million

	Standard spending assessment	*Grants*
1997–98	210.2	8.1
1998–99	229.9	2.8
1999–2000	238.3	7.8
2000–01	248.4	25.8

Note:

The following revenue grants have been included: DfEE contributions to the Standards Fund; Class Size Reduction Grant; Funding for Education Action Zones; Grant for Nursery Vouchers in 1997–98; School Budget Support Grant; School Standards Grant; and Education Budget Support Grant

Table D: Central Government capital investment made in the City of Liverpool Community College

Year/education establishment	*£000*
1997–98	
Myrtle Street Centre for Performing Arts and Media Studies[1]	[2]6,541
1998–99	
Clarence Street[1]	[2]4,469
Refurbishment at the Old Swan and Bankfield sites	3,100
2000–01	
Merchants Square—New Build of Service Industry Training and Community Learning Centre and construction of a new Technology Centre at Plumpfields Business Park	[2]5,260
Total	19,370

[1] New Build Project

[2] These projects are located in the Liverpool, Riverside constituency

Table E: Revenue funding for the City of Liverpool Community College

Year	*£*
1997–98	21,021,505
1998–99	19,984,675
1999–2000	20,572,499
2000–01	20,285,784

Table F: Total amount of Government funding in schools and colleges in Liverpool since 1997

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Schools				
Capital funding	15,306	20,104	13,964	97,879
Revenue funding	210,200	229,900	238,300	248,400
FE college				
Capital funding	6,541	7,569	—	5,260
Revenue funding	21,021	19,985	20,572	20,286
Total	253,068	277,558	272,836	371,825

School Playgrounds (Accidents)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many accidents in school playgrounds have been recorded in each year from September 1997. [154644]

Jacqui Smith: The Health and Safety Executive collects this information for Great Britain, for each 12 month period from April to March, under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995. The figures for reported accidents in school playgrounds where they relate to the activities of the school are as follows:

	Number
1997–98	4,171
1998–99	2,808
1999–2000	2,516

New Deal (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in Shrewsbury and Atcham have benefited since 1 May 1997 from the *(a)* New Deal 25-plus, *(b)* New Deal 50-plus, *(c)* New Deal for Disabled People, (b) New Deal for Lone Parents and (e) New Deal for Partners; and if he will make a statement. [154661]

Ms Jowell: For the Employment Service districts of Shropshire and South Staffordshire, which include Shrewsbury and Atcham constituency, the number of people who have benefited from and entered work through New Deal since 1 May 1997 are:

(a) New Deal 25+

Between July 1998 and December 2000, 51 people found sustained employment.

(b) New Deal 50-plus

Between April 2000 and February 2001, 25 people went into work with the Employment Credit.

(c) New Deal for Disabled People

NDDP pilots are not currently operating in Shrewsbury and Atcham constituency. NDDP extension is due to be introduced nationally from 2 July 2001. Job brokers will be announced in April.

(d) New Deal for Lone Parents

Between October 1998 and December 2000, 73 people obtained employment.

(e) New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed

Between April 1999 and February 2001, five people found work.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Stevens Inquiry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date the witness interviewed in silhouette and described as Geoff in the BBC television documentary 'Brits' was interviewed by the Stevens Inquiry. [152087]

Dr. Reid: I am informed that Sir John Stevens' team interviewed this individual on 4 July 2000.

Police Service Recruitment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the *(a)* newspapers, *(b)* magazines and *(c)* television stations which have featured RUC recruitment advertisements in 2001. [152869]

Mr. Ingram: The list of publications used for the Police Service of Northern Ireland recruitment advertisements is as follows:

Northern Ireland

Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, News Letter, Daily Mirror, Sunday Life, Sunday World, Ballymena Guardian, Northern Constitution, Portadown Times, Ballyclare/Carrick/Larne Gazette, Armagh Observer, Co. Down Spectator, Newtownards Chronicle, Down Democrat, Ulster Herald, Mourne Observer, Derry Journal, Down Recorder, Newry Reporter.

Republic of Ireland

Sunday Independent, The Star, Anglo Celtic, Donegal Democrat, The Argus, Dundalk Democrat, Northern Standard, Sligo Champion.

Great Britain

Glasgow Herald, Edinburgh Evening News, Manchester Evening News, Birmingham Evening Mail, Evening Standard (London), Liverpool Echo.

Television

UTV, Channel 4, TARA TV.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the implications for the conduct of policing resulting from the ratification of the European Convention on Minority Languages; what instructions have been issued to Consensia concerning language issues in police recruitment; and what questions are addressed to potential applicants concerning their proficiency in the Irish language. [152868]

Mr. Ingram: The NIO and devolved Administration have agreed which elements of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages are for them to take forward.

Ratification was expected in the week commencing 12 March 2001 and the Northern Ireland Office is in the process of assessing the impact of ratification on those areas for which it is responsible in readiness for implementation during mid 2001.

The police already have available information on the rights of those in custody in various languages, including the Irish language, and make available interpreters as necessary.

No instructions have been issued to Consensia by the Secretary of State.

No questions are addressed to applicants on their proficiency in the Irish language.

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153409]

Dr. Reid: The advertising campaigns for each of the past five years incurred the following costs:

	£
1996–97	135,938.07
1997–98	477,726.16
1998–99	887,303.00
1999–2000	330,630.95
2000–01	85,827.00

Only a small fraction of the NIIS advertising budget went on radio or newspaper costs, due to an emphasis on television impact campaigns.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152792]

Dr. Reid: The headline pay settlement for 2000–01 was 2.5 per cent. on the paybill and together with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received performance related increases averaging 4.5 per cent. The increases were not staged.

HMS Caroline

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will visit HMS Caroline; and if he will make a statement as to its tourist, recreational and heritage potential. [153914]

Dr. Reid: I have no plans at present to visit HMS Caroline. This ship is currently in full time operation as a Royal Naval Reserve vessel and therefore the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.

Police (Northern Ireland) Act

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the changes sought to the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 of which he has been notified by *(a)* the Ulster Unionist Party, *(b)* the SDLP, *(c)* Sinn Fein and *(d)* others. [154514]

Mr. Ingram: As the statement by the British and Irish Governments of 8 March said

"The two Governments are aware of concerns that have been expressed about whether the British Government's legislation (the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000) and plans for implementation fully reflect the letter and spirit of the Patten Report and deliver the new police service we all want. Significant progress has been made and discussions will continue".

The Government do not think it appropriate to list the specific areas raised by individual political parties.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155371]

Dr. Reid: This information is not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the meetings and conferences organised by her Department and agencies of her Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if she will make a statement. [155364]

Clare Short: No meetings or conferences have been cancelled or postponed in my Department as a result of the foot and mouth disease.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Record Office

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the key performance targets are for the Public Record Office Executive Agency for 2001–02. [155739]

Mr. Lock: The list sets out the key performance targets that the Lord Chancellor has set for the Public Record Office for 2001–02.

Public Record Office: Key Performance Indicators 2001–02[1]

Efficiency

KPI 1 Unit costs of key activities

KPI 1A Selecting and preserving the public records per metre: to ensure that the unit cost does not rise above £102.81

KPI 1B Giving Access: To ensure that the unit cost per information transaction onsite does not exceed £8.69

KPI 1C Giving Access: To ensure that the unit cost per information transaction online does not exceed £0.16

KPI 2 Backlog of records in departments reported as being over 30-years-old and awaiting review: To reduce the backlog, assessed in January 2001 as 913 metres, by 179 metres

Quality of Service

KPI 3 The achievement of Charter Standards

(a) to achieve 98.5 per cent. against the Office's Charter Standards targets for:

(i) making newly opened records and their catalogues available to users

(ii) answering letters

(iii) delivering records to users for consultation in the reading rooms

(iv) supplying copies of records

(v) answering the telephone

(vi) keeping appointments

(b) to carry out four satisfaction surveys and to achieve assessments of 'good' or 'excellent' from 90 per cent. of those expressing a view

Income Generation

KPI 4 To increase revenue generated by commercial activity to £800,000

Modernising Government

KPI 5 Electronic Records Management

To encourage other Government Departments to achieve electronic records management by 2004 by

(i) disseminating three toolkits by 30 March 2002, in line with the route map and milestones towards electronic records management by 2004

(ii) publishing a workbook containing completion criteria for the interim milestones which will enable Departments to assess their progress towards the 2004 target

(iii) monitoring and recording departmental progress against milestones by means of a regular reporting mechanism

KPI 6 Electronic Service Delivery

To develop digital access to popular records so that 50,000 digital record images are delivered to users.

[1] More information on these and other key targets is published in the Corporate and Business Plans.

Divorce and Separation

Helen Jackson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals the Lord Chancellor has to provide divorcing and separating couples with access to information, legal help, mediation and counselling services. [155724]

Jane Kennedy: The Government continue to finance both mediation and legal advice and representation through the Legal Services Commission. The Lord Chancellor also provides funding for marriage and relationship support organisations, which will increase to £4.5 million in 2001–02 and £5 million in 2002–03. Officials are currently working with the Legal Services Commission in order to pilot proposals to tie these services more closely together, in Family Advice and Information Networks, which will be able to provide a range of information and help to those experiencing family problems, either directly or by referring them to other local support and information agencies. These proposals will build on research evidence, in order to enable us to provide the information and help that people want at the time that they need it. We expect piloting to begin by October 2001.

Dispute Resolution

Mr. Pond: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans she has to promote alternative dispute resolution in the settlement of disputes involving Government. [155726]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has today announced an initiative on the settlement of Government disputes through Alternative

Dispute Resolution. Under this initiative, Government Departments and agencies make these commitments on the resolution of disputes involving them:

(1) Alternative Dispute Resolution will be considered and used in all suitable cases wherever the other party accepts it.

(2) In future, Departments will provide appropriate clauses in their standard procurement contracts on the use of ADR techniques to settle their disputes. The precise method of settlement would be tailored to the details of individual cases.

(3) Central Government will produce procurement guidance on the different options available for ADR in Government disputes and how they might be best deployed in different circumstances. This will spread best practice and ensure consistency across Government.

(4) Departments will improve flexibility in reaching agreement on financial compensation, including using an independent assessment of a possible settlement figure.

There may be cases that are not suitable for settlement through ADR, for example cases involving intentional wrongdoing, abuse of power, public law, Human Rights and vexatious litigants. There will also be disputes where, for example, a legal precedent is needed to clarify the law, or where it would be contrary to the public interest to settle.

Government Departments will put in place performance measures to monitor the effectiveness of this undertaking.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155363]

Mr. Lock: The Court Service has postponed a circuit management conference on its Western Circuit. The conference was scheduled to be held at a hotel on Dartmoor, within a restricted area, on 15 and 16 March. It was postponed after consultation with MAFF and with Dartmoor National Park.

The Legal Services Commission has cancelled two meetings (one in Cumbria and one in the south-west of England) and changed the venue of one meeting in Wales, in accordance with MAFF advice.

No other meetings or conferences in the Lord Chancellor's Department, its agencies, or other departments reporting to the Lord Chancellor have been postponed or cancelled because of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Belize

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the position of the Guatemalan Government on the territorial integrity of Belize; what boundaries to Belize Her Majesty's Government recognise, and on what legal basis; and if he will make a statement. [152847]

Mr. Battle: The Government of Guatemala are currently working within a process, jointly with the Government of Belize and facilitated by the Organisation of American States, to demarcate its boundary with Belize. The United Kingdom welcomes and supports this process.

The United Kingdom continues to regard the 1859 Treaty as defining the boundary between Belize and Guatemala.

Canadian Parliamentarians

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reasons invitations to meet Canadian parliamentarians during their visit to London on 5 to 7 March were extended by his Department to Labour and Liberal Democrat hon. Members who took part in a visit to Canada in 2000, but not to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chiselhurst (Mr. Forth), the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) who were also part of the UK parliamentary delegation to Canada. [153992]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The FCO was glad to be able to make a number of programme arrangements for Mr. Speaker Milliken's first visit to London after his appointment. However, the FCO did not arrange all aspects of his programme, nor of the visit made at the same time by the Chairman of the Canada-UK Inter-Parliamentary Association, Mr. John Harvard.

We understood that those hon. Members not invited to earlier events would be invited to another function.

Israel

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures he is taking to persuade the Israeli Government *(a)* to lift the restriction on movement it has imposed upon Palestinian towns and villages and *(b)* to comply with its obligations to uphold access to education and freedom of movement. [154715]

Mr. Wilson: Bilaterally and with European Union partners, we have in confidential demarches, public statements and in discussions during ministerial and official meetings, urged the Government of Israel to end the policy of closure, which restricts movement, including access to education. European Ministers renewed their call on Israel to end the closures at the General Affairs Council on 19 March.

Great Lakes Region

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts on holding an international conference on achieving peace, security and democracy in the Great Lakes Region. [154776]

Mr. Wilson: Along with our EU partners we continue to fully support the holding of an international conference on the Great Lakes Region but share the view that this should only be convened once there has been significant progress towards implementation of the Lusaka and Arusha agreements.

India and Pakistan (Nuclear Industry Contacts)

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a

statement on the Government's policy on contacts between UK nuclear industry personnel and nationals of India and Pakistan. [155731]

Mr. Wilson: Our policy on contacts with India and Pakistan on nuclear issues is set out in a statement to Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 687–88W. However, where contact between UK nuclear scientists and nuclear industry personnel and Indian and Pakistani individuals is judged not to be of proliferation concern, we will, on a case-by-case basis, consider making an exception to the policy.

We have decided to make such an exception for an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) research co-ordination meeting on nuclear reactor decommissioning which, following a request by the IAEA, British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. (BNFL) have agreed to host. Participants from several countries, including India and Pakistan, will be invited to attend the meeting, to be held in the United Kingdom in May 2001. In view of our policy we were consulted by BNFL on the IAEA proposal. We firmly support the work of the IAEA and the safe decommissioning of nuclear reactors and judge that the meeting will not in any way assist the development of weapons of mass destruction. We will continue to consider future cases individually.

Entry Clearance Service

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government will take to reform and update the entry clearance service. [155727]

Mr. Vaz: The Government will invest £7.2 million from the Capital Modernisation fund over the next three years in improved technology for the entry clearance (visa) service. This will help deliver a fairer, faster and firmer service, with benefits for visa applicants and for their sponsors in the UK. It will also contribute to the Prime Minister's target of enabling all public services to be delivered electronically by 2005.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will be raising the human rights situation in Aceh at this month's 57th session of the UN Human Rights Commission. [155034]

Mr. Battle: I represented the UK for the first time at the 57th session in Geneva.

Indonesia is not subject to either a resolution or a Chairman's statement at the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights. However, the European Union will deliver an omnibus country statement, which will include a full reference to the overall human rights situation in Indonesia, including Aceh.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what steps he is taking to follow the human rights situation in Aceh, Indonesia; [155031]

(2) what steps he has taken to apprise the Indonesian Government of Her Majesty's Government's views on military operations in Aceh; [155028]

(3) what the results were of the visit by the British Ambassador to Aceh earlier this month, with regard to the human rights situation there; [155030]

(4) what steps he has taken to press the Indonesian authorities to continue with the policy of dialogue to halt violence in Aceh; [155029]

(5) what reports he has received recently about the human rights situation in Aceh, Indonesia. [155032]

Mr. Battle: Our message on Aceh with the Indonesian Government has been consistently clear: a long-term solution to Aceh's problems can be achieved only through political negotiation and consultation with the Acehnese. We have taken action with the Indonesian leadership, most recently on 19 March, to reinforce the message that political negotiation should be the first resort and that the security forces should operate within the law and with strict regard to human rights; if they do not, they should be punished. The British Ambassador gave the same message to his interlocutors in Aceh during his visit to the province earlier this month.

We remain in close touch with the Indonesian Government at the highest level; they are fully aware of our concern about the overall human rights situation in Indonesia, not just in Aceh.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to press the Indonesian authorities to investigate the deaths on 6 December of three humanitarian volunteers working for Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims in Aceh, RATA. [155033]

Mr. Battle: I met Foreign Minister Shihab in the margins of the EU-ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Vientiane in December 2000 and personally requested an immediate investigation into the murders. On 20 December EU Ambassadors in Jakarta called on Co-ordinating Minister Yudhoyono to maintain EU pressure. He reported that a criminal investigation team had been established and sent to Aceh. During the British Ambassador's visit to Aceh earlier this month, he raised the case with the Chief of Police and the Deputy Chief of Police. They assured him that suspects had been arrested and prosecutions were being prepared.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 26 March 2001

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Light Dues

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on light dues. [155949]

Mr. Hill: I am pleased to announce that the light dues rates will remain the same for 2001–02.

Following four years of stability, the current rates were set in 1997 when charges were reduced by an average of 4.6 per cent. The General Lighthouse Authorities deserve credit for their efforts in trying to maximise efficiency while keeping costs down.

We will consult the shipping industry on the current charging regime later this year, to discuss where there can be further savings and improvements.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy on competitive bidding for funds by local councils on specific projects; and how much level of public expenditure was allocated to such arrangements in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 2000–01. [153801]

Ms Armstrong: The vast majority of Government support to local authorities is provided as general support. Competitive bidding for funds can play a part in bringing forward local proposals for specific projects. Figures for that part of Government support allocated by competitive bidding, as opposed to provision through a standard allocation process, on specific projects for which local authorities are able to bid, are given in the table.

£ million

Programme	*1996–97*[1]	*2000–01*[2]
Education Standards Fund	46	78
New Deal for Schools capital[3]	—	450
Health programmes	24	21
New Deal for Communities[3]	—	120
Air Quality and Smoke Control Supplementary Credit Approvals	3	3
Estates renewal	30	81
Estate Action	252	68
Land reclamation	51	6
Crime Fighting Fund and schools intervention[3]	—	48
PFI credits for joined up schemes[3]	—	30
Invest to Save Budget[3]	—	39
Capital Modernisation Fund[3]	—	340
European Structural Funds[4]	116	212
Single Regeneration Budget (Challenge Fund)/SRB[5]	265	814
City Challenge[6]	224	—
DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund[3]	—	2
Combined Conservation Area Partnership Schemes and Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme	12	5
Innovative transport project[3]	—	1
Rural Bus Challenge[3]	—	20
Total	1,023	2,338

[1] Actual outturn
[2] Provisional
[3] Programmes did not exist in 1996–97
[4] Outturn for both years
[5] In the SRB, local regeneration partnerships, which normally include local authority partners, were able to bid for resources under individual bidding rounds (1–6)
[6] Programme ended in 1998.

In addition £18.5 million has been allocated to fund the development of new and the extension of existing neighbourhood warden schemes.

Explosion (Sandhurst, Gloucestershire)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive the *(a)* next and *(b)* final reports from the (i) Environment Agency and (ii) Health and Safety Executive, following the explosion at Sandhurst, Gloucestershire; and if he will make a statement. [153747]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* Three reports from the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have been received and placed in the Library of the House:

1. Interim report of the joint investigation by the Agency and HSE under the Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) Regulations. The possible contravention of waste management controls is also being covered by this investigation;

2. Final report of the quality assurance review of the Agency's regulatory actions; and

3. Final report of the review carried out by HSE as part of its major incident handling.

The final report of the joint investigation (Report One) will be split into two parts. Part 1 will report on the COMAH investigation into the cause of the fire and will be submitted to the European Commission by 12 April. It will not include decisions on prosecution. Part 2 will report on the Agency's and HSE's views on liability and prosecution of the operator. In the light of Counsel's advice, the Agency advise that they now expect Part 2 to be completed and submitted to Ministers by late summer. A progress report, providing an indication of possible breaches of the waste controls, will be submitted to Ministers by 30 April.

Crash Barriers

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the specifications for use are of *(a)* corrugated steel crash barriers and *(b)* concrete crash barriers on (i) motorways and (ii) trunk roads; and what criteria were used in determining the specifications. [154472]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. David Amess, dated 26 March 2001:

CRASH BARRIERS

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked Tim Matthews, Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to reply to your recent Parliamentary question concerning specifications and criteria for crash barriers. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews.

The specifications for corrugated steel and concrete crash barriers are given in the Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works, Volume 1 Specification for Highway Works. Additional information is given in the Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works, Volume 3 Highway Construction Details (Section 2). No distinction is made between the use of steel and concrete for normal containment on motorways and trunk roads.

You have also asked what criteria are used in determining their specification. There are two steps used to determine the criteria for the use of safety barriers.

The first step is to consider what level of protection is appropriate for the specific conditions on the road concerned. In most situations this would require a normal containment safety barrier, defined as being able to contain and safely redirect a 1.5 tonne car travelling at 110 kph (70 mph) and impacting at an angle of 20°. This is equivalent to an impact from a family size saloon travelling at the maximum legal speed on a motorway under normal conditions. This is an internationally recognised standard used on many motorways and A class roads throughout Europe.

The second step is to consider the need to refine the general specification to take into account any special roadside features or conditions that might: limit the amount of deflection provided by the barrier; require a higher level of protection; or involve environmental and aesthetic considerations. Guidance on such matters is given in the Highways Agency's design standard TD 19/85 "Safety fences and barriers".

Copies of the documents referred to are held in the House of Commons library.

If you would like any further information about this matter, please contact Brian Hill, in Room 4/30, St Christopher House, Southwark Street, London, SE1 OTE (telephone 020 7921 4936).

Mobile Phone Masts

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has given local planning authorities on applications to erect mobile phone masts in residential areas. [154833]

Mr. Raynsford: Government planning policy for telecommunications is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 8 (revised): Telecommunications and the Department's Circular 4–99 "Planning for Telecommunications".

I wrote to Council leaders in June 2000 to explain the action the Government had in hand to take forward the planning recommendations of the Stewart report ("Mobile Phones and Health") published in May 2000. This letter said that the Stewart report had concluded that

> "the balance of evidence indicates that there is no general risk to the health of people living near to base stations on the basis that exposures are expected to be small fractions of the guidelines. However, there can be indirect adverse effects on their well-being in some cases".

Gaps in scientific knowledge led the Stewart report to recommend a precautionary approach comprising a series of specific measures. The report did not recommend a ban on masts in schools, hospitals or residential areas. The Government accepted the recommended precautionary approach and are taking forward a range of precautionary actions.

In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), I announced on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 748–51W, a series of important changes to the planning system for telecommunications masts which the Government intend to make. These will significantly strengthen the current arrangements. On that day, I wrote to the Leaders of all Councils in England to advise them of the proposed changes. Copies of the letter were sent to Chief Planning Officers. I also wrote in similar terms to all hon. Members for constituencies in England.

Airports

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sites identified by Scott Wilson in the work on the South East Regional Airports Study as being suitable for development as airports. [155424]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The work undertaken by Scott Wilson identified a significant number of sites which might be suitable for development either as a very large new airport or to serve particular sectors, such as air cargo. From that list Ministers selected a small number of options for further study and appraisal, alongside options for the development of existing major airports. We will proceed through successive sifts to narrow down these options to a final shortlist, on which there will be a full public consultation before Ministers come to conclusions.

In advance of the consultation, it would be premature to comment on the status of any specific option. Releasing information at this stage, in advance of final options, could result in unnecessary and lengthy blight, as well as multiplying uncertainty and anxiety. This approach is consistent with my Department's Code of Practice on the Dissemination of Information during Major Infrastructure Developments.

Compulsory Purchase

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what conclusions he has reached from his Department's review of existing law relating to compulsory purchase. [155421]

Mr. Raynsford: The Urban White Paper ("Our Towns and Cities: the Future". Cmnd 4911), published last November, set out our approach in response to the recommendations of the Advisory Group, which conducted a review of the laws and procedures relating to compulsory purchase and compensation, published in July last year. New guidance on the operation of the system will be available in the next few months, and the Law Commission will shortly publish a preliminary scoping study, which they have undertaken at the Department's request, of ways of simplifying, consolidating and codifying the law. Consideration is being given to proposals for changes to the law made by the Advisory Committee and in responses to their report. In doing this we are taking account of the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 and it may be necessary to await the outcome of legal challenges to the system currently before the courts before further proposals for changes to the law can be put forward.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will conclude his consideration of the further business rate relief he will provide to those indirectly affected by foot and mouth disease; and if this relief will be extended to the self-catering holiday accommodation sector. [155250]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* As I indicated in my statement to the House on 20 March, the Government will underwrite 95 per cent. of local authority costs in offering discretionary hardship rate relief to businesses badly affected by foot and mouth disease.

Any type of businesses with a rateable value of £12,000 or less in rural local authority districts, which adopt the scheme, will be eligible for a reduction of up to £1,290 for a three month period, provided they can show that they have suffered serious economic loss through the impact of foot and mouth disease. For some businesses this could amount to all of their rate bill for the period in question. The scheme will allow impacts beyond three months to be kept under review.

Businesses with properties above £12,000 rateable value level affected by Foot and Mouth disease will be eligible to benefit from existing local authority hardship relief provisions in which Government meet 75 per cent. of the cost.

The scheme will be available in the rural local authorities as set out in the list.

Rural Local Authorities

For rural rate relief announcement 22 March 2001

North East

Alnwick
Berwick-upon-Tweed
Castle Morpeth
Derwentside
Durham
Easington
Redcar and Cleveland
Sedgefield
Teesdale
Tynedale
Wear Valley

North West

Allerdale
Carlisle
Chester
Congleton
Copeland
Crewe and Nantwich
Eden
Ellesmere Port and Neston
Lancaster
Pendle
Ribble Valley
South Lakeland
Vale Royal
Wyre

Yorkshire and the Humber

Craven
East Riding of Yorkshire UA
Hambleton
Harrogate
North Lincolnshire UA
Richmondshire
Ryedale
Scarborough
Selby

East Midlands

Bassetlaw
Boston
Daventry
Derbyshire Dales
East Lindsey
East Northamptonshire
Harborough
High Peak
Hinckley and Bosworth
Melton
Newark and Sherwood
North Kesteven
North West Leicestershire
Rushcliffe
Rutland UA
South Derbyshire
South Holland
South Kesteven
South Northamptonshire
West Lindsey

West Midlands

Bridgnorth
East Staffordshire
Herefordshire UA

Malvern Hills
North Shropshire
North Warwickshire
Oswestry
Shrewsbury and Atcham
South Shropshire
South Staffordshire
Staffordshire Moorlands
Stratford-on-Avon
Wychavon

East

Babergh
Braintree
Breckland
Broadland
East Cambridgeshire
East Hertfordshire
Fenland
Forest Heath
Huntingdonshire
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk
Maldon
Mid Bedfordshire
Mid Suffolk
North Norfolk
South Bedfordshire
South Cambridgeshire
South Norfolk
St. Edmundsbury
Suffolk Coastal
Tendring
Uttlesford
Waveney

South East

Arun
Ashford
Aylesbury Vale
Canterbury
Cherwell
Chichester
Chiltern
Dover
East Hampshire
Horsham
Isle of Wight UA
Lewes
Maidstone
Mid Sussex
New Forest
Rother
Sevenoaks
Shepway
South Oxfordshire
Tandridge
Test Valley
Thanet
Tonbridge and Malling
Tunbridge Wells
Vale of White Horse
Waverley
Wealden
West Berkshire UA (Newbury)
West Oxfordshire
Winchester
Wycombe

South West

Caradon
Carrick
Cotswold
East Devon
East Dorset
Forest of Dean
Isles of Scilly
Kennet
Kerrier
Mendip
Mid Devon
North Cornwall
North Devon
North Dorset
North Wiltshire
Penwith
Purbeck
Restormel
Salisbury
Sedgemoor
South Hams
South Somerset
Stroud
Taunton Deane
Teignbridge
Tewkesbury
Torridge
West Devon
West Dorset
West Somerset
West Wiltshire.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which parts of South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority come within the scope of the proposed measures to assist rural areas with the consequences of foot and mouth disease set out in his oral statement of 20 March. [155304]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* Wherever they are located, rural businesses experiencing financial hardship as a consequence of foot and mouth disease will benefit from the Government's commitment to give them sympathetic treatment on tax and other payments as set out in my statement of 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 191. The increase from 75 per cent. to 95 per cent. in the contribution to the cost of rate relief is being made available to the most rural authorities. South Gloucestershire is not one of these.

Quality Mark Scheme

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what has been the cost to date of introducing and operating the Quality Mark scheme in the pilot areas; [154854]

(2) how many builders and allied traders have *(a)* applied to join and *(b)* joined the Quality Mark scheme; [154856]

(3) what estimate his Department has made of the annual cost of operating the Quality Mark scheme nationally; [154855]

(4) what plans he has to extend the pilot Quality Mark scheme to the rest of the country. [154857]

Mr. Raynsford: In total the Department has paid out just over £700,000 to support the development of the Quality Mark scheme and its implementation in the two pilot areas of Birmingham and Somerset. Likely costs for running a national scheme will be identified as part of the review of the pilot.

Some 280 builders and allied traders are now pursuing the Quality Mark, and nine have already achieved it.

The Government will carry out a review of the pilot scheme towards the end of the year, following which a decision will be made about extending the scheme to the rest of the country.

I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 28 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 688W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love).

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment has been made of the quantity and effect of emissions into the air of dioxins resulting from the burning of coal slag, railway sleepers and the other materials being used for the incineration of animals culled for the purpose of eradicating foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155435]

Mr. Meacher: My Department has asked the National Environmental Technology Centre of AEA Technology to calculate amounts of air pollutants, including dioxins, particles (as PM_{10}) and nitrogen oxides, released from the burning of carcases and fuels on the pyres. At present, it is estimated that the amount of dioxins released from the burning on pyres to date is about 10–20g. This is equivalent to about 3–6 per cent. of the total annual emissions of dioxins in the UK. This is roughly equivalent to the amount released annually from domestic burning of coal and wood and is less than one third the amount released annually from accidental fires and other open burning sources. I will write to the hon. Member with more accurate figures as they become available.

Infected animals must be killed quickly to prevent the further spreading of the disease and their carcases have to be destroyed. Burning on farms, although not without its pollutant emissions, is the quickest and most appropriate method to dispose of the large number of carcases, at present. We are investigating other methods of disposal, such as rendering, landfill and burial on farms, where appropriate. We will also continue to assess the levels of emissions from the pyres, including dioxin levels.

Housing Tenure

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the law relating to housing tenure. [155960]

Mr. Raynsford: Following clearance by the Lord Chancellor, the Law Commission has today been asked to undertake a major review of the law surrounding housing tenure in both the social and private rented housing sectors. The referral is in response to a Law Commission paper ("Reform of Housing Law: A Scoping Study Paper") which the Commission has also published today. Terms of reference reflecting the ground covered by the Scoping Paper are:

> "To consider the law relating to the existing forms of housing tenancies in the rented sector and their creation, terms and termination, with a view to its simplification and reform; and in particular to review the law on:
>
> (1) the forms of housing tenancy let by:
>
> (a) local authorities and other social landlords;
>
> (b) private landlords,
>
> with a view to providing a simple and flexible statutory regime for both the social and the private housing sectors;
>
> (2) the remedies available in respect of harassment and unlawful eviction;
>
> (3) tenants' statutory rights of succession; and
>
> (4) such other aspects of housing law as may be agreed between the Law Commission, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and the Lord Chancellor's Department."

Today's referral asks the Law Commission to undertake work on the ground covered by item (1) of the terms of reference and which the Commission's Scoping Paper refers to as the "first phase" of work. This in itself represents a substantial piece of work on which the Commission has undertaken to deliver a report and draft Housing Bill by July 2003. A further referral covering items (2) and (3) of the terms of reference (referred to in the Scoping Paper as the "second phase" of work) will be considered in the light of progress on first phase work.

The Law Commission's scoping paper represents an excellent piece of work. It highlights a long overdue need for a simpler, less complex framework for housing tenure law—one that will be more transparent and better understood by landlords and tenants alike; one that will enable social landlords to make better use of their stock; and one that will facilitate greater choice and diversity in the housing sector along with tenant participation.

We also intend to look to the review as the sensible vehicle within which to take forward our intention, announced in the Housing Policy Statement ("Quality and

Choice: A decent home for all—The Way forward for Housing") to look at a single form of tenure for the social housing sector and other tenure flexibilities. The Law Commission's continued readiness to work with DETR and other key housing interests, and to involve a wider range of landlord and tenant interests in taking forward this substantial piece of work will ensure an inclusive approach.

I am arranging for a copy of the Law Commission's Scoping Paper to be placed in the Library of the House.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Recycling

Ms Walley: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if she will introduce an audited scheme to recycle House waste paper. [155945]

Mrs. Roe: I understand that the Serjeant at Arms is in the process of introducing a paper recycling scheme. The first phase will be implemented in Portcullis House by the end of May this year.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154971]

The Solicitor-General: In 1999, in line with national policy, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), in liaison with the Dyfed Powys police and the magistrates court, introduced procedures based upon the Narey proposals. All defendants charged with a criminal offence where a guilty plea is anticipated now make their first appearance before the Cardigan or Aberystwyth magistrates within three working days of charge, or eight days if charged after the cut-off point for that court for that week.

In the last eight months, over half of defendants have had their cases finalised at the first court hearing. Since October 2000, the prosecution of Persistent Youth Offenders has been subject to a fast-track procedure. Fourteen defendants in Ceredigion have been dealt with to date under this procedure. These cases have been finalised in an average of 56 days over the five months to February 2001.

In January 2001, the provisions of section 51 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into force. Seven defendants within Ceredigion charged with indictable-only offences have been sent directly to the Crown court in Swansea. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the criminal justice system.

In May 2001, CPS Dyfed Powys will be altering its structure in line with the proposals of the Glidewell review. This will enable the CPS to place greater emphasis on the more serious crime cases in the Crown courts in Swansea, Carmarthen, and Haverfordwest.

Since May 1997, the CPS has successfully prosecuted a number of significant cases arising in the Ceredigion area. In 1998–99 police officers targeted heroin dealers in Aberystwyth in an operation that led to the arrest and successful prosecution of 12 heroin dealers in Aberystwyth. This had an important deterrent effect on further drug offences in Aberystwyth.

In 2000, the Dyfed Powys CPS also dealt with a murder case involving an elderly defendant who had allegedly murdered his wife. The defendant claimed that he had killed his wife as part of a suicide pact. After an extensive inquiry the prosecution accepted a guilty plea to manslaughter accepting the defendant's version of events. The case was dealt with by leading counsel and a higher court advocate from the Dyfed Powys CPS office.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office do not directly affect the Ceredigion constituency.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Solicitor-General (1) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997; [154972]

(2) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997; [154973]

(3) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154970]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), in liaison with the police and the magistrates courts, introduced procedures based upon the Narey proposals for the Central and Western Divisions of the North Wales Police Area, which includes these constituencies. All defendants now charged with a criminal offence make their first appearance before a magistrates court within one week and, in some cases, within 96 hours of being charged. Current figures indicate that around 40 per cent. of defendants now have their cases finalised at that first hearing. On 1 July 2000, the CPS North Wales Area office, which has responsibility for prosecutions in these three constituencies, altered its structures in line with the proposals contained in the Glidewell report. This enabled the CPS to place greater emphasis on more serious crime. More recently, as a further development of a proposal in the Glidewell report, the CPS have established a co-located Criminal Justice Unit within the Divisional Police Headquarters at Caernarfon. Closer links between the CPS and police in this area will further enhance the progress of cases into and through the magistrates courts.

CPS North Wales is also piloting Statutory Time Limits in youth cases and has worked together with the other agencies locally to speed up youth justice, particularly cases involving persistent young offenders. This has resulted in cases being disposed of within 71 days in two quarters of the last year. Since May 1997, the Crown Prosecution Service has reduced the time taken to finalise prosecutions arising in the Caernarfon, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy and Ynys Môn areas, especially cases involving

youth offenders. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy in speeding up the criminal justice system.

CPS North Wales are also piloting the Victim Notification arrangements. They have established a Victim Information Bureau at their headquarters at Wrexham, which provides detailed explanations to victims when cases are dropped or charges substantially amended. Meetings are also offered to victims in certain cases.

Action and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office do not directly affect the Caernarfon, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy and Ynys Môn constituencies.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Motor Industry

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many complaints were received by the Director General of Fair Trading of unfair practice by insurance company-owned motor industry vehicle body repair shops in 2000. [155141]

Dr. Howells: The Director General of Fair Trading received six complaints of unfair practice by insurance company-owned motor industry vehicle body repair shops in 2000.

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy towards competition in the UK motor vehicle body repair industry; and if he will make a statement. [155139]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition law, it is the responsibility of the Director General of Fair Trading to monitor competition in the UK motor vehicle body repair industry.

Gas and Electricity Licences

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to publish the standard licence conditions for gas and electricity licences. [155950]

Mr. Hain: The final draft of the standard licence conditions for gas and electricity have been published today. Following the two consultations which were undertaken last year, I am inviting final comments—particularly on drafting—from all interested parties by the end of April.

It is currently planned that the standard licence conditions should be formally determined in May, and should come into effect shortly afterwards.

Business Investment (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what total new investment was in business in London in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* the most recent year for which figures are available. [154778]

Mr. Caborn: Regional statistics on business investment are currently available for manufacturing only. The Office for National Statistics' 'Annual Business Inquiry' shows that in 1996 business investment in London was £1.16 billion. In 1997 (the most recent year for which information is available) investment in London was £1.3 billion.

ONS plan to extend coverage to include the service sector later this year.

Sub-post Office Closures

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub-post offices have closed in each quarter since 1990 in Essex; and how many have been newly established. [151459]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* I understand from the Post Office that the information requested is not available, as data on post office closures are not maintained on a county basis.

Commodity and Service Prices

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in what form his Department maintains records of prices of commodities and services *(a)* in different regions of the United Kingdom, *(b)* in urban and rural areas, *(c)* comparatively with other EU member states and *(d)* in the Republic of Ireland; and if he will list those categories of goods and services for which price information is monitored. [154560]

Dr. Howells: The Department collects information on energy prices as set out; however it does not routinely collect information on the prices of other commodities or services.

Petroleum product prices

Average UK prices of lead replacement petrol, premium unleaded petrol, ultra low sulphur diesel, standard grade burning oil and gas oil are collected on a weekly basis by the Department. These figures are published by the European Commission in its weekly "Oil Bulletin" which contains comparable prices for the other EU member states. Average prices are also collected on a monthly basis for these fuels and for super-unleaded petrol. These are also published in the "Oil Bulletin", as well as in the DTI monthly publication "Energy Trends" and in the annual "Digest of UK Energy Statistics".

Industrial energy prices

The DTI collects average prices for fuel purchased by manufacturing industry in Great Britain on a quarterly basis. These figures are published in "Energy Trends" and in the annual "Digest of UK Energy Statistics". Average prices are published for gas, electricity, coal, heavy fuel oil and gas oil, broken down by size of consumer. The average prices for medium fuel oil, liquefied petroleum gases and hard coke are also published, however these are not broken down by size of consumer. The data are not analysed on a regional basis.

Certain elements of these data are also provided to the International Energy Agency (IEA) for inclusion in their publication "Energy Prices and Taxes" where information on prices paid by industry in other OECD countries is presented.

The DTI also collects data on industrial prices for gas and electricity for Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Communities), as part of the directive on transparency of gas and electricity prices. The figures are published by Eurostat in their series "Statistics in Focus".

The data are for certain sizes of consumers in specific towns in the UK and also for the UK as a whole. Comparable data for other EU member states are presented in the publication.

Household energy prices

Average household prices for gas and electricity are collected on a regional basis and on a UK basis. For electricity, the regions follow those of the regional electricity distribution companies. For gas, the regions follow those of Transco's local distribution zones. These figures are published in the annual "Digest of UK Energy Statistics".

Information on household electricity and gas prices for different consumption levels and in different towns in the UK is published in the Eurostat series "Statistical in Focus". Comparable data for other EU member states are presented in the publication.

Prices paid by households for other fuels are collected by the Office for National Statistics as part of the Retail Prices Index.

Non-energy prices

With the exception of energy prices, the Department does not routinely collect information on the prices of commodities, such as bread, or services, although from time to time prices may be collected as part of an individual investigation initiated by the Department. Most regular collection of price information in the UK is carried out by the Office for National Statistics. The main domestic measure of inflation in the UK is the Retail Prices Index (RPI) which includes 130,000 separate price quotations in compiling the index each month. The European Union member states compile the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HCIP) which provides similar information to the RPI across the member states of the EU. Average UK prices based on the RPI price collection are published each month for certain food items, petrol, tobacco and alcohol.

Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Communities) co-ordinate the European Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exercise which compares prices of goods and services in each of the 15 countries in the European Union, and several other European countries. Results are published annually for groups of commodities and services, in the form of purchasing power parities expressed in national currencies and price level indices compared against the EU average. Detailed average prices for individual goods or services are confidential and are not published. No regional analyses for the RPI, HCIP or PPP are available.

Comic Relief (Telephone Calls)

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the regulations governing the charging by telecommunications companies for telephone calls to charity events, with particular reference to Comic Relief. [155258]

Ms Hewitt: I understand that BT has made substantial donations to charity to reflect the increase in its traffic revenues generated by calls to Comic Relief. While this is a matter for the company, I welcome BT's generosity.

Sudan

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much ECGD cover was given for exports by British companies to Sudan in the past two years. [154906]

Mr. Caborn: None.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many export credits have been granted by the UK Government for British companies exporting to Sudan in each of the last three years; and if he will list the *(a)* value of each export credit and *(b)* companies to which they were granted. [155145]

Mr. Caborn: No export credit facilities have been provided by ECGD for exports to the Sudan during the last three years.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice the UK Ambassador in Khartoum gives to UK *(a)* companies considering investment in Sudan and *(b)* oil companies investing in Sudan. [155136]

Mr. Caborn: The British Embassy in Khartoum provides a full range of Trade Partner UK services including frank and comprehensive advice about doing business, including the political climate.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with UK companies *(a)* operating and *(b)* considering operating in Sudan. [155149]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has not recently met with any UK companies to discuss Sudan or related issues.

Postal Services Act

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the remaining provisions of the Postal Services Act 2000 will come into force; and if he will make a statement. [155962]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have now made a further Commencement Order to bring into force by today the remaining major provisions of the Postal Services Act 2000. The order includes a number of provisions smoothing the transition to the new statutory framework, and applying the schemes under which the Post Office has traditionally carried out its postal and postal order business to the future Post Office company and its subsidiaries. The only provisions of the new Act still to be commenced are a few repeals of the Post Office Act 1969 which are being retained until the Post Office is dissolved in accordance the new Act.

The new Act will thus became fully operational today and the business of the Post Office has been transferred to the company nominated as the Post Office company, ie Consignia Holdings plc. The operational functions of the Post Office company will be carried out by its wholly owned subsidiary, Consignia plc.

In accordance with Part II of the Act, the Postal Services Commission has granted a licence to Consignia plc permitting it to provide the postal services which are restricted under section 6 of the Act, and requiring it to provide a universal postal service throughout the whole of the United Kingdom at a uniform tariff Consignia plc

(registered number 4138203 of 148 Old Street, London EC1V 9HQ) is thus a universal service provider for the purposes of the Postal Services Act 2000.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has confirmed the appointment of the current members of the Post Office as the initial directors of the Post Office company and the directors of Consignia plc.

The implementation of the Act and the issuing of the licence heralds the completion of the reform programme described in July 1999 in the Post Office Reform White Paper and sets in place a Post Office company with the greater commercial freedom that it needs to meet the challenges of the changing postal markets, and provides the framework in which postal users can look forward to the evolution of the modern and effective postal services that are essential for the business and social life of the nation in the 21st century.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the climate change levy rebates have been cleared by the EU Commission under the state aids provisions; and if he will make a statement. [149887]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

The Government are seeking approval under EU state aids rules for 80 per cent. discounts from the climate change levy for energy-intensive industries and businesses that negotiate agreements to improve energy-efficiency. An amended version of the EU state aids guidelines for environmental measures was published recently, and the Government are confident that these discounts and negotiated agreements will be approved as falling within the scope of these guidelines.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Report

Mr. McFall: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she plans to publish the 2001 Departmental report for her Department. [155632]

Clare Short: The Departmental report 2001 for my Department is published today. It looks back at a year in which considerable progress was made in strengthening international efforts to reduce poverty: 22 countries have now qualified for HIPC debt relief; increasing numbers of poor countries are producing comprehensive poverty reduction strategies; and the European Union has agreed to duty-free access for all imports except arms from least developed countries. As this report shows, the Department for International Development is a driving force behind these and many other efforts to reduce global poverty.

This year's report provides a more detailed assessment of progress against the International Development targets broken down by region. The report also shows progress in meeting the objectives set in our 1998 Public Service Agreement which are based on the performance of our top 30 partners in achieving the International Development targets. The 2000 Spending Round agreed substantial additional resources to enhance our existing efforts. Our plans for allocation of these resources are set out in the report.

Sudan

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the aid Britain gives to Sudan reaches areas in the south and in the Nuba Mountains. [154905]

Clare Short: We meet urgent humanitarian demands in Sudan wherever they arise. The mechanisms in place are the standard reporting and accountability procedures that are part of our funding agreements with international non-government organisations and United Nations agencies. Our officer at the British Embassy in Khartoum regularly monitors and reports on progress and the impact of assistance provided. DFID staff also regularly visit to monitor our support and assess humanitarian needs. In addition, the Embassy regularly presses the Government of Sudan for access to all areas of need by the organisations and UN agencies we support.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions her Department has had with the *(a)* Department of Trade and Industry and *(b)* Foreign and Commonwealth Office concerning the role of UK 'companies' investment in Sudan. [155137]

Clare Short: We have regular contacts with other Government Departments about the impact of investment on development in Sudan.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid the Government gives to Sudan. [154904]

Clare Short: Our support to Sudan is designed to meet urgent humanitarian needs. A small proportion is also spent on support for civil society and on international and grass roots efforts to build peace.

In the last five years the UK has provided the following amounts of aid to Sudan:

	£000
1995–96	5,996
1996–97	4,534
1997–98	5,677
1998–99	24,201
1999–2000	3,231

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Visits

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister what authority is necessary for Ministers to take *(a)* a spouse and *(b)* a partner on an overseas visit paid out of public funds; and how many such visits have taken place, and by which Ministers, since May 1997. [143162]

The Prime Minister: Ministers require my approval if they plan to take a spouse or partner on an overseas visit at public expense. However, no central record is kept of whether such visits actually take place after allowing for cancellation or postponement for parliamentary business or other reasons. Where a spouse or partner has accompanied a Minister on an overseas visit the cost is included in the figures published annually on Ministers'

visits overseas. Figures for 1999–2000 were published on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 969W. This showed that the cost of travel in 1999–2000 was £4.6 million compared with £7.9 million in the last year of the previous Administration.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the visits overseas undertaken by Government Ministers costing in excess of £500 between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 2000 indicating *(a)* the cost, destination and purpose of the visit and *(b)* if the Minister was accompanied by a partner or spouse, indicating the name of their partner and the contribution to the cost of the trip made by the Minister towards the partner's expenses. [148563]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* Lists of all visits overseas undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more for the periods 2 May 1997 to 31 March 1999 and 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000 have already been placed in the Libraries of the House. The annual list for travel during the period 1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001 will be published in due course. In relation to the information requested about spouses or partners accompanying Ministers overseas I refer the hon. Member to my answer earlier today to the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), *Official Report*, columns 438–39W.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list the IT projects being undertaken at No. 10; and if he will state *(a)* the expected completion date and *(b)* the cost of each project; [151843]

(2) if he will list the IT projects No. 10 is planning to undertake during the next year; and if he will state in each case *(a)* the expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* the cost. [151844]

The Prime Minister: I refer my right hon. Friend to the reply given to him by the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 770–71W.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister if all documents in his office relating to an official inquiry by the then Prime Minister in 1970 into allegations that the chemical and biological defence establishment, Porton Down, had experimented on old people for germ warfare purposes, have been placed in the Public Record Office; and if he will make a statement. [154767]

The Prime Minister: There are no documents in my office relating to such an inquiry.

Foot and Mouth Taskforce

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 753W, on the Foot and Mouth Taskforce, for what reason he did not include in the taskforce representatives from the *(a)* National Assembly for Wales, *(b)* Farmers Union of Wales, *(c)* Welsh Development Agency and *(d)* Welsh Tourist Board. [155131]

The Prime Minister: The taskforce is considering the economic impacts of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease across the United Kingdom and includes representatives of the devolved administrations, including the National Assembly for Wales. Mike German, the Assembly's Minister for Economic Development, attended the taskforce's second meeting. Although the taskforce is a UK-wide body, most of the issues it discusses are devolved, and in practice it concentrates mainly on proposals to be implemented in England. It is then for each devolved administration to decide whether to follow similar policies. In order to avoid the group becoming too unwieldy, we have inevitably had to restrict membership. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and other UK Ministers concerned would, however, welcome constructive suggestions from organisations in all countries.

Sinn Fein

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the undertakings he gave to the leaders of Sinn Fein in May 2000, indicating which have been *(a)* fulfilled and *(b)* remain outstanding. [154321]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* In the course of the multi-party talks at Hillsborough, the Government committed themselves to honouring the Good Friday Agreement, if all other parties did, in relation to all aspects of it. Those undertakings were reflected in the proposals made jointly with the Irish Government on 5 May 2000.

I am satisfied that we are honouring these commitments.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

China

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ensure that the EU delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights will raise the current human rights situation in China with special reference to religious freedom and torture. [154907]

Mr. Battle: We are pressing the EU Presidency and our EU partners to ensure that relevant EU statements at the UN Commission on Human Rights reflect our concerns about the human rights situation in China, including the use of torture and respect for religious freedoms.

I spelt out the UK's concerns on human rights in China in my address at the UN Commission on Human Rights on 22 March.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reasons were given for refusal of visas by entry clearance officers at the appeal stage in the case of visa refusals overturned by the Minister for Europe. [155298]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* When an entry clearance officer refuses a visa applicant he or she always gives the applicant written reasons for doing so. The reasons for refusal will vary from case to case. Where there is a right of appeal against the refusal, the Minister with responsibility for entry clearance does not become involved in the appeal process, which is handled by the Independent Appellate Authority.

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reasons were given for the initial refusal of visas by entry clearance officers in the case of visa refusals overturned by the Minister for Europe. [155299]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* In such cases, entry clearance officers initially refused to grant a visa because they were not satisfied that the applications met the requirements of the Immigration Rules. Where hon. Members subsequently made representations which have satisfied me that, in fact, the requirements of the Immigration Rules have been fully met, I have overturned the original decision of the entry clearance officer.

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in respect of visa refusals overturned by the Minister for Europe, how many he intervened on *(a)* following representations from an hon. Member and *(b)* following external requests. [155300]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* I have overturned a total of 49 decisions following representations from right hon. and hon. Members since October 1999. I do not take representations from other sources and have therefore overturned no decisions following external requests.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many family visit visa applications were *(a)* received, *(b)* determined, *(c)* allowed and *(d)* refused since 1 January, broken down by entry clearance post. [155570]

Mr. Vaz: The table sets out the information received from entry clearance posts issuing more than 1,200 visas per year. I regret that the information for the remaining posts issuing less than 1,200 visas per year is not available centrally.

Family visit visas applications 2001

	Applications received		*Applications determined*		*Applications issued*		*Applications refused*	
	January	*February*	*January*	*February*	*January*	*February*	*January*	*February*
Abidjan	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Abu Dhabi	24	—	23	—	17	—	6	—
Abuja	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Accra	753	—	685	—	277	—	408	
Addis Ababa	31	12	39	11	14	6	25	5
Almaty	36	13	37	13	37	13	0	0
Amman	426	85	0	85	0	84	0	1
Amsterdam	38	34	38	34	32	30	6	4
Ankara	29	38	29	38	28	38	1	0
Bahrain	16	10	16	10	16	10	0	0
Baku	19	9	19	9	18	9	1	0
Bandar Seri Begawan	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bangkok	80	173	73	154	45	131	28	23
Banjul	38	34	40	31	32	20	8	11
Beirut	92	62	89	62	87	61	2	1
Belgrade	258	391	4	352	0	347	4	5
Bogota	33	33	33	33	25	29	8	4
Bombay	619	1,070	619	1,070	454	874	165	196
Bratislava	50	—	50	—	47	—	3	—
Brussels	14	10	4	7	3	5	1	2
Bucharest	58	85	59	90	48	82	11	8
Budapest	6	7	6	7	5	7	1	0
Cairo	137	145	129	142	113	124	16	18
Calcutta	94	118	97	120	95	116	2	4
Canberra	7	—	7	—	4	—	3	—
Casablanca	117	119	110	116	105	114	5	2
Chicago	141	176	119	162	119	162	0	0
Colombo	70	74	70	74	32	48	38	26
Copenhagen	44	36	44	36	44	36	0	0
Damascus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dar Es Salaam	107	104	107	104	93	83	14	21
Dhaka	451	490	348	415	203	227	145	188
Doha	49	31	49	31	46	31	3	0
Dubai	71	79	75	81	47	47	28	34
Dublin	36	—	36	—	34	—	2	—
Dusseldorf	106	272	100	246	94	241	6	5
Ekaterinburg	11	16	11	16	11	16	0	0
Geneva	25	74	21	67	20	66	1	1
Georgetown	33	—	33	—	28	—	5	—
Guangzhou	121	—	90	—	84	—	6	—
Hanoi	4	3	4	3	2	1	2	2
Harare	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Havana	3	0	3	0	3	0	0	0

Family visit visas applications 2001

	Applications received		Applications determined		Applications issued		Applications refused	
	January	*February*	*January*	*February*	*January*	*February*	*January*	*February*
Hong Kong	32	[1]	32	[1]	27	[1]	5	[1]
Islamabad	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]
Istanbul	430	453	485	522	424	451	61	71
Jakarta	36	58	37	56	33	50	4	6
Jedda	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jerusalem	5	[1]	5	[1]	5	[1]	0	[1]
Kampala	116	102	120	84	100	59	20	25
Karachi	575	[1]	460	[1]	397	[1]	63	[1]
Kathmandu	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Khartoum	44	15	15	16	5	6	10	10
Kiev	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]
Kingston	52	[1]	46	[1]	35	[1]	11	[1]
Kuala Lumpur	14	12	13	13	10	11	3	2
Kuwait	200	43	200	43	196	39	4	4
Lagos	1,147	1,193	901	1,293	688	1,143	213	150
Lima	12	[1]	12	[1]	8	[1]	4	[1]
Los Angeles	0	216	0	216	0	216	0	0
Luanda	8	2	8	2	8	1	0	1
Lusaka	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]
Madras	217	229	233	226	216	211	17	15
Madrid	26	[1]	26	[1]	26	[1]	0	[1]
Manila	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]
Minsk	0	14	0	14	0	13	0	1
Moscow	237	214	228	191	223	190	5	1
Muscat	75	39	72	39	68	36	4	3
Nairobi	156	[1]	156	[1]	132	[1]	24	[1]
New Delhi	913	1,153	907	1,129	573	682	334	447
New York	533	[1]	511	[1]	500	[1]	11	[1]
Nicosia	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]
Oslo	30	44	27	42	27	41	0	1
Ottawa	475	278	442	185	442	184	0	1
Paris	0	253	0	248	0	246	0	2
Peking	109	63	94	51	88	40	6	11
Port Louis	80	136	80	136	73	126	7	10
Port of Spain	5	[1]	5	[1]	5	[1]	0	[1]
Prague	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]
Pretoria	27	[1]	20	[1]	16	[1]	4	[1]
Quito	24	14	24	14	20	14	4	0
Riga	11	[1]	11	[1]	11	[1]	0	[1]
Riyadh	8	15	12	20	9	9	3	11
Rome	63	90	61	80	60	77	1	3
Sana'a	20	13	20	10	8	1	12	9
Sarajevo	61	119	61	119	61	117	0	2
Shanghai	10	30	10	30	8	23	2	7
Singapore	21	26	24	25	18	25	6	0
Sofia	89	118	74	117	71	113	3	4
St. Petersburg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
St. Domingo	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]
Stockholm	89	103	129	123	128	121	1	2
Taipei	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tashkent	13	5	13	5	12	4	1	1
Tbilisi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tehran	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tel Aviv	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]
Tirana	21	21	15	23	15	20	0	3
Tokyo	5	5	5	4	4	2	1	2
Tunis	97	92	87	70	60	70	27	21
Valletta	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]
Vienna	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]
Warsaw	0	3	0	1	0	1	0	0
Washington	312	305	312	301	312	301	0	0
Wellington	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]	0	[1]
Yaounde	7	[1]	22	[1]	20	[1]	2	[1]
Zagreb	70	96	70	90	63	82	7	8

[1] Information not yet received from Posts

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many family visit visa refusals in relation to which *(a)* an appeal has been received, *(b)* the refusal has been overturned by an entry clearance manager after receipt of an appeal, *(c)* an appeal has been despatched, *(d)* entry clearance has been issued prior to the outcome of an appeal, *(e)* an appeal has been allowed and notified to the post and *(f)* an appeal

has been dismissed and notified to the post, there were in each month in 2001, broken down by entry clearance post. [155571]

Mr. Vaz: The table on family visit refusals appeals received, refusals overturned after receipt of an appeal and appeals despatched covers information so far received from overseas Posts issuing more than 1,200 visas per year. I regret that the information requested for the remaining posts issuing less than 1,200 visas per year is not available centrally.

The information requested at *(d)* on the issue of entry clearance prior to the outcome of an appeal is not available centrally or locally. The Entry Clearance Manager may sign an appeal form only if he or she decides, after review, that the refusal stands.

Similarly, the information requested at *(e)* and *(f)* on appeals allowed and dismissed is not available centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost by contacting all entry clearance issuing posts individually. The Home Office informs posts of the outcome of allowed appeals. The Lord Chancellor's Department informs posts of dismissed appeals.

Family Visit Visa Refusals 2001

	Appeals received		*Refusals overturned by ECM*		*Appeal despatched*	
	January	*February*	*January*	*February*	*January*	*February*
Abidjan	—	—	—	—	—	—
Abu Dhabi	1	—	0	—	1	—
Abuja	—	—	—	—	—	—
Accra	3	—	0	—	6	—
Addis Ababa	0	1	0	0	0	0
Almaty	0	0	0	0	0	0
Amman	0	0	0	0	0	0
Amsterdam	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ankara	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bahrain	0	0	0	0	0	0
Baku	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bandar Seri Begawan	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bangkok	0	6	1	0	0	5
Banjul	0	0	0	0	0	0
Beirut	1	0	0	0	1	0
Belgrade	0	1	0	0	0	1
Bogota	2	0	0	0	1	0
Bombay	9	13	0	0	8	14
Bratislava	0	—	0	—	0	—
Brussels	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bucharest	0	2	0	0	0	2
Budapest	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cairo	0	1	0	0	0	0
Calcutta	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canberra	0	—	0	—	0	—
Casablanca	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chicago	0	0	0	0	0	0
Colombo	5	1	1	0	4	1
Copenhagen	0	0	0	0	0	0
Damascus	3	2	0	0	1	6
Dar Es Salaam	0	2	0	0	0	2
Dhaka	12	14	2	2	7	12
Doha	1	0	0	0	1	0
Dubai	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dublin	1	—	0	—	0	—
Dusseldorf	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ekaterinburg	0	0	0	0	0	0
Geneva	0	0	0	0	0	0
Georgetown	0	—	0	—	0	—
Guangzhou	3	—	0	—	2	—
Hanoi	0	0	0	0	0	0
Harare	0	0	0	0	0	0
Havana	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hong Kong	0	—	0	—	0	—
Islamabad	—	—	—	—	—	—
Istanbul	2	7	0	0	2	5
Jakarta	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jedda	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jerusalem	0	—	0	—	0	—
Kampala	1	3	0	1	1	1
Karachi	4	—	0	—	9	—
Kathmandu	0	1	0	0	0	1
Khartoum	0	1	0	1	0	0
Kiev	0	—	0	—	0	—
Kingston	0	—	0	—	0	—
Kuala Lumpur	0	0	0	0	0	0

Family Visit Visa Refusals 2001

	Appeals received		*Refusals overturned by ECM*		*Appeal despatched*	
	January	*February*	*January*	*February*	*January*	*February*
Kuwait	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lagos	31	33	6	5	22	31
Lima	1	—	0	—	1	—
Los Angeles	0	0	0	0	0	0
Luanda	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lusaka	0	—	0	—	0	—
Madras	1	0	0	0	1	0
Madrid	0	—	0	—	0	—
Manila	—	—	—	—	—	—
Minsk	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moscow	0	1	0	1	0	0
Muscat	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nairobi	4	—	0	—	4	—
New Delhi	15	21	1	2	12	20
New York	1	—	0	—	0	—
Nicosia	0	—	0	—	0	—
Oslo	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ottawa	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paris	0	0	0	0	0	0
Peking	1	3	0	0	0	3
Port Louis	0	1	0	0	0	0
Port of Spain	0	—	0	—	0	—
Prague	0	—	0	—	0	—
Pretoria	1	—	0	—	0	—
Quito	0	0	0	0	0	0
Riga	0	—	0	—	0	—
Riyadh	0	2	0	0	0	2
Rome	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sana'a	1	1	0	0	1	1
Sarajevo	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shanghai	0	0	0	0	0	0
Singapore	0	5	0	0	0	5
Sofia	1	0	0	0	0	0
St. Petersburg	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sto Domingo	—	—	—	—	—	—
Stockholm	0	0	0	0	0	0
Taipei	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tashkent	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tbilisi	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tehran	1	5	0	0	1	5
Tel Aviv	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tirana	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tokyo	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tunis	0	5	0	0	0	5
Valletta	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vienna	—	—	—	—	—	—
Warsaw	0	0	0	0	0	0
Washington	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wellington	0	—	0	—	0	—
Yaounde	0	—	0	—	0	—
Zagreb	1	1	1	1	0	0

' Information not yet received from Posts

Iraq

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the no-fly zone in Northern Iraq applies to military aircraft of the Turkish air force. [155065]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

The northern no-fly zone was established on humanitarian grounds in an effort to prevent Saddam Hussein from repressing the Kurdish civilian population from the air. The zone was not established to monitor the activity of our NATO allies. We therefore routinely collect information only on the activity of Iraqi aircraft.

HEALTH

Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what NHS provision there is for sufferers of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome; and if he will make a statement; [141639]

(2) what provision for diagnosis there is in England and Wales within the NHS for Ehlers-Danlos syndrome; [141638]

(3) what budget health authorities have to discharge their responsibilities for the treatment of patients with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome; [141637]

(4) what responsibility health authorities have for the provision of treatment of patients with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome; and if he will make a statement. [141636]

Yvette Cooper: The National Health Service provides Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS) services for anyone who needs them in the same way as for other rare genetic disorders. These are funded from general allocations.

The National Specialist Commission Advisory Group is working closely with Wales to consider whether EDS services should be commissioned nationally.

MRI Scanners

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will identify the NHS trusts which are to receive funding for an MRI scanner. [147705]

Yvette Cooper: Those National Health Service trusts identified to receive funding for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanners through the new opportunities fund have already been notified and announced.

The NHS Plan announced funding for 50 additional MRI scanners and we anticipate that the recipient NHS trusts will be identified in the financial year 2001–02.

MMR Vaccine

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of MMR vaccines his Department is committed to purchasing; and over what period of time. [150177]

Yvette Cooper: Measles mumps rubella vaccine is routinely contracted on a yearly basis. A new contract for 1.2 million doses has been let to cover the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002.

World Health Organisation

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what commitment Her Majesty's Government have made to the WHO on measures to eradicate measles; and what time scale is proposed for achieving its eradication. [150176]

Yvette Cooper: There is no World Health Organisation (WHO) strategy to eradicate measles nor a target date to achieve eradication. No commitments have therefore been made to WHO.

The United Kingdom has set a target of 95 per cent. measles mumps rubella vaccine uptake as this, based on guidance from WHO, is the level of uptake required to avoid outbreaks of measles, mumps and rubella. This level is sufficient to prevent long-term accumulation of pools of susceptible individuals that provide the opportunity for transmission of these diseases.

NHS Funding

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the expected funding of the NHS in England per head of population is in 2000–01. [150225]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 February 2001]:* Public expenditure on the National Health Service in England is expected to be around £890 per head of population in 2000–01.

vCJD

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what precautions against vCJD are taken in surgical procedures other than tonsillectomies; what organs are known to incubate vCJD; and if he will make a statement. [150433]

Yvette Cooper: On 4 January 2001 the Department announced a precautionary strategy for reducing the theoretical risk of transmission of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) from patient to patient via surgical instruments.

The strategy focuses first and foremost on ensuring high standards of decontamination. This has been identified by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) to be a key step in reducing risk. In October 2000, the Department required all National Health Service trusts and health authorities to conduct comprehensive reviews of their decontamination services. As part of this work, decontamination facilities at neurology and posterior ophthalmology centres have recently been inspected and any necessary improvements identified. A comprehensive strategy to modernise NHS decontamination facilities, backed by £200 million funding announced on 4 January and based on the trust reviews, is currently being prepared. This strategy will be published once it is complete.

The "Risk Assessment for the transmission of vCJD via surgical instruments" published by the Department on 16 March (available from the Department's website at www.doh.gov.uk/cjd/riskassessmentsi/htm) confirms that the risks of transmission are significantly reduced if instrument decontamination is carried out to the highest standards. On body organs, the risk assessment also shows that the central nervous system and the back of the eye would carry the highest potential infectivity, whereas lymphatic tissue such as tonsils, and front of the eye tissue are of a lesser order of risk.

When the Department's strategy was presented to SEAC at its meeting in November 2000, the committee welcomed it and the advances being made on decontamination. The committee also endorsed the concept of using tonsillectomy as a pilot scheme to see how single-use instruments would work in practice.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what investment he has made with regard for a diagnostic test for vCJD. [151269]

Yvette Cooper: The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Department of Health, the Food Standards Agency, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Medical Research Council (MRC) on 15 March 2001 issued a call to scientists for proposals to develop quick, effective and reliable diagnostic tests for diseases such as BSE and variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (vCJD). This latest co-ordinated drive aims to push the boundaries in as many ways as possible and break new ground towards creating usable diagnostic tools. The MRC is co-ordinating this call on behalf of United Kingdom Government Departments and agencies who fund public research into transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. Funding decisions are expected from autumn 2001 onwards.

General Osteopathic Council

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of the membership of the osteopathic council is registered by the General Osteopathic Council; [152778]

(2) what percentage of members of the osteopathic profession he estimates will be able to vote in elections for the General Osteopathic Council to be held in April; [152777]

(3) when he will complete his review of the implementation of the Osteopaths Act 1993. [152776]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* I understand that, at 7 March 2001, 2,796 osteopaths had been registered with the General Osteopathic Council. This included 175 osteopaths who are ineligible to vote because they live and work outside the United Kingdom. Of the remaining 2,621 registrants who work in the UK, 551 are conditionally registered and are therefore ineligible to vote in any General Osteopathic Council elections. Approximately 200 further practitioners did not apply for registration until just before the deadline for doing so. As they have not yet completed the registration process they are also ineligible to vote. Thus 79 per cent. of registered UK osteopaths will be able to vote in the forthcoming election of osteopathic members.

According to the General Osteopathic Council's published register, 13 serving members of the General Osteopathic Council are themselves registered as practising osteopaths. This comprises the 11 osteopathic members of the Council and the two education members who were drawn from the osteopathic profession. There are a further nine members—one education member and eight lay members. Thus registrants make up 59 per cent. of the current council.

We are still investigating the concerns about operation of the Osteopaths Act 1993 that were raised in the Adjournment debate on 25 October last year. The issues are complex and require careful consideration. This has taken some time but I hope to be in a position to report back to the hon. Members who raised concerns—and all those to whom I have promised to copy my views—in the near future.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recognition his Department accords to the New Democratic Osteopathic Council; and if he will make a statement. [154054]

Yvette Cooper: While it is open for any organisation or group within the osteopathic profession to establish itself as a representative body for osteopaths, the General Osteopathic Council (GOC) is the only body with the legal authority to register osteopaths within the United Kingdom. Those who register with the GOC may legally call themselves osteopaths. Anyone not registering with the council is committing an offence if he or she says or implies that he is any kind of osteopath, whatever other representative body he may choose to join.

Smoking

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much he has allocated for *(a)* nicotine replacement therapies and *(b)* bupropion (Zyban) for (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02. [153441]

Yvette Cooper: The provision for nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and bupropion (Zyban) has been made within the uplift made for the drugs bill within unified allocations for 2001–02, an increase of 8.9 per cent. In 2000–01, £20 million was allocated to fund specialist smoking cessation services, including the provision of free NRT to poorer smokers. £20 million has been allocated to specialist cessation services in 2001–02; this excludes drug costs.

Cancer Research

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on cancer research in England in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; and what estimate he has of expenditure for 2000–01. [153153]

Yvette Cooper: Funding for cancer research in the United Kingdom is provided from a number of different sources, including the Government, charities and industry. The Department does not routinely collect information on all cancer research expenditure in England.

We provide funding for cancer research through the Department, the research councils and the higher education funding councils (HEFC). The main Government agency for research into the causes of and treatments for disease is the Medical Research Council (MRC), which receives its funding via the Department of Trade and Industry. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council also supports basic research relevant to health. The research councils operate on a UK-wide basis. The Department provides support funding for research commissioned by the research councils and charities that takes place in the National Health Service as well as commissioning research directly to support policy and service priorities. The HEFC provides funds for research infrastructure in medical schools and other relevant research groups in higher education institutes.

The Department's expenditure on cancer research was approximately £53 million in 1997–98; £75.4 million in 1998–99 and an estimated £77.4 million in 1999–2000. Figures for total Department expenditure in 2000–01 are not yet available.

We have made a commitment to increasing funding for cancer research. The NHS Cancer Plan confirmed that by 2003 we will be investing an additional £20 million each year in the infrastructure for cancer research and an extra £4 million will be invested in prostate cancer research.

Mental Health Bill

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to present a mental health Bill to Parliament. [153486]

Mr. Hutton: We have set out our plans to reform the Mental Health Act 1983 in a White Paper, "Reforming the Mental Health Act", published in December 2000. We are committed to modernising mental health legislation and will introduce a Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Ophthalmic Dispensing

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent discussions he has had with representatives of optometrists and ophthalmic dispensers on the implications of changes in HM Customs and Excise regulations; [153805]

(2) what his assessment is of the implications of changes in Customs and Excise regulations on ophthalmic dispensing. [153804]

Mr. Hutton: On 15 February Her Majesty's Customs and Excise issued a business brief on how they intend to apply a recent judgment in the House of Lords on what, for value added tax purposes, comprises a single supply. At the same time they wrote to opticians' representative bodies explaining that the effect of the judgment would be to make the dispensing and supply of spectacles and contact lenses a single supply. The Department continues its discussion with the optical professions.

Cervical Screening

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the reasons for the further delay in reaching a decision on the approval of the Thin Prep Pap test. [154057]

Yvette Cooper: The pilot study to assess the feasibility of using Liquid Based Cytology (LBC) in the National Health Service cervical screening programme is being progressed in line with the overall guidance published by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in June 2000. LBC is being piloted in conjunction with Human Papilloma Virus testing.

The three sites for the pilot study have been selected and training and installation of equipment is under way. The study will become operational in spring 2001 as planned.

Coalmining Communities

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what specific support his Department has provided to coalmining communities since 1997 by *(a)* region and *(b)* health authority area. [154303]

Mr. Denham: There are 11 health authorities classified as coalfield communities by the Office for National Statistics. They receive general allocations to commission health care for their population.

In addition, seven out of the 11 health authorities are in health action zones (HAZ). They have received additional funding for this since 1998–99.

Details are given in the table.

£000

	1997–98	*1998–99*		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*		*2001–02*	
	Total allocation	*Total allocation*	*HAZ funding*[1]	*Total allocation*[2]	*HAZ funding*[1]	*Total allocation*	*HAZ funding*[1]	*Total allocation*	*HAZ funding*
County Durham	282,889	298,927	—	411,001	—	452,736	—	493,021	—
Tees	255,335	269,175	20	370,553	1,958	405,341	2,834	440,871	2,391
Wakefield	145,084	152,248	20	211,891	958	232,337	1,206	251,077	938
Northern and Yorkshire region	683,308	720,350	40	993,444	2,916	1,090,413	4,040	1,184,969	3,329
Barnsley	104,683	110,005	820	156,588	3,821	171,548	3,051	186,289	2,053
Doncaster	131,878	138,789	—	198,465	—	216,860	—	234,962	—
Rotherham	113,750	119,916	—	159,696	—	174,259	—	189,182	—
South Trent	138,964	145,527	—	199,138	—	216,561	—	234,702	—
	489,276	514,238	820	713,887	3,821	779,229	3,051	845,136	2,053
North Staffordshire	210,721	221,771	20	304,458	1,251	335,037	1,581	363,668	1,275
West Midlands region	210,721	221,771	20	304,458	1,251	335,037	1,581	363,668	1,275
North	145,260	151,836	—	201,585	—	217,660	—	236,528	—
St. Helens and	153,596	162,218	20	237,210	4,183	258,206	5,735	279,857	4,418
Wigan and Bolton	258,518	273,219	—	373,322	—	410,052	—	446,516	—
North West region	557,375	587,273	20	812,116	4,183	885,918	5,735	962,901	4,418

[1] Figures for Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster health authorities are for South Yorkshire Coalfields HAZ. Figures for St. Helens and Knowsley health authority are for Merseyside HAZ, which also includes Liverpool, Sefton and Wirral health authorities. County Durham, South Humber, North Cheshire, and Wigan and Bolton health authorities are not in HAZs.

[2] Figures for 1999–2000 onwards are for unified allocations which cover hospital and community health services, prescribing and discretionary family health services. They are not strictly comparable with those for previous years which cover hospital and community health services only.

Note:

Allocations for smoking cessation and drugs prevention are still to be made.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the funding will be provided for the medical assessment unit at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital; what the expected completion date is, and if he will make a statement. [154461]

Yvette Cooper: Funding has been made available for a £1.1 million Medical Assessment Unit (MAU) at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital National Health Service Trust'.

In December 2000 the West Midlands Regional Office of the NHS Executive gave approval to the strategic outline case to vacate Royal Shrewsbury Hospital Copthorne South site, leading to replacement of the poor ward accommodation and education facilities with newer facilities on Copthorne North. This is a recognised priority for the trust.

The MAU, which will be based on Copthorne North, is also a priority for the trust, but needs to be considered within the context of the wider development of facilities

on Copthorne North. The timetable for this can be established more clearly once the outline business case has been received from the trust and approval given.

Funded by the national accident and emergency modernisation initiative. This will enable the establishment of a MAU at both the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital and the Princess Royal Hospital, Telford.

Drinking Water (Schools)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the requirement for water in the *(a)* dietary needs and *(b)* intellectual achievements of young people in schools. [154646]

Yvette Cooper: All schools are required to provide safe drinking water, which is a basic requirement for good health. The Department has not assessed the influence of water on the intellectual achievements of young people. However, compulsory National Nutritional Standards for school lunches, which will be in force from 1 April 2001, recommend that drinking water should be available to all pupils every day, free of charge. Breaks within the school day give children ample opportunity to drink water and maintain their fluid intake.

Doctors (Investigations)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doctors were investigated by the GMC in the last three years broken down by *(a)* sex and *(b)* racial origin. [154542]

Mr. Denham: A comprehensive answer to this question is not readily available from the General Medical Council. However, they are in a position to provide some information immediately and I have requested that they write to the hon. Lady directly with the information to hand. A copy of the letter will be placed in the Library.

Asperger's Syndrome

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on plans to address the needs of people with Asperger's Syndrome following the publication of the Learning Disability White Paper. [155301]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* In late 1999 we commissioned Dr. Tony Holland of Cambridge University to undertake a review of the current state of knowledge on Asperger's Syndrome. We have just received a revised version of his report which incorporates comments from the National Autistic Society, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal College of Nursing and other interested organisations.

We have already responded to Dr. Holland's principal recommendation on prevalence of Asperger's Syndrome by asking the Medical Research Council to obtain a clear and comprehensive picture of what is currently known about the incidence, prevalence and causes of autism and how strong the evidence is which underpins that knowledge.

His other recommendations are being actively considered in the context of the needs of people across the autistic spectrum as a whole, including the implications of "Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century".

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which sections of Chapter 8 of "Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century" apply to people with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome and an IQ over 70. [155254]

Mr. Hutton: The work on diagnosis, screening and early intervention in autism referred to in sections 8.37 to 8.42 applies across the whole of the autistic spectrum, including Asperger's Syndrome, as does the work which the Medical Research Council is taking forward on its incidence, prevalence and causes. Importantly, section 8.41 points out that children with autism are children first and that whether or not they have a learning disability as well they should benefit from our proposals for improving services for all disabled children.

Chapter 8 also refers to other Government initiatives such as the Care Standards Act 2000 (8.3), the Social Care Institute of Excellence (8.4) and the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 (8.13) which will help a wide range of people including those with autistic spectrum disorders.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which statutory service has primary responsibility for *(a)* children and *(b)* adults with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome and an IQ over 70. [155255]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* It is the responsibility of local statutory authorities to determine the pattern of services in their area in the light of their knowledge of local needs and priorities. Health and local authorities should ensure that the particular health, education and social care needs of each child or adult with an autistic spectrum disorder are met with genuine choices for both clients and families, through the most appropriate community based services, in a cost-effective way.

Current legislation provides that where a health authority or National Health Service trust form the opinion that a child under five has special educational needs (SEN), including those due to autistic spectrum conditions, they shall bring it to the attention of the local education authority (LEA). The legislation also provides that where it appears to an LEA that any health or local authority could help with the identification and assessment of, and provision for, children with SEN, it may request the help of that local or health authority.

Children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome are individuals whose needs vary. Primary responsibility for meeting those needs will vary accordingly. We continue to work to promote effective collaboration between agencies.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 188–89W, on Porton Down, if he will place in the Library a list of the titles and authors of the authoritative reviews on which his Department's message was based. [154762]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is in the Library.

Years of Life Lost Formula

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the Years of Life Lost formula; and if he will place them in the Library. [155111]

Mr. Denham: A small number of representations have been received about the Years of Life Lost formula. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 443W.

A paper has been prepared on the Years of Life Lost formula which is available on the departmental website at www.doh.gov.uk/allocations/review/pubs.htm in the published papers icon listed under Rawp6. I am placing copies of this paper in the Library.

Accident and Emergency Services

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what schemes for the modernisation and improvement of accident and emergency and associated services have been carried out in hospitals serving the Richmond, Chingford and Woodford Green, North Essex, South Cambridgeshire, South Suffolk, Devizes, South-West Devon, Tiverton and Honiton, Woodspring, Wells, Bramshill, North-East Hampshire, Horsham, Maidenhead, Maidstone and The Weald, East Surrey and Tunbridge Wells parliamentary constituencies, indicating the sums invested and summarising the works in each case. [155356]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Beta Interferon

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of patients in the Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals Trust who have been recommended for treatment with beta interferon who are awaiting the NICE recommendation; and what has been the change between *(a)* the first decision to recommend the drug to NICE and *(b)* since the announcement of the postponement of the decision. [155387]

Mr. Denham: We have made no such estimate about local services.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of persons who could have benefited from treatment with beta interferon and will not do so as a result of the decision to refer the use of the drug to NICE. [155388]

Mr. Denham: Because there appeared to be genuine uncertainty over the appropriate use of beta-interferon, which was reflected in different prescribing patterns across the country, we asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to conduct an authoritative appraisal of the evidence on beta interferon as part of its first appraisal programme. We expect NICE to produce its authoritative guidance in November.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155360]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information requested is not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

TREASURY

Hauliers

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the financial help being made available to hauliers. [152747]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the Budget 2001 document. This outlines several measures that will benefit hauliers.

The total value of the Budget transport package to hauliers is £660 million, equivalent to a 7p per litre cut in fuel duty for hauliers. This valuation includes the benefit to hauliers from the cut in duty on ultra low sulphur diesel, the first allocation from the £100 million Haulage Modernisation Fund and the reforms to lorry vehicle excise duty.

In addition, the Government have already paid out over £210 million to hauliers in the form of lorry VED rebates since last December, following the Chancellor's announcement in the 2000 pre-Budget report.

Departmental Policies (Edinburgh, South)

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Edinburgh, South constituency, the effects on Edinburgh of the Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155341]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Edinburgh, South along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 983, or 48 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 83 per cent. and long-term unemployment has fallen by 70 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18–24 year olds had helped 586 young people in Edinburgh, South constituency gain valuable skills and experience—298 (51 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 900 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies that enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 13,300 in Edinburgh, South, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pensions from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an

extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,000 in Edinburgh, South.

NHS (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of the funding announced in the Budget for the NHS will be allocated to Wales. [155042]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government announced in the Budget an additional £100 million over three years for Wales. This represented the share for Wales of the overall increases in spending announced in the Budget, including as a consequence of the increases announced for England for health and other spending. It is for the National Assembly for Wales to decide how to allocate the increase in its budget according to its priorities.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what targets have been given to the Valuation Office for the time scale within which appeals against the 2000 rating list must be determined. [155038]

Dawn Primarolo: The Valuation Office Agency's targets for 2001–02 will be published shortly.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the policy of the Government that small businesses should have priority in the determination of their appeals against the 2000 rating list; and if he will make a statement. [155036]

Dawn Primarolo: Appeals are programmed so that properties of a similar type are considered together but the Valuation Office will give priority to appeals where the ratepayer would otherwise suffer hardship.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will undertake to make resources available to the National Assembly for Wales, in addition to funding under the Barnett formula, to enable financial support to be given to tourism and agriculture-related businesses that have suffered losses as a result of the effects of foot and mouth disease. [154841]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government reported on the work of the Rural Task Force provisionally on 20 March. The funding arrangements for the devolved Administrations were set out in the Statement of Funding Policy published in July 2000.

Utilities Regulators

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 163W, how many members or former members of staff of Offer, Ofgas and Ofgem will receive redundancy and severance payments which form part of the total £4.4 million. [152968]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Sixty-eight.

Educational Qualifications

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the highest qualification achieved in each region and nation of the UK was using Labour Force Survey data for summer 2000, broken down *(a)* into the (i) 16 to 49 and (ii) over 50 age groups and *(b)* by gender. [154816]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 22 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the highest qualifications achieved in each region and nation of the UK from Labour Force Survey data (154816).

The Labour Force Survey collects information on qualification levels. The table overleaf shows the number of people of working age by sex, region and age in the UK for Summer (June to August) 2000, according to their level of highest qualification.

Highest qualification of working age[1] people by sex, region and age; United Kingdom; summer 2000; not seasonally adjusted

Thousand

	All persons[2]	*Degree or equivalent*	*Qualification intermediate between A-level and degree*	*GCE A level or equivalent*	*GCSE grades A-C or equivalent*	*Other qualifications*	*No qualification*
All persons							
All of working age							
United Kingdom	38,348	5,474	3,018	8,568	7,908	5,041	5,930
Great Britain	35,327	5,348	2,955	8,324	7,693	4,953	5,689
England	30,418	4,705	2,408	7,013	6,796	4,367	4,792
North East	1,573	145	127	388	360	225	314
North West	4,181	547	382	1,057	944	481	734
Yorkshire and Humberside	3,080	380	260	757	680	435	532
East Midlands	2,573	336	198	607	588	347	448
West Midlands	3,241	405	253	671	722	491	658
Eastern	3,305	494	237	768	802	481	520
London	4,624	1,066	293	857	808	864	685
South East	4,914	880	405	1,202	1,159	667	551
South West	2,925	453	270	707	724	395	354
Wales	1,751	215	164	366	426	228	342
Scotland	3,160	428	383	945	470	358	534
Northern Ireland	1,109	126	65	244	215	88	262

Highest qualification of working age[1] people by sex, region and age; United Kingdom: summer 2000; not seasonally adjusted

Thousand

	All persons[2]	*Degree or equivalent*	*Qualification intermediate between A-level and degree*	*GCE A level or equivalent*	*GCSE grades A-C or equivalent*	*Other qualifications*	*No qualification*
16–49							
United Kingdom	27,703	4,439	2,288	8,582	6,852	3,636	3,621
Great Britain	26,901	4,332	2,217	6,361	6,854	3,570	3,452
England	23,176	3,817	1,779	5,351	5,881	3,171	2,921
North East	1,195	114	94	287	328	170	188
North West	3,168	441	283	793	826	339	462
Yorkshire and Humberside	2,345	305	196	569	592	314	337
East Midlands	1,937	288	148	484	514	248	287
West Midlands	2,441	329	181	513	627	351	404
Eastern	2,487	389	183	581	686	326	304
London	3,725	933	226	692	717	671	443
South East	3,708	863	297	922	974	480	315
South West	2,168	358	192	531	597	273	201
Wales	1,303	165	119	284	362	158	207
Scotland	2,422	350	318	726	431	241	324
Northern Ireland	802	106	50	201	197	66	169
50–59/64							
United Kingdom	8,634	1,038	752	2,008	1,058	1,405	2,309
Great Britain	8,426	1,018	736	1,963	1,038	1,383	2,217
England	7,240	887	627	1,882	934	1,195	1,871
North East	377	31	33	99	32	55	125
North West	1,012	106	99	264	117	142	272
Yorkshire and Humberside	735	74	63	188	88	121	195
East Midlands	636	69	52	143	85	99	181
West Midlands	799	76	72	158	95	140	251
Eastern	818	105	55	187	118	135	216
London	899	133	67	166	89	193	242
South East	1,206	197	108	280	188	187	235
South West	757	96	78	176	127	122	153
Wales	449	51	45	82	65	70	135
Scotland	737	78	65	219	39	117	210
Northern Ireland	217	20	16	43	18	22	92
Men							
All of working age							
United Kingdom	19,039	3,177	1,427	5,671	3,260	2,540	2,734
Great Britain	18,514	3,105	1,401	5,510	3,171	2,504	2,803
England	15,956	2,749	1,145	4,633	2,803	2,201	2,229
North East	823	85	63	270	141	111	141
North West	2,198	313	177	739	371	226	342
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,629	217	118	517	293	218	244
East Midlands	1,353	196	103	408	251	174	199
West Midlands	1,712	248	120	451	294	268	306
Eastern	1,732	282	119	507	326	236	251
London	2,403	614	122	523	348	437	327
South East	2,571	527	195	758	480	328	259
South West	1,535	289	129	462	297	203	160
Wales	922	117	84	254	182	125	155
Scotland	1,836	239	173	624	187	178	218
Northern Ireland	525	72	26	161	89	35	132
16–49							
United Kingdom	14,046	2,447	1,049	4,050	2,825	1,835	1,648
Great Britain	13,845	2,388	1,029	3,926	2,743	1,806	1,566
England	11,770	2,120	827	3,293	2,417	1,598	1,347
North East	803	82	47	187	130	84	82
North West	1,160	239	122	522	325	161	216
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,202	166	87	364	257	150	158
East Midlands	983	144	73	290	216	125	115
West Midlands	1,248	192	80	320	256	190	184
Eastern	1,260	210	89	356	280	170	145
London	1,890	524	96	398	309	332	205
South East	1,877	385	143	537	400	241	151
South West	1,099	198	89	319	245	145	92
Wales	662	84	62	186	154	87	86
Scotland	1,213	184	140	447	172	121	133
Northern Ireland	401	58	20	124	82	28	82

Highest qualification of working age[1] people by sex, region and age: United Kingdom; summer 2000; not seasonally adjusted

Thousand

	All persons[2]	*Degree or equivalent*	*Qualification intermediate between A-level and degree*	*GCE A level or equivalent*	*GCSE grades A-C or equivalent*	*Other qualifications*	*No qualification*
50–59/64							
United Kingdom	4,992	731	378	1,621	436	705	1,086
Great Britain	4,868	716	372	1,585	428	698	1,036
England	4,186	629	318	1,339	385	802	882
North East	219	23	15	83	12	27	58
North West	588	74	54	217	46	65	126
Yorkshire and Humberside	427	50	31	153	38	68	87
East Midlands	370	52	30	118	35	48	84
West Midlands	487	58	39	131	38	78	122
Eastern	472	72	29	151	46	66	106
London	512	90	27	125	40	105	121
South East	694	141	52	218	80	87	108
South West	436	71	40	144	52	58	69
Wales	260	33	22	68	28	38	70
Scotland	422	54	33	177	14	58	85
Northern Ireland	124	14	[3]—	37	[3]—	[3]—	50
Women							
All of working age							
United Kingdom	17,307	2,297	1,591	2,897	4,647	2,502	3,196
Great Britain	16,813	2,243	1,552	2,813	4,521	2,449	3,066
England	14,459	1,955	1,261	2,380	3,993	2,166	2,583
North East	750	59	64	116	218	114	173
North West	1,983	234	186	318	572	255	392
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,451	163	142	240	386	218	288
East Midlands	1,220	140	95	200	348	173	249
West Midlands	1,528	157	134	220	428	223	350
Eastern	1,573	212	119	261	476	225	269
London	2,222	453	171	335	458	427	358
South East	2,343	353	210	447	879	338	291
South West	1,390	184	141	245	427	192	194
Wales	830	99	80	112	245	103	187
Scotland	1,524	189	210	321	284	180	316
Northern Ireland	494	54	39	84	126	53	130
16–49							
United Kingdom	13,657	1,992	1,217	2,512	4,027	1,802	1,973
Great Britain	13,256	1,944	1,188	2,435	3,911	1,764	1,885
England	11,405	1,697	952	2,058	3,444	1,573	1,574
North East	592	52	47	100	198	86	106
North West	1,558	202	141	271	501	178	246
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,143	139	110	205	335	164	180
East Midlands	954	122	73	175	298	122	153
West Midlands	1,195	137	101	193	371	161	220
Eastern	1,227	179	93	224	406	156	159
London	1,835	409	131	294	409	339	237
South East	1,831	298	155	385	574	238	164
South West	1,070	159	103	212	352	128	109
Wales	641	81	57	98	208	70	121
Scotland	1,209	166	178	279	259	120	190
Northern Ireland	401	48	29	77	116	38	87
50–59/64							
United Kingdom	3,850	305	373	385	821	700	1,223
Great Britain	3,557	299	364	378	611	685	1,180
England	3,054	259	309	323	549	593	989
North East	158	[3]—	18	16	20	28	67
North West	424	33	45	47	71	77	145
Yorkshire and Humberside	308	24	32	35	52	54	108
East Midlands	288	17	22	25	51	51	97
West Midlands	333	20	33	27	57	62	130
Eastern	346	34	26	37	70	69	110
London	386	44	40	41	49	88	121
South East	512	55	56	62	105	100	127
South West	321	25	38	33	75	64	85
Wales	189	18	23	14	36	32	66
Scotland	315	23	32	42	25	80	126
Northern Ireland	93	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	10	15	43

[1] Men aged 16–64 and women aged 16–59.

[2] Includes people who did not state their highest qualification.

[3] Figure too small for reliable estimate.

Economic Activity

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library an estimate of the activity rates of *(a)* men, *(b)* women and *(c)* men and women in each region and nation of the UK for the (i) 45 to 49, (ii) 50 to 54, (iii) 55 to 59 and (iv) 60 to 64 age groups. [154811]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 22 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the activity rates by region and nation of the UK for males and females of various age groups (154811).

Information about economic activity is collected by the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The table overleaf shows the economic activity rates by age and sex for each region and nation of the UK for autumn (September to November) 2000.

In the LFS, economically active people are those aged 16 and over who are either in employment or who are International Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployed.

Economic activity rate by age, sex and region; United Kingdom; autumn 2000; not seasonally adjusted

Percentage economically active

	Aged			
	45–49	*50–54*	*55–59*	*60–64*
All persons				
United Kingdom	84.6	79.1	66.7	38.4
Great Britain	84.8	79.3	66.9	38.7
England	85.1	80.0	68.0	39.6
North East	77.4	73.9	56.1	27.1
North West	83.1	73.5	59.6	34.9
Yorkshire and Humberside	83.5	80.2	68.1	36.6
East Midlands	87.4	81.8	69.7	38.8
West Midlands	81.2	78.8	66.3	38.3
Eastern	87.2	83.8	72.1	44.9
London	82.6	77.1	67.2	40.3
South East	88.7	83.8	74.9	45.6
South West	91.4	84.8	70.8	42.3
Wales	81.8	70.0	55.6	32.4
Scotland	83.1	77.2	63.0	33.9
Northern Ireland	77.4	72.2	58.3	27.5
Men				
United Kingdom	90.0	85.8	74.9	50.9
Great Britain	90.2	85.9	75.1	51.3
England	90.5	86.7	76.1	53.0
North East	88.4	82.6	64.0	36.5
North West	86.2	80.1	66.7	46.7
Yorkshire and Humberside	88.4	84.1	76.4	48.4
East Midlands	92.3	88.1	79.4	57.3
West Midlands	87.6	85.5	74.0	50.7
Eastern	93.0	90.7	81.4	57.9
London	89.8	84.7	74.0	54.1
South East	93.9	91.0	82.0	59.9
South West	94.1	91.1	80.7	56.0
Wales	88.9	76.7	64.1	35.2
Scotland	88.2	83.9	72.1	45.3
Northern Ireland	82.8	81.9	69.9	35.2
Women				
United Kingdom	79.2	72.4	58.6	26.5
Great Britain	79.4	72.6	58.9	26.7
England	79.8	73.4	60.1	26.8
North East	66.4	65.1	48.3	18.4
North West	80.0	66.9	52.7	23.7
Yorkshire and Humberside	78.5	76.2	59.8	25.2
East Midlands	82.6	75.4	60.0	20.6
West Midlands	74.7	72.1	58.7	26.2
Eastern	81.5	76.9	63.0	32.3
London	75.4	69.8	60.7	27.1
South East	83.5	76.6	67.9	31.7
South West	88.8	78.7	61.1	29.3
Wales	74.9	63.3	47.3	29.7
Scotland	78.0	70.6	54.4	23.7
Northern Ireland	71.9	62.7	47.2	[1]—

[1] Sample size too small for reliable estimate

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Earnings Statistics

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the average weekly earnings for full-time *(a)* male and *(b)* female employees in each region and nation of the UK; and if he will index all such earnings to a base in which 100 represents the average weekly earnings in each category. [154815]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 22 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the average weekly earnings for males and females in each region and nation of the United Kingdom (154815).

The New Earnings Survey (NES), carried out in April of each year, is the most comprehensive source of earnings information in Great Britain. The tables show the weekly earnings for the United Kingdom and each region and nation within it. It also shows an index based on the United Kingdom as 100 for each category. The figures provided are for full-time employees on adult rates of pay, whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence.

Average gross weekly pay (£) New Earnings Survey, United Kingdom, April 2000

	Male		*Female*	
	(£)	*Index*	*(£)*	*Index*
United Kingdom	451.6	100	336.7	100
England	459.2	102	341.5	101
Wales	400.5	89	313.7	93
Scotland	423.0	94	316.1	94
Northern Ireland	393.3	87	307.3	91
North East	398.9	88	306.0	91
North West	428.6	95	312.8	93
Yorkshire and the Humber	409.9	91	308.8	92
East Midlands	407.0	90	301.1	89
West Midlands	425.3	94	311.2	92
South West	418.2	93	309.8	92
East	455.5	101	333.8	99
London	593.0	131	434.3	129
South East	482.1	107	353.1	105

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Jury Service

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many citizens have performed jury service in England and Wales in each of the past five years for which figures are available. [155061]

Jane Kennedy: Jurors are selected on a random basis from among those people who are registered on the electoral rolls for England and Wales. No figures on juror numbers are held centrally. However, the combined attendance and non-attendance days have been used to estimate the numbers of jurors performing jury services over the past five years.

1996—146,000
1997—147,000
1998—139,000
1999—134,000
2000—132,000

Notes:

1. Estimates rounded to nearest 1,000
2. They do not indicate numbers originally summoned

Departmental Policies (Ceredigion)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of the Lord Chancellor's Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154985]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, to improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

Work is scheduled to start on a local Community Legal Service Partnership in Ceredigion from this summer. Across Ceredigion contracts have been awarded to local law firms for 2001–02 with a total value of £94,000, and these contracts include categories such as family, debt, housing and welfare benefits. Contracts with Aberystwyth and Cardigan Citizens Advice Bureaux and Shelter Cymru will also benefit local residents.

The Legal Services Commission is considering expressions of interest in the provision of bilingual telephone advice services for financially eligible clients in Ceredigion, in acknowledgement of the fact that this is a rural area with significant numbers of people unable to access easily services delivered through offices in the larger towns. An announcement on the award of a telephone contract for Ceredigion is anticipated within the next two months.

Departmental Policies (Ynys Môn)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of the Lord Chancellor's Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154986]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, to improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

The Anglesey Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP), which covers the Ynys Môn constituency area, is one of 165 CLSPs throughout England and Wales. Across Anglesey, the Legal Services Commission (LSC) has awarded local law firms contracts for 2001–02 with a total value of £91,000. Contracts awarded to Ynys Môn Citizens' Advice Bureaux and Shelter Cymru will also benefit local residents. The contracts cover a range of categories such as family, debt, housing and welfare benefits.

Departmental Policies (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of the Lord Chancellor's Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154989]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, to improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

Meirionnydd Nant Conwy falls within the Gwynedd Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP) area. Across Gwynedd, contracts have been awarded to local law firms for 2001–02 with a total value of £197,000. These cover categories of law including family, debt, housing and welfare benefits. Contracts with Gwynedd CAB, Shelter Cymru and Bangor Disablement Welfare Rights will also benefit local residents.

The Legal Services Commission is considering expressions of interest in the provision of bilingual telephone advice services for financially eligible clients in Gwynedd, in acknowledgement of the fact that this is a large rural area with significant numbers of people unable easily to access services delivered through offices in the larger towns. An announcement on the award of a telephone contract for Gwynedd is anticipated within the next two months.

Departmental Policies (Caernarfon)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of the Lord Chancellor's Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154988]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely

with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, to improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

Caernarfon falls within the Gwynedd Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP) area. Across Gwynedd, contracts have been awarded to local law firms for 2001–02 with a total value of £197,000. These cover categories of law including family, debt, housing and welfare benefits. Contracts with Gwynedd CAB, Shelter Cymru and Bangor Disablement Welfare Rights will also benefit local residents.

The Legal Services Commission is considering expressions of interest in the provision of bilingual telephone advice services for financially eligible clients in Gwynedd, in acknowledgement of the fact that this is a large rural area with significant numbers of people unable easily to access services delivered through offices in the larger towns. An announcement on the award of a telephone contract for Gwynedd is anticipated within the next two months.

Family Visit Appeals

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* oral and *(b)* paper-only family visit appeals were received by the Immigration Appellate Authority in February. [155572]

Jane Kennedy: In February 2001, the Immigration Appellate Authority received 65 cases for oral hearing and 67 cases for paper-only hearing.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many family visit appeals were *(a)* determined, *(b)* allowed and *(c)* dismissed by the Immigration Appellate Authority (i) at an oral hearing and (ii) on the papers only, in February. [155573]

Jane Kennedy: The breakdown of family visit appeals determined, allowed and dismissed by the Immigration Appellate Authority in February 2001 is:

	Oral cases	*Paper cases*
Determined	13	57
Allowed	12	17
Dismissed	1	40

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery Funding

16. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about funding for arts buildings allocated from the national lottery. [153877]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Between 1995 and 2000 the Arts Council of England, through its Capital Programme, has awarded £913,752,038 to projects with a building element.

18. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about the speed with which lottery funding reaches the good causes. [153880]

Mr. Chris Smith: All Lottery funds left after paying expenses allowed under the legislation are allocated immediately to one of the 15 National Lottery distributing bodies. The distributing bodies make payments to award recipients as funds are required.

Lottery Liaison Officers

17. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his Department's assistance to lottery liaison officers employed by local authorities. [153879]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department recognises the important role which local authority Lottery liaison officers can play in attracting Lottery funding into their areas, and is supporting the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association in their plans to draw up best practice guidance. The guidance will focus on what Lottery liaison officers can do to help small organisations and community groups secure Lottery funding. We also encourage our Lottery distribution bodies to work closely with Lottery liaison officers to ensure that they are kept up to date on new Lottery funding initiatives and programmes.

Olympic Games 2012

19. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of the facilities required for the United Kingdom to host the Olympic games in 2012. [153881]

Kate Hoey: My Department has not made any assessment of the facilities required to host the 2012 Olympic Games. The British Olympic Association (BOA) have primary responsibility for UK bids and have not yet taken a decision on whether to bid for 2012. However, we have seen a draft of the BOA's feasibility report on what is required for a possible London bid for 2012. The Government will consider with the BOA, the Mayor, the Greater London Authority and other interested parties what further work will be needed to assess the costs and requirements of a London bid.

Foot and Mouth

20. **Mr. Fearn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance his Department offers to hoteliers and bed-and-breakfast businesses which have been affected by the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [153882]

Janet Anderson: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and Head of the Rural Task Force announced on 20 March a preliminary package of measures to alleviate immediate financial hardship of small businesses, including tourism businesses, in rural areas. My right hon. Friend also announced that extra funding will be made available to promote rural attractions. The Rural Task Force will continue its work and we will want to consider any further Government response in the light of the latest developments.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155359]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* No meetings or conferences have been cancelled or postponed by my Department or by the Royal Parks Agency. On the contrary, Ministers and officials in my Department have held many additional meetings, particularly with representatives of the tourism and leisure sectors, to explore ways of dealing with the consequences of the foot and mouth outbreak.

28. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the effect on tourism of the foot and mouth epidemic. [153890]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Member to my statement in the House on 14 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 1021–36.

Church Repairs (Grants)

21. **Maria Eagle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will make an announcement on grants to places of worship which need repair. [153883]

Mr. Chris Smith: The new grant scheme for listed places of worship will be a considerable help to churches and congregations around the country. My Department is now in the process of consulting interested parties on how best to deliver the new scheme. I hope to make an announcement about the availability of the grants as early in the new financial year as possible.

Sports Coaching

22. **Mr. Bailey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to improve sports coaching. [153884]

Kate Hoey: The recently published Government's Plan for Sport indicates that we are establishing a Coaching Task Force to review the future role of the National Coaching Foundation, to conduct, during this year, an independent international benchmarking exercise on coach education and to consider the feasibility of an investment programme to create 3,000 full-time paid coaching posts by 2005.

Millennium Dome

23. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future of the Millennium Dome. [153885]

Janet Anderson: The Government are currently conducting market testing prior to launching a new competition. Details of the timetable and process for that competition will be announced as soon as possible after market testing is complete.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the cost of maintaining the Dome at Greenwich. [153876]

Janet Anderson: Following decommissioning it is estimated that the running costs of the Dome will be up to £500,000 per month.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if the sponsorship of the Millennium Dome falls within the Guidance on Sponsorship of Government Activities and Events; [153326]

(2) if he will investigate the sponsorship of the Millennium Dome in relation to the Guidance on Sponsorship of Government Activities and Events. [153312]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* Responsibility for negotiating and securing sponsorship rested with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), an executive Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). As an NDPB, the NMEC is bound by specific rules and guidance on regularity and propriety in the stewardship of public funds in line with the principles set out in the sponsorship guidance.

Wembley Stadium

24. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on Wembley stadium. [153886]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave earlier today to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), *Official Report*, column 672.

UK Film Industry

25. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent assessment he has made of levels of inward investment in the UK film industry. [153887]

Janet Anderson: Britain is an increasingly popular location for film production. A record 28 feature films produced by foreign companies were made in Britain last year, with budgets totalling £366 million, an increase of 9 per cent. on the previous year. Total inward investment in film and television productions was £539 million last year, a 33 per cent. increase on the previous year.

26. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the impact of the extension of the film tax concessions on the industry. [153888]

Janet Anderson: The Government's long-term aim is to create a more sustainable and better capitalised film industry. Film tax reliefs have already had a significant impact, attracting hundreds of millions of pounds of investment. The Chancellor's announcement that Section 48 reliefs for the film industry will be extended until July 2005 will give the industry sufficient time to build on these encouraging developments.

Arts Council

27. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what Arts Council money has been distributed in Thurrock in the past five years. [153889]

Mr. Alan Howarth: East England Arts is contributing £19,900 over three years to help Thurrock unitary authority to fund an Arts Development Officer. In addition Thurrock

has received £5,620 grant in aid funding and a further £15,055 from the Lottery funded Arts for Everyone scheme.

Football Foundation

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance the Football Foundation can provide to small local clubs. [153869]

Mr. Chris Smith: Football clubs may apply to the Football Foundation for funding for grass roots initiatives which promote social inclusion or benefit local communities, for education projects, or for stadium improvement work. The Foundation has some £24 million to invest in football in 2000–01 and it is likely that the moneys available will more than treble from 2001–02 onwards. Decisions on applications are for the Foundation's Board, but it is likely that a substantial proportion of total funding will go to smaller clubs.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reason the new Millennium Experience Company decided to make remuneration payments through on offshore account; and what the value was of such payments. [145565]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 15 January 2001]:* NMEC has advised that during the course of 1999 the company took advice from its tax consultants, in discussion with the Inland Revenue, and concluded that, while it would operate with a clear presumption against payments to offshore accounts, it would consider each case on its merits and on the condition that requested arrangements were not for the purpose of tax avoidance.

I refer to my letter of 19 December 2000 to the hon. Member, a copy of which has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. NMEC has completed a further search of all its payment records as part of its preparation for solvent liquidation. NMEC has concluded that prior to 19 December 2000, and excluding payments net of tax, remuneration through offshore accounts was made in two cases, not one as previously advised, both to an Isle of Man address. The total value of these payments was £93,898.5.

Separately, payments by cheque, handed over on site but payable to companies registered outside the UK, in respect of work undertaken by individuals filling headcount posts, totalled £138,423.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what date *(a)* his Department, *(b)* the NMEC and *(c)* Lord Falconer of Thoroton were informed of intelligence reports relating to the Hinduja brothers, referred to in paragraph 8.4 of the report of the Hammond inquiry. [153734]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* Sir Anthony Hammond's report set out all the facts relevant to the subject of his inquiry. He confirmed that the intelligence material which had been collected was handled entirely properly in accordance with the statutory functions of the intelligence agencies. It is long-standing practice not to comment on the detail of intelligence matters.

Departmental Policies (Ynys Môn)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154978]

Mr. Chris Smith: Through their commitment to public service broadcasting, the Government have helped to foster an environment in which a creative, commercially successful broadcasting industry provides a wide range of UK-made, high quality, original programmes catering for all viewers and listeners. We have ensured a secured funding base for the BBC and S4C, while giving them the freedom to develop commercial operations which complement and support their public service remit. We have made it clear in the Communications White Paper that public service broadcasting will continue to have a key role to play in the digital future.

The Government have also introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November last year. Information on the number of beneficiaries by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 5,300 people aged 75 or over living in the Ynys Môn constituency.

My Department sponsors the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which continues to promote Britain effectively as an attractive tourist destination for overseas visitors. The BTA's successful marketing activities are aimed at bringing benefits to all parts of the UK, including Ynys Môn.

According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, there have been 136 national lottery awards to Ynys Môn, totalling £3,715,880 since 2 May 1997. Nine Millennium Award Winners have been identified from Ynys Môn and between them they have received grants totalling £33,985.

Departmental Policies (Ceredigion)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154981]

Mr. Chris Smith: Through their commitment to public service broadcasting, the Government have helped to foster an environment in which a creative, commercially successful broadcasting industry provides a wide range of UK-made, high quality, original programmes catering for all viewers and listeners. We have ensured a secured funding base for the BBC and S4C, while giving them the freedom to develop commercial operations which complement and support their public service remit. We have made it clear in the Communications White Paper that public service broadcasting will continue to have a key role to play in the digital future.

The Government have also introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November last year. Information on the number of beneficiaries by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 4,800 people aged 75 or over living in the Ceredigion constituency.

My Department sponsors the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which continues to promote Britain effectively as an attractive tourist destination for overseas visitors. The BTA's successful marketing activities are aimed at bringing benefits to all parts of the UK, including Ceredigion.

According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, there have been 252 national lottery awards to Ceredigion, totalling £16,357,304, since 2 May 1997: this includes an award from the Millennium Festival of £12,000 for the Teifi River Festival. Thirty Millennium Award Winners have been identified from Ceredigion and between them they have received grants totalling £106,865.

Departmental Policies (Caernarfon)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154979]

Mr. Chris Smith: Through their commitment to public service broadcasting, the Government have helped to foster an environment in which a creative, commercially successful broadcasting industry provides a wide range of UK-made, high quality, original programmes catering for all viewers and listeners. We have ensured a secured funding base for the BBC and S4C, while giving them the freedom to develop commercial operations which complement and support their public service remit. We have made it clear in the Communications White Paper that public service broadcasting will continue to have a key role to play in the digital future.

The Government have also introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November last year. Information on the number of beneficiaries by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 5,300 people aged 75 or over living in the Caernarfon constituency.

My Department sponsors the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which continues to promote Britain effectively as an attractive tourist destination for overseas visitors. The BTA's successful marketing activities are aimed at bringing benefits to all parts of the UK, including Caernarfon.

According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, there have been 149 national lottery awards to Caernarfon, totalling £5,908,513 since 2 May 1997. Thirteen Millennium Award Winners have been identified from Caernarfon and between them they have received grants totalling £28,066.

Departmental Policies (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154980]

Mr. Chris Smith: Through their commitment to public service broadcasting, the Government have helped to foster an environment in which a creative, commercially successful broadcasting industry provides a wide range of UK-made, high quality, original programmes catering for all viewers and listeners. We have ensured a secured funding base for the BBC and S4C, while giving them the freedom to develop commercial operations which complement and support their public service remit. We have made it clear in the Communications White Paper that public service broadcasting will continue to have a key role to play in the digital future.

The Government have also introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November last year. Information on the number of beneficiaries by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 3,800 people aged 75 or over living in the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency.

My Department sponsors the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which continues to promote Britain effectively as an attractive tourist destination for overseas visitors. The BTA's successful marketing activities are aimed at bringing benefits to all parts of the UK, including Meirionnydd Nant Conwy.

According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, there have been 173 national lottery awards to Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, totalling £5,887,272, since 2 May 1997: this includes an award from the Millennium Festival of £80,000 for the Celtic Bowl Festival 2000. Ten Millennium Award Winners have been identified from Meirionnydd Nant Conwy and between them they have received grants totalling £41,389.

Picketts Lock

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice he has received from Sport England regarding the value for money represented by their *(a)* current and *(b)* future investment of Lottery funds in Picketts Lock; and if he will make a statement. [155366]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* When making a lottery award, value for money is one of the factors Sport England and other lottery distributors must take account of.

Lottery Commissioners

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to appoint a Lottery Commissioner from outside the South East Standard Planning Region; and if he will make a statement. [155422]

Kate Hoey: National Lottery Commissioners are appointed on the basis of their abilities. The most recent Commissioner, Timothy Hornsby, was appointed

following an application process which fully complied with the processes and guidance of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (CPA). There was an agreed job specification, the post was advertised and the shortlisted candidates were interviewed by a panel which included independent assessors as required by the CPA.

Regional Digital Multiplexes

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the decision by the Radio Authority to award all regional digital multiplexes to MXR. [155564]

Janet Anderson: Of the 23 local digital multiplex licences awarded so far, five have been deemed regional multiplexes by the Radio Authority. Of these, four have been granted to MXR and one further regional multiplex licence (for Central Scotland) awarded to Switch Digital. Decisions on the award of all independent radio licences are a matter for the Radio Authority, in accordance with the criteria set out in the Broadcasting Acts. The Authority publishes detailed assessments, setting out its reasons for all such licence awards.

Creative Partnerships

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his plans for Creative Partnerships. [153875]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman), *Official Report*, column 674.

Departmental Policies (Edinburgh, South)

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Edinburgh, South constituency, the effects on Edinburgh of the Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155339]

Mr. Chris Smith: Through their commitment to public service broadcasting, the Government have helped to foster an environment in which a creative, commercially successful broadcasting industry provides a wide range of UK-made, high quality, original programmes catering for all viewers and listeners. We have ensured a secure funding base for the BBC, enabling it to cater to all the nations and regions of the UK, while giving it the freedom to develop commercial operations which complement and support its public service remit. We have made it clear in the Communications White Paper that public service broadcasting will continue to have a key role to play in the digital future.

The Government have also introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November last year. Information on the number of beneficiaries by constituency is not available, but estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 6,700 people aged 75 or over living in Edinburgh, South constituency.

My Department sponsors the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which continues to promote Britain effectively as an attractive tourist destination for overseas visitors. The BTA's successful marketing activities working in partnership with the Scottish Tourist Board are aimed at bringing benefits to all parts of the UK, including Edinburgh, South.

According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the national lottery awards database, there have been 91 national lottery awards to Edinburgh, South, totalling £3,873,066 since 2 May 1997. Forty two Millennium Award Winners have been identified from Edinburgh, South and between them they have received grants totalling £139,233.

New Opportunities Fund

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future programme of the New Opportunities Fund. [153878]

Kate Hoey: Proposals for the future programme of the New Opportunities Fund were set out in the consultation paper "New Opportunities from the Lottery". Those proposals received widespread support and a draft Order specifying the new initiatives and requiring the approval of both Houses was laid before Parliament on 1 March.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Policies (Edinburgh, South)

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Edinburgh, South constituency, the effects on Edinburgh of the Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155342]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in the Edinburgh, South constituency and the City of Edinburgh local authority area since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive child

benefit, and in Edinburgh, South 7,259 families benefit and in City of Edinburgh local authority area 47,558 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Edinburgh, South the number has reduced from 1,900 to 1,200, and in the City of Edinburgh local authority area from 13,000 to 7,400. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in Edinburgh, South the number has decreased from 1,300 to 1,000 and in the City of Edinburgh local authority area from 7,000 to 6,300.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 14,000 older people in Edinburgh, South have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter. Information on the number of Winter Fuel Payments received is not available by local authority area.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 13,400 pensioners in Edinburgh, South, and 74,900 in the City of Edinburgh local authority area will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 6,300 in Edinburgh, South and 31,100 in the City of Edinburgh local authority area. 2,200 pensioner families in Edinburgh, South and 11,300 in the City of Edinburgh local authority area are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will break down the Disability Living Allowance awards for which deafness is the main disabling condition by *(a)* the rate of each component and *(b)* the age bands (i) 0 to 15, (ii) 16 to 24, (iii) 25 to 34, (iv) 35 to 44, (v) 45 to 54, (vi) 55 to 64 and (vii) 65 years and over; [155475]

(2) if he will break down the Disability Living Allowance awards for which deafness is the main disabling condition by *(a)* the age bands (i) 0 to 15, (ii) 16 to 24, (iii) 25 to 34, (iv) 35 to 44, (v) 45 to 54, (vi) 55 to 64 and (vii) 65 years and over and *(b)* type of award, including (1) care component only, (2) mobility component only and (3) combined care and mobility components. [155476]

Mr. Bayley: Information is not available in the form requested.

Regulations

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the availability of the full regulations governing social security; and how many copies he holds which are available for consultation by the public. [155001]

Mr. Rooker: Regulations on Social Security are contained in Statutory Instruments which are published by The Stationery Office Ltd. and made available through their bookshops and libraries. They are also available on the internet at www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk.

Average Income

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average income is for a lone-parent family in London *(a)* on income support and *(b)* where the parent is in employment. [155005]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Median average net disposable weekly household income by family type for lone parents in Great Britain

£ per week

	Median average household income			
	Before housing costs		*After housing costs*	
Family type	*Income Support*	*Working*	*Income Support*	*Working*
All Lone Parent Families (equivalised)	164	216	113	173
Equivalent money values for different types of lone parent family				
1 child aged 5	135	177	86	132
2 children aged 5, 11	176	231	116	177
2 children aged 11	182	240	121	186
3 children aged 5, 11, 16	235	309	159	243

Notes:

1. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set which is derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS does not include Northern Ireland, and 1998–99 is the latest year for which data are available.

2. The income measure used in HBAI is weekly net (disposable) equivalised household income (that is to say income that is adjusted to reflect the composition of the household). The equivalised income benchmark used for comparison purposes is the income of a couple with no children. The equivalent actual money values for different types of lone parent family have also been given.

3. The estimates are sample counts, which have been adjusted for non-response using multipurpose grossing factors that control for region, Council Tax band and a number of other demographic variables. Estimates are subject to both sampling error and to variability in non-response. All proportions are rounded to the nearest per cent.
4. The estimates are presented on both a Before Housing Costs (BHC) and an After Housing Costs (AHC) basis in line with HBAI conventions.
Source:
Family Resources Survey 1998–99

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average income of a family with two children in London was *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [155006]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested is not available.

Pensions Advertising Campaign

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how much he estimates will have been spent on the current pensions advertising campaign by its conclusion; which media are being used and at what cost; what factors underlay the choice of media used; and if he will publish the brief to the agency responsible for the current pensions campaign; [154059]

(2) what the objective and subjective criteria are for measuring the success of the current pensions advertising campaign; [154065]

(3) pursant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) of 12 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 458W, on pensions, if he will set out details of the working study of pension provision uptake; [154147]

(4) what plans he has to monitor the new pension provisions for people who responded to the pension advertising campaign and who received copies of the new pension guide. [154064]

Mr. Rooker: The costs for developing, running and evaluating the pensions education campaign will be in the region of £6.5 million. We are advertising on TV, in the national press, in selected magazines and in the cinema.

The broadcast media used for this campaign were selected to ensure that the new campaign made an impact and that the target audience was reached in the most effective way.

The brief only formed a starting point for the agency and covered areas other than the current pensions education campaign.

The campaign will be evaluated in a number of ways, including quantitative tracking research. We will also monitor hits to the website, numbers of orders placed and leaflets sent. Over the longer term we will be looking at take-up of different pension provision.

A summary of quantitative tracking research on the pensions education marketing campaign will be placed in the Library in the summer.

We are conducting quantitative tracking research on the campaign as well as longer term monitoring of pension provision.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), of 12 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 458W, when the results of the tracking study on the current pensions advertising campaign will be available. [155405]

Mr. Rooker: A summary of quantitative tracking research on the pensions education marketing campaign will be placed in the Library in the summer.

Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what weekly state second pension a person can expect to receive having worked for 40 years and with annual earnings of *(a)* £4,000, *(b)* £5,000, *(c)* £6,000, *(d)* £7,000, *(e)* £8,000, *(f)* £9,000, *(g)* £9,500, *(h)* £10,000, *(i)* £11,000, *(j)* £12,000, *(k)* £13,000, *(l)* £14,000 and *(m)* £15,000. [153788]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* A full working life for pensions purposes is 49 years for a man and 44 for a woman if she was born on or before 5 October 1950 (the full working life for women increases incrementally to 49 years as a result of the equalisation of state pension age).

The table shows a comparison of figures:

£

			For comparison	
Annual earnings	*State second pension entitlement on 40 year working life*	*SERPS entitlement on 40 year working life*	*State second pension entitlement on 49 year working life*	*SERPS entitlement on 49 year working life*
£4,000	50	5	59	6
£5,000	50	8	59	10
£6,000	50	11	59	13
£7,000	50	15	59	17
£8,000	50	18	59	21
£9,000	50	21	59	25
£9,500	50	22	59	27
£10,000	50	24	59	28
£11,000	51	27	61	32
£12,000	52	30	63	36
£13,000	54	33	65	40
£14,000	55	36	66	44
£15,000	57	39	68	47

Note:
All figures expressed in 2001 earnings terms, and constant earnings terms

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 22 November 2000. [154502]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Manchester, Gorton since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Gorton 9,893 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Gorton the number has reduced from 4,700 to 2,900. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Gorton from 3,400 to 3,000.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 10,900 older people in Gorton have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 11,000 pensioners in Gorton will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 3,800 in Gorton. 4,400 pensioner families in Gorton are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Redundancies (Paignton)

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact of 1,400 redundancies in Paignton, Devon, on benefit advice services. [154294]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Adrian Sanders, dated 23 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what assessment he has made of the impact of 1,400 redundancies in Paignton, Devon, on benefit advice services.

The potential redundancies in Paignton are in two tranches of 700, the first occurring in January and the second is imminent. The local Benefits Agency (BA) office, in consultation with Employment Service (ES) colleagues, has assessed the requirement to deal with the issues arising, including benefit advice.

This was minimal with respect to the first tranche but is considered to be significant with regard to the second. BA and ES staff have analysed all potential requirements and are to discuss the appropriate response with the Company, Nortel Electronics, this week. Staff will be made available to deal with the emerging situation with little or no impact on service to other customers.

I hope this is helpful.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library copies of all the assessments conducted by the War Pensions Agency into the report produced by the US Institute of Medicine in 1993, "Veterans at Risk—the health effects of mustard gas and Lewisite". [154765]

Mr. Bayley: The report was studied by the War Pensions Agency but no formal evaluation of it took place.

Departmental Policies (Truro and St. Austell)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154532]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done.

Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Truro and St. Austell since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Truro and St. Austell 11,107 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Truro and St. Austell the number has reduced from 2,800 to 1,800. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Truro and St. Austell from 1,000 to 900.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 24,400 older people in Truro and St. Austell have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 22,900 pensioners in Truro and St. Austell will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 10,000 in Truro and St. Austell. 3,000 pensioner families in Truro and St. Austell are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Benefit Take-up

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action the Government are taking to ensure an improvement in benefits take-up. [151366]

Mr. Rooker: We actively encourage people to claim the benefits to which they are entitled. Recent activity has included a national TV advertising campaign for the Minimum Income Guarantee.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Clergy Stipends and Pensions

33. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what financial contribution in *(a)* cash and *(b)* percentage terms the Church Commissioners made to clergy stipends and pensions in the last year. [153857]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners fund all clergy pensions earned on service before 1998 in full. In 1999, the last year for which audited figures are available, the cost to the Commissioners was £87 million. They paid a further £17 million as part of their scheme to assist on a time-limited basis with the pension costs from 1998 which are now the responsibility of dioceses.

The Commissioners also met 16 per cent. of the Church of England's total stipend bill in 1999. They paid over £20 million towards the stipends of parish clergy, much of it targeted towards dioceses most in need of financial help, and a further £6.6 million to meet those stipends of bishops and cathedral clergy for which they are responsible.

Church Commissioners (Membership)

34. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what discussions he has had with the clergy about the categories of membership of the Church Commissioners. [153858]

Mr. Stuart Bell: None. The constitution and membership of the Church Commissioners are laid down by statute, as most recently stated in the National Institutions Measure 1998.

Church Commission Rents

35. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what response the Commissioners have given to the representations made to them in the last six months on rent levels of Church Commission residential property in London SE1. [153859]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners have responded fully to all representations made to them on this matter.

The hon. Gentleman will have received a copy of the Commissioners' letter setting out the detailed consultation now taking place over letting policy on these estates with residents, clergy and local representatives. If he would like further information I shall be happy to provide it.

36. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the policy of the Church Commissioners in respect of agricultural land rents. [153860]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Commissioners are required as a charity to seek the best returns on their assets for the benefit of the Church of England clergy, serving and retired. They also seek to act as responsible landlords.

In the case of agricultural tenants, the Commissioners fully recognise the crisis in farming, and especially the problems caused by foot and mouth disease, and where there is hardship will consider how best to help. This is done on a case by case basis and tenants are encouraged to discuss their difficulties with agents or staff.

CABINET OFFICE

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the meetings and conferences organised by her Department and agencies of her Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if she will make a statement. [155362]

Marjorie Mowlam: This information is not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

Correspondence

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 19 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 80W, how many letters from hon. Members did not receive substantive replies within nine months during the last three years. [155097]

Marjorie Mowlam: This information is not held centrally and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, a number of individual Departments do collect this information for their own records.

I can confirm that, so far this year, the Cabinet Office has had only two late replies. Both of these were replied to within one and a half months of receipt.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Ports Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Port of Larne police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent to which these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement. [153924]

Mr. Ingram: Responsibility for the Port of Larne police now rests with the Northern Ireland Assembly under the control of the Department for Regional Development. It is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made of Belfast Harbour police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent to which these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with (2) and complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement. [153923]

Mr. Ingram: Responsibility for Belfast Harbour police now rests with the Northern Ireland Assembly under the control of the Department for Regional Development. It is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Independent Commission of Inquiry (Bombings)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he has received a request for *(a)* information and *(b)* documents from the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin, Moraghan and Dundalk bombings; and if he will make a statement. [154759] [154760] [154761]

Dr. Reid: I have received a request from the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin, Monaghan and Dundalk bombings for all relevant information held by the UK Government relating to these incidents. This request has been shared with all relevant Government Departments and Agencies, who in response are currently researching archived records to establish what information they hold.

I am also replying on behalf of the Secretary of State for Defence and the Home Secretary, of whom similar questions have been asked but who have not received separate requests from the Independent Commission of Inquiry.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will establish for what reason assurances given by telephone by the office of the Minister of State to the hon. Member for Lewes on *(a)* 3 January and *(b)* 15 February that a reply to the hon. Member's letter of 22 September 2000 concerning his constituent Mr. George Tripp, would be dispatched shortly, have not been implemented; [155563]

(2) for what reason no reply had been received by 21 March by the hon. Member for Lewes to his letter of 22 September 2000 to the Minister of State, concerning his constituent Mr. George Tripp; and if he will make a statement. [155562]

Mrs. Roche: I replied to the hon. Member's letter on 22 March. I am sorry for the delay which seems to have been caused in part by the papers being misdirected within the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. It is normal practice for Private Office staff to monitor the progress of Ministers' cases and to chase outstanding replies. When they informed the hon. Member in January and February that a reply would be sent shortly, they were acting in good faith on the basis of available information. I am sorry that this information proved to be inaccurate. A draft

reply was received in my Private Office at the beginning of March which I signed off. A further short delay was again caused by an apparent misdirection of the papers.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 31 January regarding a constituent, Ref: 2093/1. [153490]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 March 2001. I am sorry I was unable to send him an earlier reply.

Immigration

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances immigration-related inquiries are required to be referred to a Minister's private office. [154328]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The decision to make a Deportation Order is taken by a Minister in all cases. Any proposal to release a detainee from an Immigration Service detention centre following an application for a writ of habeas corpus must also be authorised at Ministerial level. Immigration and nationality cases will otherwise be referred to Ministers if they are considered to involve significant policy issues, questions of security or if they are likely to be controversial or sensitive.

Entry Clearance

Mr. Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many nationals of *(a)* Albania, *(b)* Algeria, *(c)* Angola, *(d)* Armenia, *(e)* Azerbaijan, *(f)* Bahrain, *(g)* Bangladesh, *(h)* Belarus, *(i)* Bulgaria, *(j)* Cambodia, *(k)* Cameroon, *(l)* China, *(m)* Columbia, *(n)* the Dominican Republic, *(o)* Ecuador, *(p)* Egypt, *(q)* Fiji, *(r)* the Gambia, *(s)* Ethiopia, *(t)* Georgia, *(u)* Ghana, *(v)* Guyana, *(w)* India, *(x)* Indonesia, *(y)* Iran, *(z)* Ivory Coast, (aa) Jordan, (bb) Kenya, (cc) Kuwait, (dd) Lebanon, (ee) Liberia, (ff) Libya, (gg) Macedonia, (hh) Madagascar, (ii) Mongolia, (jj) Morocco, (kk) Mozambique, (ll) Nepal, (mm) Pakistan, (nn) Peru, (oo) the Philippines, (pp) Romania, (qq) Russia, (rr) Saudi Arabia, (ss) Senegal, (tt) Sri Lanka, (uu) the Sudan, (vv) Syria, (ww) Taiwan, (xx) Tanzania, (yy) Thailand, (zz) Tunisia, (aaa) Turkey, (bbb) Yugoslavia, (ccc) Ukraine, (ddd) Vietnam and (eee) Yemen applied for entry clearance to come to the United Kingdom for temporary purposes, including visitor and student applications in 2000; how many visas were issued for temporary purposes; how many recipients of these visas returned to their country of nationality before the visas expired; and how many applied *(a)* to remain permanently in the United Kingdom or *(b)* for political asylum. [155025]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is given in the table.

Entry clearance data for 2000 are not yet available. No data are available on the numbers of persons who return to their country of nationality before their leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom expires. Information is not available on the number of holders of visas for temporary purposes who apply for asylum or for settlement. The information on grants of settlement includes persons who entered the United Kingdom with an entry clearance leading to settlement; and the data on asylum applications and those who entered by clandestine means include persons who held no entry clearance.

Grants of settlement and applications for asylum 2000[1]

Nationality	*Grants of settlement*[2,3]	*Applications*[4] *for asylum*
Albania	110	1,470
Algeria	980	1,535
Angola	240	765
Armenia	20	85
Azerbaijan	50	70
Bahrain	20	5
Bangladesh	3,660	725
Belarus	60	555
Bulgaria	290	85
Cambodia	10	5
Cameroon	140	335
China	1,640	3,840
Colombia	630	475
Dominican Republic	60	—
Ecuador	100	425
Egypt	470	60
Ethiopia	2,700	390
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia[5]	2,420	5,695
Fiji	20	*
Gambia	230	40
Georgia	40	220
Ghana	3,010	255
Guyana	190	5
India	7,770	1,850
Indonesia	200	45
Iran	1,790	5,170
Ivory Coast	200	420
Jordan	250	15
Kenya	940	430
Kuwait	50	15
Lebanon	970	270
Liberia	230	50
Libya	340	150
Macedonia	50	55
Madagascar	[6]—	*
Mongolia	10	70
Morocco	580	25
Mozambique	10	5
Nepal	140	605
Pakistan	10,800	2,825
Peru	160	10
Philippines	1,850	25
Romania	310	2,065
Russia[7]	1,180	980
Saudi Arabia	50	15
Senegal	30	10
Sri Lanka	6,910	6,035
Sudan	1,470	390
Syria	220	130
Taiwan	180	10
Tanzania	380	50
Thailand	910	15
Tunisia	120	15
Turkey	4,850	3,925
Ukraine	380	725
Vietnam	120	180
Yemen	280	180

[1] 1999 data are provisional

[2] Excluding persons given indefinite leave to enter

[3] All settlement data are rounded to three significant figures or to the nearest 10 if less than 1,000

[4] Figures are rounded to the nearest 5 with * = 1 or 2, and exclude dependants

[5] Includes holders of passports of the former Yugoslavia

[6] Negligible (ie five or fewer)

[7] Includes holders of Soviet Union passports

Departmental Policies

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997; [154943]

(2) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997; [154936]

(3) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997; [154942]

(4) if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154944]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My hon. Friend asked questions regarding the four constituencies of Caernarfon, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, Ynys Môn and Ceredigion. The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent Home Office Annual Report is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are some examples relating to the Caernarfon, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, Ynys Môn and Ceredigion constituencies or the immediate locality:

Neighbourhood Warden Schemes

Gwynedd county council has received £35,000 to provide one warden for the Maes Barcer estate, in the Caernarfon area, which has a higher than average incidence of crime and disorder. The bid relates very much to the council's overall housing strategy for improving the housing stock.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Conwy county borough council was awarded £65,000 for the Conwy Mobile Unit, which is a portable system consisting of four cameras to monitor crime and disorder 'hotspots' throughout Conwy.

Gwynedd council was awarded £96,000 for the Bangor—Phase 2—Measgeirchen, a scheme that will provide eight cameras to cover the only access road to the estate and the main public, community and shopping facilities.

Ceredigion county council was awarded approximately £206,000 for the Lampeter CCTV scheme, which will provide coverage for the Lampeter Town Centre, including three car parking areas, parts of the University campus and residential areas.

Youth Offending

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) is currently funding a Bail Support Scheme and three Intervention Schemes through the development fund in North and Mid Wales. A bail supervision scheme, Bail Information, Supervision and Support, is being run in Conwy, Wrexham, Flintshire, Denbighshire, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn. The YJB is contributing approximately £200,000 to the scheme.

North Wales Drug, Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment for Young People is being run in the six local authorities in the North of Wales (including Wrexham), by the North Wales health authority with the YJB contributing approximately £42,000.

Mid Wales Restorative Justice Challenge Project is a joint effort by Powys/Ceredigion involving Mid Wales Youth Offending Team (YOT). It is targeting young offenders at all stages of the criminal justice process from Final Warnings to Action Plans, Reparation Orders and Supervision. The project envisages use of victim offender mediation and direct and indirect reparation as appropriate. It has been awarded a grant from the YJB of approximately £184,000.

Mid Wales Cognitive Behaviour Programme targets high/medium risk repeat offenders. It is implementing 12 one and a half hour sessions designed to match young offenders learning style. There is CD Rom material and additional sessions for people with high criminogenic factors. A YJB grant has been awarded of approximately £84,000.

The Central North Wales YOT is engaging in multi-agency responses to youth crime including: a Bail Supervision Scheme to target and reduce the number of young people at risk of re-offending while on bail; a community reparation scheme with 11 agencies supporting community reparation work resulting in 60 per cent. of reparation work being community based and reducing delays within the court process by producing 98 per cent. of court reports within the agreed time scales. The YOT has also developed a protocol with appropriate agencies with the aim of involving parents in the youth justice process. A trained worker is in place to develop the opportunities for victims of crime to become involved in indirect reparation.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Caernarfon, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, Ynys Môn and Ceredigion to a greater or lesser extent. For example: 376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established; racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the outcome of the Justice and Home Affairs Council held in Brussels on 15 to 16 March was; what the Government's voting record at the Council was; and if he will make a statement. [154788]

Mr. Straw: I, together with the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), represented the United Kingdom at the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 15 and 16 March. The main matters dealt with at the meeting were as follows:

A points

The A points were approved as in document 6943–01 (a copy of which is in the Library), with the exception of item 2, Council Decision updating the Common Consular Instructions. The Government did not vote on those items in which the United Kingdom does not participate.

Mixed Committee

Illegal Immigration via the Western Balkans

The Council gave firm support for the United Kingdom, Commission and Italian initiatives. I reported that the United Kingdom was prepared to commit 10 immigration officers for 12 months to work in joint teams supporting Croatian and Bosnian border services, and urged others to provide similar resources. Five member states gave commitments to provide personnel.

Directive and Framework Decision on preventing the facilitation of entry and residence of illegal immigrations

Member states were divided on the level of penalty for facilitating illegal entry into the European Union (EU) and on the scope of an exemption for those acting with humanitarian motives. Although a majority of delegations were willing to accept as a compromise a Presidency proposal for a six year minimum maximum penalty where the offence involved specified aggravating circumstances, others argued for a higher penalty of between eight and 10 years. The Presidency sought, without success, to achieve consensus on an alternative approach involving agreement on a six year penalty by all, with those member states who wished to impose a 10 year penalty making a joint Declaration to do so. There was, however, agreement on making the offence of facilitation as defined in the Directive extraditable. It was also agreed that work should continue on the two draft instruments with a view to reaching political agreement at the May Council.

Schengen Implementation in Nordic Countries

The Mixed Committee noted that evaluations had been completed and border controls between the Nordic states, including Iceland and Norway, and the existing Schengen area would be lifted on 25 March.

Main Agenda

Proposal for a Council Directive on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between member states in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof

The Presidency reported positively on progress. Outstanding issues on duration, decision making, access to asylum procedures and solidarity were to be dealt with by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) in time for adoption at the 28–29 May Justice Home Affairs Council.

Council Regulation reserving to the Council: implementing powers with regard to certain detailed provisions and practical procedures for examining visa applications. Council Regulation reserving to the Council implementing powers with regard to certain detailed provisions and practical procedures for carrying out local border checks and surveillance

These texts were remitted to COREPER.

Civil crisis management

Over lunch, the Council exchanged views with the High Representative, Javier Solana, as part of the preparations for the Police capabilities commitment conference on 10 May. Ministers stressed the importance of proper training of the police involved.

Fight against drugs through law enforcement

The Council held a public debate focused on the themes of criminal law, practical law enforcement and EU action with the candidate countries.

The Council welcomed the Commission's intention to present a communication on drugs in April. This would include: proposals for evaluating the implementation of the EU Action Plan in 2002 and 2004; a drugs follow-up table; and an assessment of implementation of the joint action on synthetic drugs. It was important to maximise assistance to candidate countries through the Poland and Hungary Aid for Reconstruction of the Economy and Mesures d'Assistance programmes and to pursue early participation in the EU drugs observatory.

The Council discussed harmonisation of legislation on drug trafficking and common penalties. A Commission proposal for a framework decision on harmonising drug trafficking legislation would be published in April.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State drew attention to the priorities set out in the United Kingdom paper: an all encompassing drugs scoreboard; tough penalties to be agreed by the end of 2001; confiscation of convicted drug traffickers' passports and travel banning orders; speeding up the production of supply side indicators; agreement by the end of 2001 to the drug action plans for the candidate countries; and increased co-operation with Turkey.

Crime prevention—towards a European crime prevention policy

Political agreement was reached by unanimity on the draft Council Decision establishing the European Crime Prevention Network and Articles 1 to 4 of the Hippocrates funding programme, subject to consideration of the European Parliament's opinion on both texts which was expected in mid-April. The Presidency's paper on a European Crime Prevention Policy was agreed.

Draft Framework Decision on the protection of the environment through criminal law

The Council discussed handling of the draft framework decision in the light of the Commission's proposal for a directive, which sought to impose an obligation on member states to introduce criminal sanctions for breaches of existing Community environmental legislation. The majority of member states expressed support for the objectives of the draft framework decision. They accepted that consideration would need to be given to the issues raised by the Commission's proposal but were clear that criminal sanctions were matters for the Third Pillar and argued for a clear declaration to that effect. The Presidency concluded that the Council had reached provisional agreement concerning the objectives and in principle the

content of the framework decision, but would instruct officials to examine whether it was necessary to complement the framework decision in the light of the Commission's proposal.

Fight against cybercrime

The Commission presented its Communication on cybercrime. This envisages future legislation proposals to approximate member states' legislation on: child pornography on the internet; computer hacking and virus attacks; racist/xenophobic material on and off the internet; and mutual recognition of pre-trial order in cybercrime investigations.

Candidate Countries

On 16 March, an informal meeting was held in the margins of the Council with candidate countries, including Turkey, with the aim of strengthening practical co-operation; in particular discussion focused on the fight against organised crime, asylum and illegal immigration. The *United Kingdom* was represented by officials.

Postal Votes

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will issue guidance to political parties, agents and candidates on the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 2000 relating to breaches of the postal vote regulations; and if he will make a statement. [155470]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People Act 2000 made no changes to the provisions for the security of postal votes. Electoral administrators are aware of those provisions and will see that they are enforced. It is the responsibility of political parties, agents and candidates to familiarise themselves with all aspects of electoral law which may affect them.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if *(a)* candidates and *(b)* their agents will have the right to a copy of the list of electors exercising their right to vote by post, and the address to which the ballot paper is to be sent, at least 24 hours prior to the despatch of absent votes to electors. [154797]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Regulation 61(i) of the Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 provides that the registration officer shall, on request, supply a copy of the list of those electors who have been granted applications to vote by post to each candidate or their election agent at any time. However applications for postal votes can be received up until the sixth day before polling, so obviously a complete list of postal voters will not be available until after that date. Postal ballot papers will be despatched continuously from the date of close of nominations until shortly after the sixth day before polling day.

Electoral Register

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if electoral registration officers have been advised to suffix existing elector numbers to accommodate additions to the register. [154799]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Electoral registration officers were advised by a Home Office Representation of the People Act 2000 (RPA) circular (RPA circular No. 437) on 20 February that they should ensure that all individuals are inserted at the correct location in the register consistent with their address, and that no numbers should be re-used. Instead, existing elector numbers should be given a suffix to accommodate additions to the register. This will allow for identification of additions and cause little disruption to the already published numbering.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the provisions for existing rights of inspection and copying of the ballot box register (marked register) used on polling day are to continue. [154800]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There has been no change to the legal provisions for parliamentary and local elections governing the inspection and copying of the marked register used on polling day in those elections.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if elected public representatives and registered political parties will be entitled to receive details of additions and deletions to the register as and when they are published by electoral registration officers; and if representatives and registered political parties will be entitled to a free copy of the register in data format up to four times a year. [154798]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Paragraph 47 of the Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 provides for elected representatives, political parties, candidates and their agents to be supplied with one copy of the register that relates to the area they represent, or seek to represent. Unless the recipient requests otherwise, this copy will be in data format from which they may produce further copies. There is currently no provision for lists of amendments to the published electoral registers to be sold or supplied free of charge, though amendment regulations dealing with the sale and supply of the register which we hope to publish shortly will provide for it.

Extradition

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the grounds on which an individual subject to extradition could be transferred to another jurisdiction in his recently published proposals on extradition. [155079]

Mr. Straw: The consultation document, "The Law on Extradition: A Review", which I published on 12 March, makes proposals for extensive streamlining and reform of the present extradition legislation. It does not propose however to amend the fundamental grounds on which an individual subject to extradition proceedings can be transferred to another jurisdiction. These are that there is an extradition arrangement in place between the requesting state and the United Kingdom, and that the offence of which the individual has been accused or convicted is an extradition crime.

The definition of extradition crime varies depending on the particular extradition arrangements in place; the bars to extradition also vary under different arrangements. The proposals for streamlining these provisions are summarised in Chapter II of the consultation document.

Vets

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applicants awaiting

processing of *(a)* immigration and asylum claims and *(b)* appeals, are qualified veterinary surgeons; and if he will list the countries of origin involved. [155436]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not held centrally and not systematically collected as part of the immigration and asylum application process and is therefore available only at disproportionate cost.

A foreign national wishing to practise as a veterinary surgeon needs a work permit. Information on the number of applications for work permits from veterinary surgeons awaiting decision in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) is not held centrally, but the number is likely to be very small. Arrangements have been made with the Department for Education and Employment for such applications to be highlighted and on arrival in IND they will be processed as a matter of priority.

The criteria for recognition as a refugee, and hence the granting of asylum, are set out in the 1951 United Nations *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, extended* in its application by the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. The United Kingdom considers all asylum applications against these criteria and not on an applicant's occupation.

Pub-watch Schemes

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998 on pub-watch schemes; and if he will make a statement. [155559]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are keen to promote pub-watch schemes which involve licensees working together to reduce alcohol-related violence and disorder on licensed premises. The schemes may involve information about known troublemakers being passed between local licensees for this purpose.

We do not consider that these schemes, which are supported by the police, are in any way incompatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. The Act should not therefore have any impact on properly run schemes.

Family Visit Appeals

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the net income from fees for family visit appeals since 2 October 2000 is; and what proportion of this net income relates to appeals which are outstanding. [155569]

Mrs. Roche: The exact figure is not available, because it is not yet clear how many appeals were lodged before the fees were reduced on 12 January. The Immigration Appellate Authorities are conducting an exercise to establish that information. At present we estimate the current figure for net income from fees for family visitor appeals in the period 2 October 2000 to 22 March 2001 is about £49,000. Of this, 39 per cent. relates to appeals which are currently outstanding and which may result in further refunds.

Passports

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many passports were lost by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each of the last 10 years. [155565]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

However, the Integrated Casework Directorate's (ICD's) Return of Passport Unit, which was set up in October 1999, issued 97 lost passport letters to applicants in the year 2000 and has issued 24 letters so far this year.

Secure Units

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which local authority secure units have been suspended from use by the Youth Justice Board; for what reasons use of those secure units has been suspended; which secure units which had been suspended from use in the past are being used by the Youth Justice Board; and if he will make a statement. [155567]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The operation of these secure units is a matter for the local authorities concerned and the Department of Health which licenses them. The Youth Justice Board purchases places in most of them. It has ceased to do so, or decided not to start purchasing places, where the unit cannot meet the Board's contracting standards or concerns have been raised by the Board's monitors or the Social Services Inspectorate about the quality of care provided. The units affected during the past year are the Gladstone Unit in Liverpool, Stamford House in London and Stoke House in Coventry. Some places are now being purchased in each of them.

Ports Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will examine with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and HM Treasury, the impact on combating *(a)* organised crime, *(b)* incidental theft, *(c)* bootlegging and *(d)* illegal immigration of having (i) a dedicated ports police force for the whole of the United Kingdom's ports and (ii) the reintroduction of the British Transport Police at the UK's ports; and if he will make a statement. [153922]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is the lead Department for port police forces. I understand there are no plans at present to establish a dedicated ports police force for the whole of the United Kingdom or to bring ports policing under the control of the British Transport Police. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), announced a review of the current arrangements for ports police in an answer given on 8 March 2001, *Official Report,* column 276W. The review will identify which ports in England and Wales still utilise their own police forces, what powers they have and what functions they perform. It also aims to compare how the port police forces compare with Home Office forces in terms of accountability, report on the current situation and make recommendations for future options for the port police forces. The Home Office will be consulted in the course of this review.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Port of Liverpool police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and

(b) the extent that these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement; [153925]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Tees and Hartlepool police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent that these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement; [153926]

(3) what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Port of Tilbury police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent that these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) and complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement; [153927]

(4) what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Port of Bristol Police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent that these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) and complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement; [153928]

(5) what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Port of Devon police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent that these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) and complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement; [153929]

(6) what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the contribution made by Port of Felixstowe police to combating (i) organised crime, (ii) incidental theft, (iii) bootlegging and (iv) illegal immigration and *(b)* the extent that these forces have been able to (1) collaborate with and (2) and complement the work of (A) the Customs and Excise, (B) the Immigration Service and (C) the Special Branch; and if he will make a statement. [153930]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is the lead Department for port police forces. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), announced a review of the current arrangements for ports police in an answer given on 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 276W. The review will identify which ports in England and Wales still utilise their own police forces, what powers they have and what functions they perform. It also aims to compare how the port police forces compare with Home Office forces in terms of accountability, report on the current situation and make recommendations for future options for the port police forces.

Hilda Murrell

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects West Mercia Constabulary to be informed of the DNA test results by the Forensic Science Service in the case of Hilda Murrell; and if he will make a statement. [154270]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* I understand that the Forensic Science Service anticipate the results of the current round of DNA tests in the case of Hilda Murrell by the week beginning 23 April, and the West Mercia Constabulary will be informed shortly thereafter.

Special Constables (Wales)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* funded and *(b)* actual specials were in post in each of the Welsh constabularies on (i) 31 March 1997 and (ii) the latest date for which figures are available. [154803]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate collect police personnel statistics, including those of the Special Constabulary.

There are no national targets for specials and each of the Welsh constabularies has advised that it does not differentiate between funded and actual specials. The Special Constabulary strength figures for the Welsh constabularies for 31 March 1997 and 30 September 2000 (the latest figures available) are given in the table.

	March 1997	*September 2000*
Dyfed Powys	283	193
Gwent	157	131
North Wales	341	233
South Wales	361	254

Rural Parishes

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of rural parishes do not have a police station. [153132]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of rural parishes which do not have a police station is not held centrally.

Refrigerants

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to what extent the Home Office building at 50 Queen Anne's Gate uses hydrofluorocarbons for *(a)* refrigeration and *(b)* air conditioning; what amounts of hydrofluorocarbons have been purchased in each year since 1995; and what plans he has to phase out the (i) purchase and (ii) use of hydrofluorocarbons. [153020]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Hydrofluorocarbons are used in domestic fridges at tea

points and freezer cabinets and fridges in the staff restaurant area. They are also used as refrigerants in the air-conditioning systems.

Figures supplied by our maintenance contractor on the purchase of hydrofluorocarbons are:

2000—10 kg

2001—840 kg.

The information for the years 1995–99 is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Our policy is that hydrofluorocarbons should be used only where other safe, technically feasible, cost effective and environmentally acceptable alternatives do not exist.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's policy is regarding the purchase of *(a)* hydrocarbons and *(b)* other environmentally benign refrigerants to meet all the refrigeration and other energy needs of buildings and premises (i) owned and (ii) leased by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153019]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The Home Office does not have a specific policy on the purchase of hydrocarbons. However, my Department's policy is to ensure that no products are purchased which contain chlorofluorocarbons and—except where existing systems cannot be easily converted—no hydrochlorofluorocarbons, halons, carbon tetrachloride, 111 trichloroethane or any other ozone-depleting substances. The policy also states that hydrofluorocarbons should only be used where other safe, technically feasible, cost effective and environmentally acceptable alternatives do not exist.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which buildings and premises *(a)* owned and *(b)* leased by his Department use (i) chlorofluorocarbons and (ii) hydrochlorofluorocarbons for refrigeration and other energy needs; and if he will give details of such use and the reasons for it. [153016]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Information on the use of chlorofluorocarbons and hydrochlorofluorocarbons is not recorded centrally. My Department's policy is to ensure that we do not purchase any products which use chlorofluorocarbons and, except where existing systems cannot be easily converted, hydrochlorofluorocarbons.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

After-school and Holiday Clubs (Northern Region)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* after school clubs and *(b)* holiday play scheme places there were in the Northern Region in (i) 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [155010]

Ms Hodge: The available information on out-of-school clubs[1] and holiday scheme places in the North East region is as follows.

In March 1996 there were 70 out of school clubs providing 2,267 places and 143 holiday schemes providing 3,784 places.

In March 2000 there were 200 out of school clubs providing 6,615 places and 692 holiday schemes providing 26,541 places[2].

[1] Data on after school clubs are not available separately. The data on out-of-school clubs include before and after school clubs.

[2] Holiday scheme figures prior to 1998 may not be directly comparable to 2000 because of changes in the instructions given to providers for recording places in 1999.

Child Care Tax Credit

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with Treasury Ministers about the extension of the Child Care Tax Credit to cover formal child care in the home; and if he will make a statement. [154565]

Ms Hodge: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in the Budget recently that the Government are considering this matter, in particular to help families who may need care in the home because they are shiftworkers or have children with disabilities. I keep in close touch with my hon. Friend the Paymaster General on this issue.

Departmental Policies (Manchester, Gorton)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Manchester, Gorton constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 22 November 2000. [154503]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Manchester, Gorton constituency and the Manchester LEA.

Excellence In Cities (EIC)

This paragraph updates the information on EIC which was provided in November 2000.

Manchester was designated an Excellence in Cities area in Phase 1 of the programme. The Partnership covers all 23 secondary schools in the city. The partnership now has:

21 Learning Support Units;

Three Beacon schools and one specialist school approved under the Excellence in Cities programme;

Six clusters of secondary schools working together to support gifted and talented pupils;

65 Learning Mentors all of whom have had local and national training;

Three City Learning Centres operating with a fourth to open later this year;

One small Education Action Zone operating from September 2000 and a further two are to start in September.

The Manchester partnership also has an approved plan for primary EIC with 54 primary schools involved. The Learning Mentor strand and programmes for Gifted and Talented pupils are already under way with three Primary Learning Support Units planned to open this academic year.

Manchester is also included in the Excellence Challenge programme with planning to be completed by June 2001 for implementation in September 2001.

Performance Indicators

As per PQ 136171.

Funding per pupil

In Manchester LEA, funding per pupil has increased by £610 in real terms between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Capital funding

£000

	2001–02
ACG	9,946
VA grant	4,002
Science labs	221
Access at 85 per cent.	465
Security	100
Seed challenge	297
NDS condition funding	1,157
NDS devolved formula capital	1,630

Further Education

Student numbers at all FEFC funded institutions where home postcode is in the local authority district of Manchester.

	1999–2000	
	Full-time	Part-time
FEFC funded		
16–18	5,393	1,800
Adult	3,643	24,838
Non-FEFC funded		
16–18	163	723
Adult	642	1,722

Modern Apprenticeships

Since 22 November 2000, we know of 13 starts on Modern Apprenticeships (seven on Foundation Modern Apprenticeships and six on Advanced Modern Apprenticeships) in the Gorton constituency (as at 31 December 2000).

For comparison, known starts on Modern Apprenticeships for the period 2 May 1997 to 21 November 2000, broken down by financial year, are:

Financial year	Foundation Modern Apprenticeships[1]	Advanced Modern Apprenticeships[2]	Total
1997–98	0	85	85
1998–99	42	111	153
1999–2000	112	144	256
2000–01[3]	117	107	224
Total	271	447	718

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.

[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.

[3] To 21 November 2000.

Notes:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied by the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.).

2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

4. Data for the period 21 November to 31 December 2000 may be less than 95 per cent. complete due to some notifications of training starts not yet being received from TECs.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Gorton constituency, 1,968 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 843 have found jobs, 604 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The working age employment rate in Manchester in autumn 2000 was 60.4 per cent., below the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 55.8 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 25.0 per cent. in February 1997 to 13.0 per cent. in February 2001 in the Gorton constituency.

Departmental Policies (Ceredigion)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154975]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Ceredigion constituency. The Welsh Assembly will be able to provide details of education policies.

Modern Apprenticeships

Numbers of known starts on modern apprenticeships for the requested constituency since 2 May 1997 (as at 30 November 2000) are as follows, broken down by financial year:

Ceredigion

Financial year	Foundation modern apprenticeships[1]	Advanced modern apprenticeships[2]	Total
1997–98	0	134	134
1998–99	46	98	144
1999–2000	168	64	232
2000–01[3]	138	44	182
Total	352	340	692

[1] Foundation modern apprenticeships, formerly known as national traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.

[2] Advanced modern apprenticeships, formerly known as modern apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.

[3] To date

Notes:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.).

2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Ceredigion constituency, 704 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 341 have found jobs, 282 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 5.8 per cent. in February 1997 to 4.2 per cent. in February 2001 in the Ceredigion constituency.

Employment zone

The constituencies of Caernarfon, Ynys Môn and Meirionnydd Nant Conwy are covered by the North West Wales Employment Zone. The zone began operating in May 2000 and by December 2000, 882 people had started on the Employment Zone. Of these people 37 had entered employment by December 2000.

Departmental Policies (Sutton and Cheam)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Sutton and Cheam constituency, the effects on Sutton and Cheam of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154412]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Sutton and Cheam constituency and Sutton LEA.

Beacon Schools

There is one Beacon school in Sutton LEA—St. Elphege's RC Infant School which was awarded Beacon status September 2000.

Specialist School	
School	St. Philomenas Catholic High School
Specialism	Technology
Start	September 1997
Sutton and Cheam	No

Infant class size	*Number*
Allocations (£ million) Capital and Revenue	2.4
January 1997 (number of children in infant class sizes of 31 or over)	1,657
September 2000 (number of children in infant class sizes of 31 or over)	31

Performance indicators—Key Stage 2 results

Percentage

	2000	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*
Pupils achieving level 4 and above				
English				
LEA	80	78	68	70
England	75	71	65	63
Maths				
LEA	74	73	61	66
England	72	69	59	62
Science				
LEA	88	82	70	73
England	85	78	69	69
GCSE/GNVQ Results				
5+A-C*				
LEA average	63.4	60.1	57.9	54.7
England average	49.2	47.9	46.3	45.1
5+A-G*				
LEA average	94.1	93.9	91.6	91.6
England average	88.9	88.5	87.5	86.4
No passes				
LEA average	3.5	3.2	4.5	5.0
England average	5.6	6.0	6.6	7.7
A/AS level, advanced GNVQ				
Average points for two or more A/AS levels				
LEA average	20.9	20.3	20.3	19.1
England average	18.5	18.2	17.8	17.3
A/AS average per entry				
LEA average	6.1	6.0	6.0	5.6
England average	5.5	5.5	5.4	5.3
Average point score GNVQs				
LEA average	8.8	9.4	8.3	n/a
England average	10.1	9.9	9.6	n/a

Funding per pupil

In Sutton LEA, funding per pupil has increased by £180 in real terms between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Capital funding

£000

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*
ACG	3,902	4,411	2,848	4,021	3,563
SCA	—	477	191	64	1,452
NDS	—	2,462	564	516	602
VA Grant	197	95	296	57	44
Seed	153	136	—	—	
PPP	—	—	—	—	—
Formula Capital	—	1,128	—	—	—
NgFL	—	518	337	241	—
Science labs	147	147	—	—	—
SSLU	32	37	—	—	—
Access at 85 per cent.	232	—	—	—	—
Security	37	52	52	37	30
Class size	—	109	365	288	—
Outside toilets	—	—	—	10	—
Energy efficiency	—	—	—	35	—
Assistance with AMP	—	—	20	—	—
Nursery provision	—	—	—	—	—

Note:

The allocation for 2001–02 also includes £621,000 for NDS Devolved Formula Capital and £432,000 NDS Condition Funding

Further Education

Student number at all FEFC funded institutions where home postcode is in the local authority district of Sutton.

1996–97 to 1999–2000

	16–18		Adult	
	Full-time	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Part-time*
FEFC funded				
1996–97	1,260	595	629	6,981
1997–98	1,242	643	564	7,457
1998–99	1,205	550	518	7,064
1999–2000	1,198	571	486	6,235
Non-FEFC funded				
1996–97	33	95	158	357
1997–98	33	112	174	354
1998–99	35	143	179	399
1999–2000	44	248	214	1,549

Modern Apprenticeships

Since 2 May 1997, we know of 565 starts on Modern Apprenticeships in the Sutton and Cheam constituency (as at 31 December 2000). Broken down by financial year these are:

Financial year	*Foundation Modern Apprenticeships*[1]	*Advanced Modern Apprenticeships*[2]	*Total*
1997–98	2	90	92
1998–99	34	98	132
1999–2000	82	99	181
2000–01[3]	80	80	160
Total	198	367	565

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.
[3] To date.

Notes:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent).

2. In addition, the postcode information on TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database.

New Deal for Young People

In the Sutton and Cheam constituency, 260 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 150 have found jobs, 115 of which are sustained.

Labour Market Statistics

The working age employment rate in Sutton in autumn 2000 was 84.5 per cent., above the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 82.1 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 4.3 per cent. in February 1997 to 1.7 per cent. in February 2001 in the Sutton and Cheam constituency.

Departmental Policies (Caernarfon)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154976]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Caernarfon constituency. The Welsh Assembly will be able to provide details of education policies.

Modern Apprenticeships

Numbers of known starts on Modern Apprenticeships for the requested constituency since 2 May 1997 (as at 30 November 2000) are as follows, broken down by financial year:

Caernarfon

Financial year	*Foundation Modern Apprenticeships*[1]	*Advanced Modern Apprenticeships*[2,a]	*Total*
1997–98	0	64	64
1998–99	27	76	103
1999–2000	206	65	271
2000–01[3]	147	35	182
Total	380	240	620

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.
[3] To date

Notes:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.)

2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Caernarfon constituency, 818 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 497 have found jobs, 406 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from: 10.7 per cent. in February 1997 to 6.0 per cent. in February 2001 in the Caernarfon constituency.

Employment zone

The constituencies of Caernarfon, Yns Môn and Meirionnydd Nant Conwy are covered by the North West Wales Employment Zone. The zone began operating in May 2000 and by December 2000, 882 people had started on the Employment Zone. Of these people 37 had entered employment by December 2000.

Departmental Policies (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154977]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency. The Welsh Assembly will be able to provide details of education policies.

Modern Apprenticeships

Numbers of known starts on Modern Apprenticeships for the requested constituency since 2 May 1997 (as at 30 November 2000) are as follows, broken down by financial year:

Meirionnydd Nant Conwy

Financial year	*Foundation Modern Apprenticeships*[1]	*Advanced Modern Apprenticeships*[2]	*Total*
1997–98	0	40	40
1998–99	32	48	80
1999–2000	135	49	184
2000–01[3]	91	44	135
Total	258	181	439

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.
[3] To date

Notes:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), form which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.).

2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, 443 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 253 have found jobs, 201 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The working age employment rate in Denbighshire UA in autumn 2000 was 72.7 per cent., below the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 72.2 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from:

8.7 per cent. in February 1997 to 5.4 per cent. in February 2001 in the Clwyd, South constituency.

Employment zone

The constituencies of Caernarfon, Ynys Môn and Meirionnydd Nant Conwy are covered by the North West Wales Employment Zone. The zone began operating in May 2000 and by December 2000, 882 people had started on the Employment Zone. Of these people 37 had entered employment by December 2000.

Departmental Policies (Ynys Môn)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154974]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Ynys Môn constituency. The Welsh Assembly will be able to provide details of education policies.

Modern Apprenticeships

Numbers of known starts on Modern Apprenticeships for the requested constituency since 2 May 1997 (as at 30 November 2000) are as follows, broken down by financial year.

Ynys Môn

Financial year	*Foundation Modern Apprenticeships*[1]	*Advanced Modern Apprenticeships*[2]	*Total*
1997–98	3	102	105
1998–99	87	68	155
1999–2000	361	87	448
2000–01[3]	195	67	262
Total	646	324	970

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.
[3] To date

Notes:

1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.)

2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.

3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:

WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Ynys Môn constituency, 1,091 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 580 have found jobs, 462 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 12.3 per cent. in February 1997 to 9.0 per cent. in February 2001 in the Ynys Môn constituency.

Employment zone and Action Teams

The constituencies of Caernarfon, Ynys Môn and Meirionnydd Nant Conwy are covered by the North West Wales Employment Zone. The zone began operating in May 2000 and by December 2000, 882 people had started on the Employment Zone. Of these people 37 had entered employment by December 2000.

The North West Wales Action Team for Jobs operated in Holyhead, which lies within the Ynys Môn constituency. The Action Team began operating in October 2000: by February 2001 the Team had a caseload of 140 people and 15 people had entered employment.

Departmental Policies (Edinburgh, South)

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Edinburgh, South constituency, the effects on Edinburgh of the Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155340]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Edinburgh, South constituency. For education matters I refer my hon. Friend to the Scottish Parliament.

Modern Apprenticeships
Scottish Office will provide.

New Deal for Young People
In the Edinburgh, South constituency, 586 young people have joined the New Deal to the end December 2000. 298 have found jobs, 232 of which are sustained.

Labour Market Statistics
The working age employment rate in City of Edinburgh in autumn 2000 was 81.8 per cent., above the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 73.2 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 7.9 per cent. in February 1997 to 4.4 per cent. in February 2001 in the Edinburgh, South constituency.

Departmental Policies (Lincoln)

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lincoln constituency, the effects on Lincoln of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152980]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Lincoln constituency and Lincolnshire LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Stourbridge and Dudley)

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to *(a)* Stourbridge and *(b)* the metropolitan borough of Dudley the effects on the area of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154730]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Stourbridge constituency and the metropolitan borough of Dudley and Dudley LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Lancaster and Wyre constituency, the effect on Lancaster and Wyre of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154685]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Lancaster and Wyre constituency and the Lancashire LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Battersea)

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Battersea, the effects of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154821]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Battersea constituency and the Wandsworth LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Truro and St. Austell)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Truro and St. Austell constituency, the effects on Truro and St. Austell of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154534]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Truro and St. Austell constituency and Cornwall LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155279]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Chichester constituency and West Sussex LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Walthamstow constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154174]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Walthamstow constituency and the Waltham Forest LEA have been placed in the Library.

New Deal

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many cohorts had their first interview for the New Deal for 18 to 24-years-olds in *(a)* January and *(b)* April 1998. [154931]

Ms Jowell: In January 1998, 4,030 young people had an initial New Deal interview in the 12 Pathfinder areas. In April 1998, the first month that the programme was rolled out nationally, 13,200 young people had an initial interview.

Education Action Zones

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each education action zone *(a)* the lead LEA, *(b)* the schools in the zones, *(c)* the parliamentary constituencies covered by each zone, *(d)* the date of the zone's inauguration, *(e)* the total public funding given to each zone to date, *(f)* the public funding budgeted to be given to the zone in future, *(g)* the total private funding obtained by each zone and *(h)* the date of *(i)* inspection and (ii) audit of each zone's efficiency and effectiveness. [153280]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information requested for each of the 73 large Education Action Zones (EAZs), is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library, with the exception of *(h)* (ii) which is an ongoing process. EAZs do not have 'lead LEAs'. The table lists the Partner LEAs.

This funding has led to improvements in the standards of education. In the 25 first round zones which have been running the longest, the proportion of 7-year-olds reaching level 2 in reading, writing and maths has increased by 7, 6 and 8 percentage points respectively since 1998, compared with national increases of 4, 4 and 6 percentage points over the same period. The proportion of 11-year-olds achieving level 4 in English, maths and science has increased by 12, 16 and 20 percentage points respectively, compared with 10, 14 and 16 percentage points nationally.

Pledged private sector sponsorship for all Education Action Zones now runs at over £37 million; some £36 million of this is for large zones.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the longest period of time is in which existing stocks of rendered specified risk material and over-30-months scheme material have been stored. [152065]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The longest period of time to date in which existing stocks of rendered OTMS material (which includes SRM from over-30-months cattle) have been stored is 4 years 9 months, i.e. from the start of the scheme in May 1996.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what veterinary advice he has received regarding the level of threat posed to the spreading of foot and mouth disease by the holding of horseracing meetings; and if he will make a statement. [152162]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Veterinary advice to Ministers is that no meeting should be held within an officially designated Protection Zone. This is an area of at least 3 kilometres around an infected premises.

We have provided veterinary support in drawing up advice for use by the British Horseracing Board regarding the conditions under which race meetings in other parts of the country may be held.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with British Waterways about the precautions necessary to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [153842]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* The Ministry has had a number of contacts with British Waterways at a local level and these have been constructive. In the light of the developing situation, British Waterways has commissioned a detailed risk assessment from the ADAS consultancy. This will ensure that a consistent policy is implemented on access to British Waterways land. The Ministry is assisting ADAS and the results of the study will be made available on the MAFF website http://www.maff.gov.uk/.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what precautions are in place with regard to the transport of animals for rendering during the foot and mouth outbreak. [153971]

Ms Quin: The lorries involved in transport to rendering plants are specially designed to be leakproof. This is checked by filling them partially with water and tilting them to 30 degrees to check for leaks. Dead animals do not excrete the virus. The carcases are all individually disinfected and covered in the lorries with plastic sheeting. This is weighed down with straw or sawdust which is heavily disinfected. The lorry is then covered with a tight-fitting tarpaulin. These precautions reduce the risk of spreading infection to an extremely low level.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will introduce regulations to allow the burial of carcases as an alternative to burning for the disposal of animals culled as part of the precautions against foot and mouth. [153952]

Ms Quin: Burial is our preferred method of disposal where environmental conditions permit. Unfortunately, the high watertable across much of the country has precluded its use in many cases. We will use the full range of safe disposal routes available to us.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the level of prices for meat at abattoirs during the foot and mouth crisis. [154283]

Ms Quin: Regular, vigorous representations on the price of red meat have been received from all sectors of the industry since the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. However, since official deadweight price reporting of cattle has recommenced and the exchange of information on sheep and pig prices has improved, the level has reduced significantly. Issues relating to pricing policies and unfair competition are a matter for the Director General of Fair Trading.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what arrangements he has made to ensure animals are being slaughtered at the closest possible abattoir to the point of origin of the stock; and if he will make a statement; [154395]

(2) what measures he has taken to reduce the transportation of carcases and stock across country in the light of the current foot and mouth outbreak; and if he will make a statement. [154394]

Mr. Morley: For the duration of the outbreak, we are using the weekly foot and mouth disease stakeholders meetings to stress the need to keep journeys as short as possible. All movement is banned subject to restricted and limited journeys under licence. Where necessary to move animals for welfare reasons, then this is subject to strict controls.

For the longer term, we agree that we will need to look very closely at long distance livestock movements, both on animal health and welfare grounds.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155372]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Foot and Mouth (Devon)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will grant a licence to Mr. Leslie Barons of Beneknowle Farm, Diptford, South Devon, to bring back 130 in-lamb ewes, 140 couples and 110 ewe-lambs from Home Farm, Churstow, Devon, to Beneknowle Farm. [154435]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Mr. Barons did not meet the criteria for the Occupational Movement Scheme and the Local Movement Scheme. The Longer Distance Movement Licence Scheme is now in place and will hopefully meet the needs he has.

Pig Swill

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to control the imports of pig swill from overseas; and if he will make a statement. [154009]

Ms Quin: Imports from third countries of pig swill containing animal products are not allowed into Great Britain. Any such imports would require an import licence and none have been issued.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152112]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment stated on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 947–48W, that each central Government Department must in future report annually on its timber purchases. This should explain what steps are being taken to buy timber and timber-related products from sustainable and legal sources; the quantity and types of purchase; and what assurances were received that the source of timber was sustainable and legal.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will be issuing to Departments, around the end of March 2001, the questionnaire on greening government progress. It will include some basic questions on timber procurement. The report from Green Ministers, due to be published in November, will make specific reference to timber procurement.

Departments will decide for themselves what detailed information they will maintain on timber purchases and whether some or all of that information will be published separately from the Green Ministers' report.

The interdepartmental working group on timber procurement will monitor the whole process and will assist Departments and their agencies in working with timber producers and suppliers; give guidance on best purchasing practice; set progressive overall targets for governmental purchases of timber from assured sustainable and legal sources; and agree appropriate targets for individual departments and their agencies.

On behalf of the interdepartmental working group on timber procurement, the DETR is planning to commission work which will identify the quantities and species of timber being sold to Government, the major suppliers and the options for assisting Departments. Promulgation of guidance and advice to buyers would follow, probably before the end of 2001.

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152115]

Ms Quin: At present, Departments do not yet have systems in place to provide data on the proportion of certified timber purchased over the last six months. The interdepartmental timber working group is working to develop a common reporting template which will form the basis for future reporting on timber procurement. An annual report will be provided in line with the answer given on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 947–48W, by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment.

Hides and Skins (Exports)

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the European Commission concerning the export of hides and skins; and if he will make a statement. [153429]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* My officials have had discussions with the European Commission and other member states on all aspects of the exports of animal products, in the light of the current UK foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. In respect of hides and skins, a significant amendment to the Commission Decision has been negotiated which allows them to be traded without the need for official certification if they have been tanned.

Meat Imports

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is used for system inspection of meat imported from *(a)* European Union countries and *(b)* other countries; and who pays for the inspection. [153678]

Ms Quin: Meat imported from other European Union countries may circulate freely within the single market, but is subject to random checks at the point of destination within the United Kingdom. If that destination is a licensed meat cutting plant or a cold store, inspections are carried out by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), and the costs of inspection are charged to the operator of that premises. If it is a meat products or meat preparations establishment, inspection is carried out either by the MHS, where the establishment is co-located with a slaughterhouse or cutting plant (in which case the costs of inspection are paid by the Food Standards Agency) or by the local authority in other cases (when the costs are met by the local authority). Depending on the perceived health risk, checks at destination may be random or 100 per cent. Following the

recent identification of specified risk material in imports of meat from Germany and the current foot and mouth disease problems in the UK, the Meat Hygiene Service has been instructed to step up levels of inspection at cutting plants and cold stores to ensure that increased volumes of imports can be checked for the necessary health marks and correct documentation.

All meat imported from third countries into the UK must enter, and is subject to veterinary inspections at, designated UK Border Inspection Posts (BIP). All consignments are subject to documentary and identity checks and at least 20 per cent. of consignments are subject to physical checks in accordance with EU legislation. These checks ensure that conditions of import have been complied with and that the products have remained in a satisfactory condition during transport. The inspection services at the BIP are the responsibility of the local authority. UK and EC legislation requires that costs incurred by the local authority while carrying out checks are recovered from the importer.

Farmers (Private Insurance)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what estimate he has made of the proportion of livestock farmers who have privately insured against foot and mouth disease; [153730]

(2) what efforts his Department has made to increase the take-up of private insurance cover for foot and mouth and other major livestock diseases. [153731]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* At the outset of last year's outbreak of Classical Swine Fever, my right hon. Friend the Minister established a joint Government/industry working party to consider what measures the livestock industry could take to protect itself in future against the commercial consequences of animal disease outbreaks. Government compensation is the value of animals slaughtered and does not extend to consequential losses caused by movement restrictions. The NFU and others from the livestock industry agreed to join the working party to examine the practicalities and specifics of such measures, including insurance arrangements. The working party report was due to be completed in the spring, although this may now be slightly delayed while attention is concentrated on eradicating the present foot and mouth outbreaks.

As part of this work, consultants were engaged to assess what types of animal disease insurance cover are presently available and the level of uptake. From this it is clear that the number and scope of available insurance products is very limited, that these are not widely purchased by farmers and that they tend to concentrate on a few diseases such as bovine TB and foot and mouth. We have made no formal estimate of the proportion of livestock farmers who have privately insured against foot and mouth disease. However NFU Mutual, the largest provider of agricultural insurance, estimate that around 10 per cent. of farmers have policies covering the disease.

CAP Grants (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list for each year since 1979 the total grants paid to farmers in Shropshire under the Common Agricultural Policy; and if he will make a statement. [154467]

Ms Quin: The table sets out total subsidies under the CAP paid to farmers in Shropshire by MAFF in calendar years 1993 to 2001. For 2001, all information received up to and including 15 March is included. Information for years before 1993 could have been obtained only at a disproportionate cost. In some cases, amounts include an element of national as well as EU funding. Farmers also benefit from expenditure on market support measures, even though this is not paid directly to them.

	£ million
1993	19.87
1994	33.35
1995	33.70
1996	52.86
1997	42.10
1998	42.45
1999	38.04
2000	42.92
2001	[1] 5.14

[1] To 15 March

Endocrine Disrupting Pesticides

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is in relation to the endocrine disrupting pesticides listed by the European Commission and reported upon by the Royal Society in June 2000. [154257]

Ms Quin: We are playing a major role in the EU programme to review all substances used as plant protection products which includes those listed by the EU Commission as endocrine disrupting pesticides. This review programme will ensure the safety of all plant protection products as regards workers, consumers and the environment. Any substance failing to meet the high standards of safety demanded will be withdrawn from the market; 18 already have been or are being withdrawn.

Hand-carried Imported Foodstuffs

Mr. Galé: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of controls over the (1) importing of bushmeat hand-carried by visitors to the United Kingdom; [154246]

(2) importing of general meat and meat products hand-carried by visitors to the United Kingdom. [154247]

Ms Quin *[holding answers 19 March 2001]:* It is illegal for individuals to import fresh meat from third countries into the United Kingdom unless it is fully cooked in a hermetically sealed container and weighs no more than 1kg.

This applies equally to 'wild game meat' which we take to include bushmeat although there is no working definition of the latter term. Where we have advised of the possibility of illegal imports of meat, the relevant enforcement authorities have been alerted and the appropriate action taken. Where illegal meat has been identified, it has been seized and destroyed. No single assessment of the effectiveness of these procedures, based

on centralised data, is available as a number of authorities, at local level, may find themselves in a position to deal with an illegal import.

Dichlorvos

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment has been made of the impact on the horticultural industry of the withdrawal of Dichlorvos; and if he will make a statement. [154561]

Ms Quin: The Advisory Committee on Pesticides is to consider the review of dichlorvos at its next meeting on 5 April 2001. To assist the Committee in its task it will be informed of the implications for growers were dichlorvos to be lost.

Bovine Carcases

Mr. Beith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if, for the duration of the foot and mouth restrictions, he will delay the implementation of the EU scheme for sampling all bovine carcases of animals more than 30-months-old; what modifications have been made to the scheme following his discussions with farming, trade and hunt kennel representatives; and if he will make a statement. [154716]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* We will shortly be consulting publicly with interested organisations on our proposals and will take account of comments received before reaching final decisions.

Farming Bankruptcies

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes have taken place in each of the past 15 years in the number of farming bankruptcies; what percentage such changes represented in each year of the total number of farmers; and what the percentage change in each year was. [154075]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* Data on farming bankruptcies for England and Wales and what percentage of farmers, partners and directors this represents are given in the table (data solely on the number of farmer are not available). The last year for which bankruptcy figures are available for the whole year is 1999[1]. Figures for the first three quarters of last year show a decrease in total farming bankruptcies of 10 per cent. on the same period in 1999.

[1] Final quarter 2000 data will be available in May 2001

Number of bankruptcies[1] in the agricultural and horticultural sector: England and Wales 1986 to 2000

		Percentage	
Year	*Total bankruptcies*	*Bankruptcies as a proportion of farmers[2]*	*Annual change in bankruptcies*
1986	258	0.1	+8
1987	298	0.1	+16
1988	236	0.1	−21
1989	220	0.1	−7
1990	309	0.1	+40
1991	401	0.2	+30
1992	504	0.2	+26
1993	434	0.2	−14
1994	397	0.2	−9
1995	317	0.1	−20
1996	257	0.1	−19
1997	206	0.1	−20
1998	222	0.1	+8
1999	258	0.1	+16
2000	[3]181	—	—

[1] Includes bankruptcies of self-employed individuals and company insolvencies (*Source:* Department of Trade and Industry)
[2] Includes directors and business partners who also work on farm holdings (*Source:* June Agricultural and Horticultural Census). Data from 1998 onwards are not comparable to those for earlier years due to fundamental changes to the labour questions in the Agricultural and Horticultural Census
[3] First three quarters only

Avilamycin

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what guidance he has given on the use of avilamycin in animals intended for human consumption; and what the possible consequences for human antibiotic protection are. [154808]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* Avilamycin is an anti-microbial growth promoter authorised throughout the European Union as a feed additive under Directive 70/524/EC. This Directive includes a provision that before a feed additive can be authorised it must be shown not to adversely affect human health, animal health or the environment at the level permitted in feedingstuffs.

Avilamycin is in a class of antibiotics that are not currently authorised for use as human medicines nor does it select for cross-resistance to any currently authorised human antimicrobial. In any future discussions on the use of avilamycin, the Government will continue to be guided by the principles established in the Report of the Joint Committee on the use of antibiotics in animal husbandry and veterinary medicines (The Swann Report) of 1969. This report proposed that antibiotics authorised for growth promotion should be restricted to those which have little or no application as therapeutic agents in man or animals, and which will not impair the efficacy of prescribed therapeutic drugs through the development of resistant strains of organisms.

Rendering

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will make the Rendering (Fluid Treatment) England Order 2001. [155071]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* My officials are currently finalising the legislation in light of the comments received in the public consultation process.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what scientific research into the phenomenon of gene stacking in genetically modified crops in natural conditions *(a)* he has evaluated and *(b)* has been brought to the attention of (i) ACRE and (ii) ACNFP; and when. [153238]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

Gene stacking refers to plants with traits from more than one genetic modification which may be developed intentionally or created unintentionally in the environment through cross-pollination between two different genetically modified (GM) plants.

The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) always considers any risks associated with gene stacking when it advises on the release or marketing of GM plants. ACRE assesses the potential for gene stacking to occur both in neighbouring crops of the same or sexually compatible species and in compatible wild plants at or around the release site. The potential for gene stacking is well controlled for research releases of GM plants and for the few GM crops which have Europe-wide approval for placing on the market. However the regulatory authorities both here and in the European Union are aware that the potential for gene stacking will increase should there be widespread cultivation of GM crops and the implications must be well understood.

ACRE considered the potential problems of both intentional and unintentional gene stacking in 1998 and have kept abreast of developments. There are relatively few scientific reports of this phenomenon occurring in natural conditions, but my Department has funded its own research on the implications of gene stacking for risk assessment. A scientific report commissioned from the John Innes Centre entitled 'impact of multiple herbicide tolerance in GM plants' is in the final stages of preparation and will be published shortly. ACRE is aware of this study and will advise on its implications and whether further work is needed.

The extent to which gene stacking could impact on food safety is an issue for the Food Standards Agency and the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP). Any GM crop that is to be used for food production must be considered for approval under the EC Novel Foods Regulation (EC 258–97). The ACNFP is aware of a number of applications for GM crops containing stacked genes which are currently being considered under the EC Novel Foods Regulation by other Member States. Each of these applications will be considered in due course by the ACNFP on a case by case basis.

DEFENCE

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list units in the armed forces on standby, as a result of a request from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to deal with foot and mouth. [155599]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Aberavon (Sir J. Morris) on 23 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 365–66W. In addition, at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Joint Headquarters have been established at MAFF HQ in London and at MAFF regional offices. The role of these Headquarters is to co-ordinate logistic and other support to MAFF, drawn from appropriate civil and military resources. The Ministry of Defence is playing an important role in these Headquarters. Teams of armed forces personnel are also helping to co-ordinate the administration of slaughter, and the transport and disposal of carcases in affected areas. Other forces are on standby in case gaps are revealed. The armed forces contribution to the operation is being directed by Land Command under Commander in Chief Land.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel, from which units, are assisting the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with the foot and mouth outbreak; where they are deployed and in what numbers; and if he will make a statement on their role. [155163]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Aberavon (Sir J. Morris) on 23 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 365–66W.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155367]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information is not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the countries from which his Department has bought meat in the past year; and which of them have recently experienced endemic foot and mouth disease in their national herd. [155256]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* In the past year my Department has bought meat from: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain and Uruguay as well as the United Kingdom. Of these only Brazil has recently experienced endemic foot and mouth disease. All meat imported into the UK for human consumption, however, must comply with Community import rules. These permit the importation of meat from some countries where foot and mouth is present but only where the veterinary authorities have contained the disease in specific regions. EC rules permit imports only from those regions where there is considered not to be a risk to human or animal health. These controls currently apply to Brazil and Uruguay.

Somme Barracks (Cyprus)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Somme barracks restaurant (building 35) at Episkopi on Cyprus was closed; for what reason; what alternative feeding arrangements were made; and when the restaurant will reopen. [154003]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The Somme (SIC) barracks restaurant (building 35) at Episkopi is in fact situated in Salamanca barracks within Episkopi Garrison. It is one of two Garrison canteens. The decision to close the restaurant was taken in March 1997 and closure effected in February 1998.

While building 35 was closed for refurbishment, as an interim measure, all feeding arrangements were carried out in the remaining Garrison canteen (building 13). There was no reduction in the total canteen meals required or received and it was planned that when the refurbishment was complete all troops would then move back to building 35 for feeding and building 13 would be demolished.

The planned completion date for building 35 is September 2001.

National Missile Defence

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for what purpose Fylingdales was upgraded in 1992; [155103]

(2) what alterations have been *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* planned at United Kingdom sites to facilitate a contribution to the US Government's proposed National Missile Defence System; [155144]

(3) what recent discussions there have been between representatives of the United Kingdom and US Governments about the use of sites in Britain as part of the United States proposed National Missile Defence System; [155134]

(4) if the US Administration requested the use of sites in Britain as part of its proposed National Missile Defence System. [155133]

Mr. Hoon: We continue to discuss all aspects of missile defence regularly with the US and others, but we have received no request for the use of sites in the UK as part of a proposed system. Nor have any alterations been undertaken, or currently planned, at sites in the UK for missile defence purposes. The new US administration have not put forward specific proposals on what form any missile defence system might take, so it remains too early to say definitively whether or not alterations at sites in the UK will be proposed as part of such a system.

In the early 1990s, the "golf balls" at RAF Fylingdales were replaced with a new phased array radar because they had become obsolete and difficult to maintain. The function of the site as part of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System did not change, and the replacement was not related to US missile defence proposals. The Relay Ground Station for the Space Based Infra Red System (SBIRS) currently under construction at RAF Menwith Hill is regarded by the US as necessary regardless of any missile defence proposals and is being pursued as a separate project.

Helicopter Flights (Greater London)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) at what height the Chinook helicopter flew over Kew, Surrey, on 11 April 2000; [155167]

(2) what instructions are given to military helicopters on training flights regarding low flying in built-up areas, with special reference to the Kew Bridge/M4 junction at Chiswick; [155166]

(3) what recent discussions he has had with military authorities concerning the behaviour of Chinook helicopters operating over Greater London. [155168]

Dr. Moonie: The Kew Bridge/M4 junction lies within the Thames Valley Avoidance Area and flights over the whole Greater London area are controlled by Heathrow Radar Control. Helicopters must be flown strictly within specific routes and heights unless otherwise directed by the Heathrow Radar Controller.

The Chinook helicopter which flew over Kew on 11 April 2000 did not fly below 750 feet (not 700 feet as I stated to the hon. Member in my letter of 17 February). Neither I nor my Ministerial colleagues have had any discussions with military authorities about the behaviour of Chinook helicopters operating over Greater London.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the establishment is for each branch of consultant in the Defence Medical Services; how many are serving in each branch; and what percentage shortfall there is in each case. [155002]

Dr. Moonie: The number of consultants against the operational and retained task requirement and the percentage of posts not filled as at 1 January 2001, is shown in the table:

Consultant speciality	*Operational and retained task*	*Current manning—consultants including those in command and staff posts*	*Percentage shortfall*
Anaesthetists	120	28	77
General Physicians	51	21	59
Dermatology	0	3	—
Paediatrics	5	2	60
Genito-Urinary Medicine	0	1	—
Neurology	1	1	0
General Surgeons	44	20	55
Obstetrics and Gynaecology	3	0	100
Urology	0	2	—
Orthopaedics	28	11	61
Burns and Plastics	10	3	70
Accident and Emergency	23	3	87
Psychiatrists	35	12	66
Ophthalmics	10	3	70
Oral and Maxillofacial	10	8	20
Ear, Nose and Throat	10	3	70
Rheumatology and Rehabilitation	7	5	29
Radiologists	11	9	18
Pathologists	6	6	0
Chemical Pathology	4	0	100

Consultant speciality	Operational and retained task	Current manning—consultants including those in command and staff posts	Percentage shortfall
Haematologist	4	1	75
Histopathology	0	1	—
Microbiology	6	3	50
Occupational Medicine	50	31	38
Public Health	1	7	0
Dental Restorative	0	1	—

[1] This speciality is being re-established in the regular Defence Medical Services

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 22–23W, on Porton Down volunteers, if the research to establish the definitive numbers of Porton Down volunteers who have taken part in nerve agent studies will assess whether these studies breached the 1947 Nuremberg code of ethics governing scientific research. [154782]

Dr. Moonie: Research into nerve agent studies at Porton Down will consider the ethical standards of the time.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he has received a report from the Operation Antler team of the Wiltshire police regarding its inquiries; and if he will make a statement. [154796]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has not received a report from the Wiltshire police concerning Operation Antler, but remains in contact with the inquiry team.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of technical reports which have been compiled by the chemical defence establishment at Porton Down to describe and record the results of its nerve agent studies involving service volunteers, specifying the title and date of each report. [154783]

Dr. Moonie: It will take some time to draw up such a list and I will therefore write to the hon. Member setting out such information as is available and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

US-UK Strategic Defence Initiative

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 176W, regarding the US-UK strategic defence initiative, which areas of research each of the letters of offer and acceptance covers; and what the contract numbers are of each of the letters of offer and acceptance signed since 1 May 1997. [154794]

Mr. Hoon: All five letters of offer and acceptance cover research into the diverse nature of the ballistic missile threat and the feasibility of countering it with missile defence systems based on technologies currently available. Contract numbers are HQ0006–98-C-0015, HQ0006–99-C-007, HQ0006–99-C-0004, HQ0006–00-C-0003 and HQ0006–01-C-0002.

Freemasons

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations led him to suspend JS DC1 88/00. [155584]

Mr. Spellar: Representations were received from solicitors acting for the United Grand Lodge of England. I subsequently authorised a temporary withdrawal of the Instruction concerned pending a review of policy towards societies such as Freemasons.

Defence Diversification Councils

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in establishing defence diversification councils. [155093]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Diversification Agency, established in 1999, is making excellent progress. A consultative period to consider the future of the Agency has just ended. We shall be considering the views put to us before reaching final decisions. As stated in the Consultative Document, we shall consider further the establishment of a defence diversification council, or similar group, in the light of experience of the new organisation.

Iraq

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in the last two years military aircraft from the Turkish air force have entered the no-fly zone in northern Iraq. [155064]

Mr. Hoon: The northern no-fly zone was established on humanitarian grounds in an effort to prevent Saddam Hussein from repressing the Kurdish civilian population from the air. The zone was not established to monitor the activity of our NATO allies. We therefore routinely collect information only on the activity of Iraqi aircraft.

RAF Bases (Commercial Development)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he has taken to promote the regeneration of former RAF bases for commercial aviation use. [152703]

Dr. Moonie *[pursuant to his reply, 19 March 2001, c. 10–11]:* I must correct an error regarding the current position on planning. The planning application for the former RAF Finningley has not been called in for determination by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). The correct position is that the planning application has been approved by the local authority and that DETR is now considering whether or not to call in the application.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 27 March 2001

TREASURY

National Insurance

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the National Insurance Contribution liability was of a self-employed person earning *(a)* £20,000 and *(b)* £30,000 in the financial years (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1999–2000 and (iii) 2000–01; and what it will be in 2001–02. [150049]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 12 February 2001]:* Since 1999, this Government have introduced a package of measures to build a fairer National Insurance system, to improve work incentives and encourage job creation. In particular, we have aimed to improve the position of lower earning self-employed people and to address the under-contribution of the self-employed as a whole to the National Insurance Fund, compared with the National Insurance contributions (NICs) payable by employees and employers.

The self-employed pay class 2 which is a weekly flat rate charge and class 4 which is charged as a percentage of profits over the lower profits limit up to the upper profits limit.

In the March 1999 Budget the Chancellor announced a reform of self-employed NICs to reduce the burden of National Insurance on the lowest earning self-employed and encourage the start up of self-employed businesses. The flat rate was reduced from £6.55 a week to £2 a week and the class 4 rate was increased from 6 per cent. to 7 per cent. The starting point for payment of Class 4 NICs has also been aligned with the income tax personal allowance. These changes were introduced following recommendations of the Taylor report.

Over the period mentioned in the question the Government have also introduced a number of measures on income tax. For example, we have introduced and extended the 10p starting rate, cut the basic rate to 22p, introduced the Working Families Tax Credit and the Children's Tax Credit, which reduce direct tax.

By October 2001 as a result of personal tax and benefit measures, UK households will be on average £590 a year better off and families with children will be £1,000 better off on average from measures introduced over the parliament as a whole.

The NICs and income tax liabilities will depend on many circumstances.

The table shows the net effect of changes to NICs and income tax for a single self-employed earner who has no children.

£

Year/Income	*NICs*	*Income tax*	*Total*
1996–97			
10,000	503.00	1,340.40	1,843.40
20,000	1,103.00	3,740.40	4,843.40
30,000	1,322.60	6,258.00	7,580.60
1999–2000			
10,000	488.80	1,107.95	1,596.75
20,000	1,088.80	3,407.95	4,496.75
30,000	1,448.80	5,707.95	7,156.75
2000–01			
10,000	497.05	1,052.90	1,549.95
20,000	1,197.05	3,252.90	4,449.95
30,000	1,744.45	5,452.90	7,197.35
2001–02			
10,000	486.55	976.70	1,463.25
20,000	1,186.55	3,176.70	4,363.25
30,000	1,879.55	5,376.70	7,256.25

The following table shows the net effect of changes to NICs, Family Credit, Child Benefit and Income Tax (including the abolition of the married couple's allowance and introduction of the Children's Tax Credit and Working Families Tax Credit) for a family unit which contains a single self-employed earner, who is working more than 30 hours, married and has two children under 11.

£

Year/Income	*NICs*	*Family credit/Child benefit*	*Income tax (including WFTC)*	*Total*
1996–97				
10,000	503.00	2,031.91	1,071.90	– 457.01
20,000	1,103.00	1,019.20	3,471.90	3,555.70
30,000	1,322.60	1,019.20	5,989.50	6,292.90
1999–2000				
10,000	488.80	2,075.64	– 690.28	–2,277.12
20,000	1,088.80	1,248.00	3,210.95	3,051.75
30,000	1,448.80	1,248.00	5,510.95	5,711.75
2000–01				
10,000	497.05	1,300.00	–2,700.04	–3,502.99
20,000	1,197.05	1,300.00	3,215.83	3,112.88
30,000	1,744.45	1,300.00	5,452.90	5,897.35
2001–02				
10,000	486.55	1,344.20	–3,456.43	–4,314.08
20,000	1,186.55	1,344.20	2,587.64	2,429.99
30,000	1,879.55	1,344.20	4,856.70	5,392.05

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many self-employed persons paid *(a)* only class 2 National Insurance Contributions and *(b)* class 2 and class 4 Contributions in 1999–2000; and what estimate he has made of the same figures for 2000–01; [144833]

(2) what the proceeds were of *(a)* class 2 and *(b)* class 4 National Insurance Contributions in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000; and what estimate he has made of the same figures for 2000–01. [144832]

Dawn Primarolo: The reform of class 2 and class 4 National Insurance Contributions (NICs) will reduce the burden on low earners and encourage business start-ups. In 1999–2000, around 0.7 million self employed are estimated to be liable to pay only class 2 and 1.8 million are estimated to be liable to pay class 2 and class 4 NICs. For 2000–01 around 0.2 million are estimated to be liable to pay only class 2 and some 2.3 million are estimated to be liable to class 2 and class 4 NICs. Theses estimates are based on the survey of personal incomes.

Estimates for class 2 and class 4 NICs receipts in 1998–99 to 2000–01 for the United Kingdom are given in the table.

£ million

	UK NICs receipts		
Year	*Class 2*	*Class 4*	*Total*
1998–99	680	960	1,640
1999–2000	730	990	1,720
2000–01	350	1,040	1,390

These estimates were provided by the Government Actuary's Department.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the oral answer of 1 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 1022, from the Paymaster General, on what evidence she based her claim that the majority of employers have welcomed the Working Families Tax Credit. [155433]

Dawn Primarolo: The evidence is that over 1.1 million working families now receive WFTC—300,000 more than received Family Credit at its peak. Thanks to the generosity of WFTC awards, employers are now able to offer jobs to people who would otherwise face financial barriers to work. This is a significant benefit to employers and the economy as a whole. The CBI has supported the WFTC which it has described as playing

"a key role in raising incentives to work by targeting additional resources on those people who are most likely to suffer from the poverty and unemployment traps".

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the entitlement to Working Families Tax Credit is of a lone parent with three children under 16 in receipt of child benefit and with eligible child care costs of £200 per week and gross earnings of *(a)* £34,000, *(b)* £40,000 and *(c)* £45,000. [155355]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* Whether such families are entitled to Working Families Tax Credit, and the sizes of their awards, depends on other conditions, including their savings. The Inland Revenue booklet WFTC/BK1, "Your Guide to Working Families' Tax Credit" explains how to calculate whether a family is entitled to an award, and its size. A copy is available on the Inland Revenue website: www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk. The values of the various credits, and the income threshold, for 2000–01 and 2001–02 are shown in Table A.3 of the Budget 2001 Red Book.

Budget Measures (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the *(a)* expected impact of the 2001 Budget and *(b)* combined impact of the Budget measures of 1998, 1999 and 2000 on (i) women and (ii) men in London. [155007]

Dawn Primarolo: The impact of Budget measures on men and women cannot be measured separately for London. For the UK as a whole, by October 2001, as a result of personal tax and benefit measures:

on average women will be £85 a year better off and men will be £80 a year better off from Budget 2001, compared to an indexed Budget 2000 base;

on average women will be £440 a year better off and men will be £225 a year better off from measures introduced over the Parliament as a whole, compared to an indexed 1997 base. For households, the average gain will be £590 a year.

Looking at the impact of individual new measures on people in London:

the introduction of the Children's Tax Credit will benefit 475,000 families;

the increase in the 10p income tax band will benefit around three million tax payers;

the £5 increase in WFTC will benefit 85,000 working families.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what circumstances self-employed persons may become eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit; and if he will make a statement with specific reference to those businesses affected by foot and mouth disease. [155352]

Dawn Primarolo: Both self-employed people and employees may be eligible for Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) if they are on low or middle incomes, work 16 hours or more a week and if they are responsible for one or more children. WFTC is available to people working in businesses affected by foot and mouth disease, just as it is to other employed or self-employed people.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what circumstances employees who work for small businesses which have cash flow problems resulting in reduced working hours and changed conditions of employment may become eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit; and if he will make a statement with specific reference to businesses affected by foot and mouth disease. [155353]

Dawn Primarolo: Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) provides an earnings top-up for low and middle income working families. An employee working for a small business—including any business affected by foot and mouth disease—would be eligible to apply for WFTC as long as he or she works for 16 hours or more a week and has one or more dependent children.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many buildings the Inland Revenue *(a)* owned and *(b)* rented in (i) Scotland and (ii) the United Kingdom in

(A) 1998–99 and (B) 1999–2000; and what was the insurance expenditure to cover buildings and employees in those years. [155310]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is as follows:

	1998–99		1999–2000	
	Freehold	*Leaseholds*	*Freehold*	*Leaseholds*
Scotland	16	27	16	28
United Kingdom	117	360	117	371

Government policy is to self-insure.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the number of Inland Revenue employees by UK region, indicating the wage cost *(a)* in total and *(b)* by region for 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01 and separately identifying the costs of London allowances and weighting. [155307]

Dawn Primarolo: For the staff numbers, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Cabinet Office publications Civil Service Statistics 1998 and 1999 and the Cabinet Office news release of 29 November 2000. The cost of wages by UK region is not available.

Customs Staff

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to how many HM Customs staff who left in 2000 compulsory Early Severance Terms under the pre-1987 agreement applied. [155566]

Dawn Primarolo: Six people left HM Customs and Excise in 2000 on Compulsory Early Severance terms with reserved rights under the pre-1987 agreement.

Guaranteed Annuities

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date in 1998 his Department received the report of the Government Actuary's Department into life offices' exposure to guaranteed annuities options. [154807]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* I understand that the Government Actuary's Department sent a report on reserving for annuity guarantees to HM Treasury in September 1998.

Vehicle Repairs (VAT)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors underlie the decision to exempt motor vehicle repair shops owned by insurance companies from VAT on labour costs. [155142]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) on 25 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 210W.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many appeals have been received to alter the valuation of business premises in the rating list which came into effect on 1 April 2000; and how many are still outstanding. [155039]

Dawn Primarolo: Information concerning the number of appeals received will be given in the Valuation Office Agency's Annual Report and Accounts, to be published later in the year.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Valuation Office staff are engaged in the programme of deciding proposals to alter the 2000 rating list. [155037]

Dawn Primarolo: A precise breakdown of the number of staff involved is not available.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will answer the question from the hon. Member for Hertsmere, Reference Number 150049, regarding national insurance contributions, tabled for answer on 12 February. [152744]

Dawn Primarolo: I have done so today.

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he will reply to the parliamentary question tabled by the hon. Member for Chichester on 30 January, reference 148435, on Treasury staff costs; [154279]

(2) when he will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Chichester on 6 February (ref. 148435). [154671]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* I have done so today.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many employees of the Office for National Statistics there were broken down by UK region, indicating the wage bill *(a)* in total and *(b)* by region for (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000 and separately identifying the costs of London allowances and weighting. [155311]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Andrew Welsh, dated 26 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of employees in the Office for National Statistics Office (ONS) in total and by region. (155311)

The ONS employed 3,384 staff in 1998/99 and 3,449 staff in 1999/00. The breakdown by region and salary cost is shown in the table below.

	1998–99		1999–2000	
Location	*Employee headcount*	*Pay bill (£000)*	*Employee headcount*	*Pay bill (£000)*
London	914	23,742	890	24,242
Newport	898	16,575	974	17,398
Runcorn	143	2,461	156	2,619
Southport	634	9,051	644	9,161
Titchfield	795	15,279	785	15,696
Total	3,384	67,108	3,449	69,116

London Weighting was abolished for new entrants in 1994 and existing staff retained it as an allowance until 1997, when it was consolidated into the London pay scale.

Unemployment Statistics (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children in families with no one in work *(a)* there were in 1996 and *(b)* there are in 2001 in each London borough. [155008]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 26 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about children from families where no one is in work in each London Borough. (155008).

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) provides information on the number of dependent children in families where neither parent is in work. The table gives this information for London Boroughs for autumn (September-November) 2000. Estimates are not available by Borough for 1996.

Children[1] in workless families in London by borough—autumn 1996 and autumn 2000 not seasonally adjusted

Thousand

	1996	2000
Greater London	442	419
Inner London	237	222
Outer London	205	196
City of London	[2]—	[3]—
Barking and Dagenham	[2]—	12
Barnet	[2]—	11
Bexley	[2]—	[3]—
Brent	[2]—	11
Bromley	[2]—	[3]—
Camden	[2]—	13
Croydon	[2]—	12
Ealing	[2]—	17
Enfield	[2]—	19
Greenwich	[2]—	15
Hackney	[2]—	21
Hammersmith and Fulham	[2]—	[3]—
Haringey	[2]—	23
Harrow	[2]—	[3]—
Havering	[2]—	[3]—
Hillingdon	[2]—	11
Hounslow	[2]—	[3]—
Islington	[2]—	20
Kensington and Chelsea	[2]—	[3]—
Kingston upon Thames	[2]—	[3]—
Lambeth	[2]—	12
Lewisham	[2]—	16
Merton	[2]—	[3]—
Newham	[2]—	38
Redbridge	[2]—	19
Richmond upon Thames	[2]—	[3]—
Southwark	[2]—	27
Sutton	[2]—	[3]—
Tower Hamlets	[2]—	26
Waltham Forest	[2]—	12
Wandsworth	[2]—	[3]—
Westminster	[2]—	[3]—

[1] Children aged under 16, and those aged 16–18 in full-time education
[2] Figure not available
[3] Figure too small for reliable estimate
Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Earnings Statistics

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the percentage of *(a)* full-time employees and *(b)* all employees who earned below £930 per week in 2000–01; and if he will provide corresponding estimates for each standard planning region. [155477]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have been asked to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 26 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of employees earning less than £930 per week. (155477)

The New Earnings Survey (NES) is carried out in April each year. This provides weekly earnings data for all employees and full-time employees. The release of NES data is restricted to figures that are derived from a sufficiently large sample of employees, and have an acceptable level of accuracy.

The table provides the available data for Great Britain and the Government Office Regions. These are based on the 2000 NES, the latest survey for which data are available.

Percentage of employees earning less than £930 per week for Great Britain and the Government Office Regions; April 2000

	Full-time employees	All employees
Great Britain	96.7	97.4
North East	98.7	99.1
North West	97.8	98.3
Yorkshire and the Humber	98.0	98.5
East Midlands	98.3	98.7
West Midlands	97.6	98.2
South West	98.0	98.5
East	96.7	97.5
London	91.4	93.0
South East	96.0	96.9
Wales	98.6	98.9
Scotland	97.8	98.3

Source:
New Earnings Survey

Average Pay (Northern Region)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average pay was in the Northern Region *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [155051]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Fraser Kemp, dated 26 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on average pay in the Northern region (155051).

Government Office regions (GORs) are now used as the standard classification for regional analysis or statistics. The one used for the Northern region is the North East GOR.

The New Earnings Survey (NES), carried out in April of each year, is the most comprehensive source of earnings information in Great Britain. This shows that in the North East Government Office Region the average weekly pay was £315.2 in 1996 and £365.8 in 2000, the latest date for which figures are available. The figures provided are for full-time employees on adult rates of pay, whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence.

Minimum Wage (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in London had their pay increased on implementation of the minimum wage. [154948]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 26 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of people in London who had their pay increased on implementation of the national minimum wage (NMW) (154948).

The Office for National Statistics has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than NMW rates for 1998, 1999, 2000. These estimates are based on an improved methodology using data from the New Earnings Survey (NES) and Labour Force Survey (LFS). This methodology provides the best estimates for the number of jobs in the UK paid below low hourly rate thresholds. Estimates for the United Kingdom and Government Office Regions, including London, are posted on the National Statistics website at: www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour_market/nmw_lowpay_tables.asp

The new methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NES and LFS, in measuring low pay.

Census

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is regarding the collection of census forms in April; and if he will make a statement. [155548]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Nick Gibb, dated 26 March 2001:

As Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking about the policy regarding the collection of census forms in April (155548).

For the first time in a census in England and Wales the main method of collection will be the post-back of completed forms. Postage paid envelopes will be delivered with the census forms. This policy will ensure that field staff resources are concentrated in those areas where lower levels of postal response are experienced, and where additional effort may be necessary to collect completed forms or provide assistance.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost will be of the 2001 Census; and how much will be attributed to *(a)* fieldwork and *(b)* data processing. [155252]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Richard Ottaway, dated 27 March 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on what the cost will be of the 2001 Census; and how much will be attributed to (a) fieldwork and (b) data processing (155252).

The total estimated cost for the 2001 Census in England and Wales over the 13-year period 1993/94 to 2005/06 is £207 million. Of this, some £92 million is attributed to fieldwork activities, mainly concentrated in the period 1999/00 to 2001/02, and £86 million is attributed to processing, mainly concentrated in the period 2001/02 to 2003/04.

The census is a devolved matter in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the plans his Department has in place to ensure that each household in England and Wales will be visited and all inhabitants counted for the purposes of the Census during the foot and mouth outbreak. [155847]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Stephen O'Brien, dated 27 March 2001:

As National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking what plans are in place to ensure that each household in England and Wales will be visited and all inhabitants counted for the purposes of the Census during the foot-and-mouth outbreak. (155847)

On 20 March I released a statement outlining new plans for conducting the Census in areas affected by foot-and-mouth disease. I attach a copy of the statement. This explains that the Census-takers working in the countryside will respect all foot-and-mouth restrictions, and new arrangements will be put in place to allow delivery to farms and households by mail, or where practical to an agreed point such as a farm boundary. Specific guidance for enumerators is being prepared in consultation with MAFF and the National Assembly for Wales.

In response to the understanding we now have this week about the potential maximum scale of the foot-and-mouth outbreak, I intend to provide an update to this statement this week.

Census: foot-and-mouth

Statement by National Statistician, Len Cook

Plans for conducting the Census in areas affected by foot-and-mouth disease were announced today by Len Cook, National Statistician, and Registrar General for England and Wales.

The Census will continue.

"Census-takers working in the countryside will respect all foot-and-mouth restrictions, whether statutory or otherwise imposed". Mr Cook said. "I am conscious of the distress and difficulty the disease is causing, and we shall do nothing that might contribute to its spread."

Census enumerators are local people, working in local communities, in local conditions. New arrangements will be put in place so that in rural areas Census forms can be delivered to farms and households by mail, or, where practical by prior arrangement to an agreed point such as a farm boundary. Census-takers are being instructed to be flexible in arranging the delivery of forms. On no account will they use taped-off thoroughfares or pass warning signs. They will also comply at all times with local disinfecting requirements. Specific guidance for Census enumerators is being prepared in consultation with MAFF and the National Assembly for Wales.

People in rural England and Wales have responded particularly well in past Censuses, and this makes it possible to introduce a much more flexible approach to counting people in these parts of the country, in response to the outbreak.

Census Day is Sunday 29 April. This year, as will be the case nationwide, households in affected areas will return their forms by post.

Barney Holbeche, Head of Parliamentary Affairs at the NFU of England and Wales, welcomed the plans.

"We are grateful to the Census organisers for recognising the need to minimise any risk of further spreading infection, and to make special arrangements for the delivery and collection of forms from farmers and their staff in the restricted areas of the

country," he said. "It is important that this exercise is conducted in a sensitive manner at this time of great stress for farmers, and we will be working with the Census-takers to facilitate this process."

Households that cannot be reached personally by a census-taker, can expect to receive a Census form by post. In Wales, there will be forms in both Welsh and English. Also included will be an explanatory letter, an information leaflet and a post-back envelope. The letter will explain that additional or different forms can be obtained by phoning the Census Helpline, which will be available from Sunday 1 April 2001.

Drug-related Deaths (Peterborough)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) where Peterborough stands nationally in relation to drug-related deaths per 100,000 of the population; [155115]

(2) how many drug-related deaths there were per 100,000 of the population in Peterborough in the last 12 months for which figures are available; and what the *(a)* highest, *(b)* lowest and *(c)* average figure was for constituencies in England. [155116]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mrs. Helen Brinton, dated 26 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent questions about where Peterborough stands nationally in relation to drug-related deaths per 100,000 of the population, how many drug-related deaths there were per 100,000 of the population in Peterborough in the last 12 months for which figures are available and what the highest, lowest and average figures were for constituencies in England. (155115, 155116).

Rates per 100,000 population are only available for Local Authorities. The Office for National Statistics holds a database on drug-related deaths. This contains information on deaths from accidents and suicides involving drugs, as well as poisonings due to drug abuse and drug dependence. It includes deaths from drugs such as paracetamol and aspirin as well as drugs of abuse. The full definition of deaths relating to drug poisoning can be found in *Health Statistics Quarterly 09* (copies of which are in the House of Commons library).

In 1999, the age-standardised death rate from drug poisonings in Peterborough Unitary Authority was 3 deaths per 100,000 population, compared to an average of 5 deaths per 100,000 for England as a whole. In Local Authorities with more than one death during 1999, the highest age-standardised mortality rate was 16 deaths per 100,000 population. There were 14 local authorities where no deaths were recorded.

Civil Servant Costs

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will separately identify the average cost of the *(a)* salary, *(b)* superannuation, *(c)* accommodation and *(d)* personal secretaries support, assuming one secretary per official, of employing a team leader, former grade 5 equivalent, in the Treasury in the financial year 2000–01. [148435]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* Treasury staff in range F fall within Senior Salaries Review Body pay bands 1 and 2. The SSRB's recent report (Cm 4995) gives more details. The average salary for a Treasury range F is £55,400. Superannuation averages £9,170.

The average accommodation or personal secretary cost for a range F cannot be separately identified.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Randall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled by Ministers since 1 January. [155234]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is not held centrally.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled by Ministers since 1 January. [155241]

Clare Short: Since 1 January no ministerial meetings between Ministers from my Department and hon. Members have been cancelled.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the contribution to peace and development in Sudan being made by foreign oil companies operating in Sudan. [155147]

Clare Short: We are aware of some efforts by oil companies to provide services to the local populations in the areas of their oil concessions. The exploitation of Sudan's natural resources has the potential to be a major driver of development for the people of Sudan. But for this to happen there needs to be a peaceful solution to the civil war.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reports she has received on East Timorese who are in camps in West Timor. [155027]

Clare Short: Accurate information on conditions in the West Timor refugee camps is difficult to obtain, following the withdrawal of UN staff and international NGOs in the aftermath of the killing of three UN workers in Atambua last September. But the Indonesian Government have managed the situation in the camps relatively well, and there have been no reports of widespread hunger. Some international NGOs, including Medecins sans Frontieres and Save the Children Fund, are considering re-establishing programmes. A UN mission is due in West Timor soon to review the security situation and decide whether conditions are safe enough for UN staff to return. The UN are particularly keen to ensure that all of those in the camps who want to return to East Timor are able to do so by 20 June, to enable them to register to vote in the Constituent Assembly elections planned for 30 August.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what contributions she is making to alleviate the conditions of internally displaced persons in Aceh, Indonesia. [155026]

Clare Short: We contributed £500,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) appeal for Indonesia last year; and we support the work of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva (also known as the Henri Dunant Centre) which brokered the recent "humanitarian pause" in Aceh. We are also working with the UN system in Indonesia to help strengthen its conflict management activities and its response to humanitarian emergencies, whether natural or conflict related.

Administration of Justice

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what help she is giving to poorer countries to improve the administration of justice. [155128]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on 7 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 597W.

St. Helena

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response she has made to the recommendations set out in the access report proposed on St. Helena prepared by High Point Rendell. [155774]

Clare Short: My Department will comment on the draft final report of the Comparative Study of Air and Sea Access within the next week. High Point Rendell will then proceed with preparation of the final report. Its recommendations will then need to be discussed with the St. Helena Government.

Colombia

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much the Government are contributing to the EU assistance package of aid to Colombia; and if she will make a statement on how this money will be spent. [153934]

Clare Short: The UK's attributed share of EC expenditure varies from year to year. In 1999, the last year for which we have finalised figures, the UK's share was 17.75 per cent. Details of the proposed aid package are still being determined and will be discussed at a meeting of the European Union of member states and the Colombian Government on 30 April 2001.

Child Soldiers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries that her Department is in discussion with about combating the use by those countries of child soldiers in military conflicts. [154456]

Clare Short: My Department has been working with UNICEF to strengthen its capacity to protect and assist children in crisis situations. UNICEF is engaged on these issues with governments, NGOs and other UN agencies in a wide range of countries including Uganda, ECOWAS states, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Cambodia, the Philippines, East Timor, Indonesia, Paraguay, South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo. My Department has also been supporting work on child soldiers in Sri Lanka with UNICEF's Children and Women in Armed Conflict programme, the Quaker UN office, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Save the Children Fund.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Royal Parks Constabulary

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will publish the report on the inspection of the Royal Parks Constabulary by Mr. Anthony Speed; and if he will make a statement. [155988]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The report was published today and I have placed copies in the Libraries of both Houses. The report is also published on the DCMS website www.culture.gov.uk. I am grateful to Mr. Anthony Speed and his assistant for conducting a thorough inspection of the Royal Parks Constabulary (RPC).

The review was commissioned by the Royal Parks Advisory Board which has considered the report carefully. In reaching my conclusions on the report's recommendations, I have had the benefit of the Board's advice for which I am grateful.

I accept the report's analysis and its recommendations for improved efficiency and effectiveness. Immediate action has been taken to remedy deficiencies and further changes and improvements are being taken forward. Mr. Speed makes 23 recommendations. In the following list I give the action taken on each of them to date.

It is essential for the morale of the RPC and for recruitment and retention that the Force is properly remunerated. The Government have agreed, therefore, to make more money available to maintain the link between the salaries of RPC officers and of the Metropolitan police service at 85 per cent. The award is being backdated to 1 September 2000. The question of an additional London Allowance is under consideration.

My Department is discussing with the Home Office the future relationship between the RPC and the Metropolitan police service. The current position is that the RPC remains part of the Royal Parks Agency. There are options for change, as Mr. Speed's report recognises. These options require further detailed examination and discussion. I recognise that uncertainty can be unsettling and we shall reach a conclusion as soon as possible.

Mr. Speed's report acknowledges the level of public satisfaction with the way in which the Royal Parks are policed. They are relatively crime-free areas. This is due to the dedication and professionalism of the officers of the RPC which I recognise and to which I pay tribute.

Report of the formal inspection of the Royal Parks Constabulary by Mr. Anthony Speed

Recommendation	*Progress*
1. The duality of function of the Chief Officer should cease (Paras 2.3–2.10)	The Chief Officer no longer has responsibilities as head of personnel. He remains a member of the Management Board
2. The Chief Officer should be a superintendent on secondment from a Home Office Police Force (Paras 2.20–2.23)	This is being discussed with the Home Office
3. The Deputy Chief Officer should be a Chief Inspector (Para 2.24)	A Promotion Board for Chief Inspector/Deputy Chief Officer post was held on 26 March 2001
4. The Chief Officer should be allowed to run the Royal Parks Constabulary alone, on properly constituted lines (Paras 2.26–2.27)	The Chief Officer now has full operational control of the Force
5. The Royal Parks Constabulary should produce an annual, costed, policing plan, which gives a clear account of performance in the previous financial year (Paras 3.12–3.15)	Properly costed policing plan for 2001–02 prepared, following full consultation. Currently being professionally reproduced for distribution Further work necessary in respect of comparisons with performance in previous financial year
6. Planning guidelines should be produced by the Force showing the link between the community and the Constabulary and include a clear timetable for the contribution from all parties to the plan (Paras 3.16–3.17)	Interim guidelines produced to enable preparation of the policing plan for 2001–02 These guidelines are being reviewed now and a more detailed document will be produced for distribution in April 2001
7. A properly constituted Police Authority should be formed, with clear links to Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary to hold the Chief Officer to account for Force performance (Paras 3.19–3.22)	This is being discussed with the Home Office
8. A budget should be set for the Force allowing the Chief Officer to set staffing levels (Para 3.24)	Budget currently being set for financial year 2001–02
9. A full participative management programme should be published which clearly shows how policy is developed and how each rank contributes to that process (Paras 3.26–3.34)	Manual of Guidance now produced and distributed Minutes of Senior Management Team meetings being prepared in greater detail, with policy decisions highlighted. Hard copies being circulated to supplement distribution by e-mail. Target set to circulate minutes within seven working days of meetings A newsletter has been distributed to every officer to explain the process of change taking place and further editions will be sent out at regular interval. The consultation guidelines for the Policing Plan 2001–02 include the opportunity to take the views of staff (both police and civil) into account in the setting of Force aims and objectives Further actions to follow
10. The Force should produce a detailed Human Resources strategy document (Para 4.1)	This document is being prepared
11. The Constabulary should not seek any further Investors in People (IIP) assessments until recommendations from previous assessments have been implemented (Para 4.4)	Meeting with IIP assessors held and areas identified for further action. Work continuing
12. Staff development should be improved including the use of acting ranks to cover absences (Paras 4.10–4.11)	Temporary promotions made in the ranks of chief inspector, inspector and sergeant Substantive promotion made in the rank of sergeant and about to be made in the rank of chief inspector Training plan for 2001–02 prioritises staff development
13. Pay parity should be immediately linked to 85 per cent., and allowances increased, in line with the total remuneration of the MPS package (Paras 4.20–4.22)	Pay award has just been made for payment at the end of March. Award backdated to 1 September 2000 Award links pay to 85 per cent. of national police pay rates and includes payment of MPS allowances in respect of London Weighting and London Allowance(2)[1]. Discussions will be held with the Treasury over payment of the Metropolitan police service allowance known as London Allowance(1), currently £1,011 pa [1] London Allowance(2), currently £3,327 pa, is paid to officers who joined after 1994 and who are not in receipt of recent allowance
14. The Constabulary should immediately start monitoring gender and racial matters	Additional monitoring of gender and racial matters is now taking place

Report of the formal inspection of the Royal Parks Constabulary by Mr. Anthony Speed

Recommendation	*Progress*
15. The Constabulary should immediately commence diversity training using the help and expertise in the Home Office (Para 4.42)	Additional diversity training for all officers is already scheduled to take place between January and April 2001 Further diversity training to be carried out between September and December 2001. This second stage training will encompass best practice from the Home Office and will be designed so as to reflect both Force policy and the specific needs of the community and RPC officers
16. The Constabulary should establish clear guidelines on grievance procedures (Para 4.42)	Grievance procedures have been redrafted taking account of comments received as a result of consultation. Final draft will be produced for publication by May 2001
17. Meetings of all parties involved in event management should be held to further the understanding of each other's roles and improve co-ordination (Para 5.31)	Meetings already held to prepare an Events Seminar for RPA/RPC managers in April 2001 Further seminar to be developed for RPA/RPC and all outside agencies involved in events, for delivery before summer 2001
18. An IT policy and procedures manual should be produced (Para 6.2)	Interim IT User Security Operating Procedures instruction issued in November 2000
19. The RPC should commence negotiations with the British Transport Police for enhanced call handling facilities and install the necessary infrastructure as soon as possible (Para 6.11)	Contract for the provision of control room services by the BTP became operative on 1 December 2000. System went live on 7 January 2001 New control room facility is dealing with an average of around 200 calls for police action/attention per week. It is projected that it will handle over 10,000 calls per year. A significant improvement in call handling and response has already been achieved
20. The Constabulary install locks on the open drive of each computer terminal (Para 6.14)	New software system introduced to prevent the use of unauthorised floppy discs
21. A submission should be made to the Home Secretary to change the law so that RPC officers retain full police powers throughout the judicial process (Para 6.22)	This is being discussed with the Home Office
22. The RPC should seek full Computerised Crime Reporting System enablement with the MPS as soon as possible (Para 7.12)	Cost implication of this measure currently being examined
23. Start up moneys should be provided for the RPC to come under Home Office control as a ring-fenced division of the MPS or, alternatively, funds should be provided to allow proper management, accountability and policing by the Royal Parks Constabulary	Exercise currently being undertaken as to the cost effectiveness of the two options. This will be discussed with the Home Office
Outside the 23 main recommendations, the following specific areas were singled out for action:	
Consultants In the opinion of the Review Team there was no need for further use of the consultants in the spheres of dogs and the mounted section and, when their contracts are complete, they should not be renewed (Paras 4.12–4.13)	It may be necessary to retain the consultants for a longer period because of the departure of key personnel in the dog and mounted sections
Search Team The RPC have a dedicated, trained search team, who know and understand their particular search area. This should continue (Para 5.22)	Relicensing of search trained officers commenced November 2000. Force now has a properly relicensed search team
Brompton Cemetery Warden Scheme The Review Team urges that negotiations commence immediately with all parties, the RPC, the Friends of Brompton Cemetery, the local community and the local authority to prepare a properly structured community safety plan for the cemetery (Para 6.21)	Initial meeting with Friends of Brompton Cemetery took place in January 2001. Follow up action continuing
Richmond Park, Isabella Plantation Warden Scheme The Review Team urges all parties to draw up detailed plans for dealing with issues of training, equipment, accountability, powers and personal safety, with regular monitoring and feedback (Para 6.22)	Once properly arranged, the Brompton Cemetery Warden Scheme will be used as a model for Richmond

DEFENCE

HMS Excellent

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department has spent at HMS Excellent in the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [155801]

Mr. Spellar: The operating and major works costs for HMS Excellent over the last five years are set out in the table:

£ million

Financial year	Operating costs	Major works costs
1995–96	14.304	3.617
1996–97	15.385	0.633
1997–98	16.408	0
1998–99	16.117	0
1999–2000	16.350	0

Defence Training Review

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Defence Training Review. [155985]

Mr. Hoon: Training is crucial to the success of our armed forces, and of the business of the Ministry of Defence itself. It represents a resource investment of some £4.2 billion each year. Increasingly, we face new challenges and it is vital to ensure that our training continues to meet our needs and is cost-effective. Against this background, my predecessor announced on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 614-615W that he had ordered a fundamental review of education and individual training. This review has now concluded and its report, entitled "Modernising Defence Training", is published today. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

The key findings of the review are that, overall, our training and education are of high quality, as demonstrated by operational successes, most recently in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. Improvements are nevertheless required to ensure that we have a training and education system to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The report therefore sets out a coherent set of measures designed to deliver a training and education system that is better integrated, aligned to operational and business needs, responsive to change and cost-effective.

To reflect changing operational priorities, in particular those which emerged from the Strategic Defence Review, the report proposes more joint training between the services, and more multinational and inter-agency training for individuals at all levels. In line with the modernising government initiative, we will introduce improvements to civilian training and to leadership and management training, and will make the leadership expertise of MOD and the armed services more widely available as a resource for the UK as a whole. We will exploit the opportunities provided by new technology to make training better and more accessible, in particular through the expansion of e-learning.

We also propose significant improvements in the field of education. The Royal College of Defence Studies, the Joint Command and Staff College and the Royal Military College of Science, with two new organisations—a Joint Services Warrant Officers School and a Defence Leadership Centre—will be brought together to form a Defence Academy, which we intend to become a national and international centre of excellence for postgraduate education and research. We plan to set up a defence sixth-form college and a defence undergraduate bursary scheme to boost recruitment of engineers and scientists, and to introduce a programme of progressive civilian accreditation of defence education and training. A common theme behind many of our proposals is the need not only to prepare our service and civilian personnel for the tasks we require of them, but to support their personal development, in line with the Government's commitment to lifelong learning, which is already enshrined in the learning forces initiative. This will help recruitment and retention, and also—recognising that for most people the services will not be their only career—provide transferable skills and qualifications that will enhance the national skills base.

We have identified significant scope for improving coherence and cost-effectiveness through training and estate rationalisation, in particular by delivering a significant proportion of specialist training in new defence schools, either joint or lead service, rather than on an individual basis. As well as eliminating duplication, this would improve the quality of training, particularly that in support of joint forces and operations. This will be investigated further by project definition teams over the next 12 months. Subject to the outcome of this work, we believe that the rationalisation programme will result in more cost-effective training and will free resources both to fund improvements we have identified and for defence as a whole.

Finally, to drive through and sustain all of these improvements we will establish a Director General Training and Education, who will provide a central strategy and policy focus.

The review has been comprehensive and wide-ranging, and has been conducted in close consultation with all interested parties both within the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces, and outside, including allies. The resulting proposals will build on our existing strengths to provide a better focused and more effective training and education system, ensuring that our service-men and women and civil servants receive the training and education they need to meet the challenges of the 21st century, and helping to maintain this country's reputation for professional, effective and successful armed forces.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what responses have been received to his Department's consultative document on screening arrangements for service personnel and civilians who have served in the Balkans and the Gulf and who are concerned about exposure to depleted uranium; and if he will make a statement. [155986]

Dr. Moonie: I am pleased to say that we have received a total of 32 very helpful and constructive responses to our consultative document on the technical aspects of a screening programme. These are being used in the development of plans for the next stage of work. We now

plan to publish a second consultative document with our proposals by 11 April. This is a little later than we had hoped, but the change is necessary if we are to take proper account of the comments we have received.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he requested Professor Peter Lachmann to subject to peer review his report into the zinc cadmium sulphide trials which was published in March 2000; and if he will make a statement. [154792]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence commissioned Professor Peter Lachmann and his colleagues to produce a report of their independent findings for publication. The report was published and a copy placed in the Library of the House on 24 March 2000. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 13 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 165W, which referred to the separate matter of the subsequent plan of Professor Lachmann and his colleagues to submit to a scientific journal a scientific paper, based on the report, for peer review and possible publication. This is a matter for Professor Lachmann and his colleagues. Peer review is a normal part of the process of publishing such papers in scientific journals.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what requests for assistance in dealing with foot and mouth disease have been received from other Government Departments. [155557]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 521W.

Compensation Claims

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many claims from *(a)* UK and *(b)* non-UK citizens for compensation are outstanding against his Department because of accidents; how many claims have been outstanding for more than (i) one, (ii) two and (iii) three years; and if he will make a statement; [155795]

(2) how many outstanding claims for compensation his Department is dealing with relating to service personnel who received injuries at the time of duty; how many have been outstanding for more than *(a)* one, *(b)* two and *(c)* three years; and if he will make a statement; [155796]

(3) how many outstanding claims for compensation his Department has from civilian employees for work-related accidents; how many are more than *(a)* one year and *(b)* two years old; and if he will make a statement. [155797]

Dr. Moonie: The number of claims for compensation outstanding against the Ministry of Defence from UK and non-UK citizens as a result of injury caused by accidents as at 23 March 2001 is as follows:

Outstanding	*UK citizens*	*Non-UK citizens*
Total	284	51
Less than one year	148	38
More than one year	75	9
More than two years	31	2
More than three years	30	2

These figures relate to public liability claims against the Ministry of Defence and therefore exclude claims from service personnel and civilian employees.

The number of claims for compensation outstanding against the Ministry of Defence from service personnel who received injuries in service was 1,596 at 23 March 2001. Of these 652 have been outstanding for less than one year, 413 for more than one year, 214 for more than two years and 317 for more than three years.

The number of claims for compensation outstanding against the Ministry of Defence from civilian employees who received injuries as the result of work-related accidents is as follows:

Outstanding	*Civilian employees*
Total	833
Less than one year	204
More than one year	386
More than two years	243

When compensation claims are submitted, they are considered on the basis of whether or not the Ministry of Defence has a legal liability to pay compensation. Where there is a legal liability to pay compensation we do so. The time taken to settle a claim is dependent on a number of factors including the complexity of the case as it relates to determining liability and the nature of the injury, which can range from simple bruises or fractures, for example, to catastrophic injuries where the long-term medical prognosis cannot be assessed for some considerable time.

In line with all other defendants, the Ministry of Defence is bound by the Civil Procedure Rules introduced on 26 April 1999, which specify time scales for the handling of claims. The courts have the power to impose financial sanctions against defendants for non-compliance with the rules. No such sanctions have been imposed against the Ministry of Defence.

Royal Navy Fire Fighting School

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the cost was of re-locating the fire fighting school to Whale Island, Portsmouth; and if he will make a statement; [155800]

(2) what the costs were of the fuel tanks recently installed at Whale Island, Portsmouth; and if he will make a statement. [155798]

Mr. Spellar: The overall cost of the new fire fighting training units at HMS Excellent, HMS Raleigh and Strathclyde fire brigade was £6.50 million (excluding VAT) per annum over a 20-year period. These provide all the fire fighting training for the Royal Navy.

The overall project was funded as a private finance initiative (PFI) with Flagship Fire Fighting Ltd. under the public-private partnership agreement between the Navy Recruiting and Training Agency and Flagship Training Ltd. Flagship own the facilities at HMS Excellent and HMS Raleigh and the Royal Navy pays a monthly cost for the training, currently estimated to average £500,000 per month. The cost of demolition of the fire fighting training facility at Horsea Island was £65,000.

The fuel tanks referred to are, in fact, waste water tanks which hold waste water expended following completion of the day's fire fighting training activities.

The cost of the waste water tanks is included within the PFI contract with Flagship Fire Fighting Training Ltd.

Rosyth

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the assets disposed of by his Department at Rosyth, indicating in each case the nature of the asset, the date of its disposal and the sum realised on disposal. [151652]

Dr. Moonie: Babcock Rosyth Defence Ltd., the owners of Rosyth royal dockyard, currently operate a regional marketing agreement for the disposal of surplus Ministry of Defence assets in Scotland, northern England and Germany. A list of those assets disposed of since the agreement came into operation in January 1997 could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Smart Procurement

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was paid by his Department, including the Defence Procurement Agency to consultants to develop the smart procurement initiative. [153450]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence has received advice from a number of consultancy companies on various aspects of the smart procurement initiative (SPI) and related changes.

The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, McKinsey and Co. Inc. were paid £1.35 million for their work specifically to help develop SPI.

Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he had on the replacement of General Sir Rupert Smith as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe by General Dietrich Stockmann; if the UK made a nomination for this post; and if he will make a statement. [155794]

Mr. Hoon: This change was part of an agreement reached preceding implementation of the new NATO command structure in 1999, under which the United Kingdom and Germany will alternate the provision of Senior Commanders at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and Regional Headquarters Allied Forces Northern Europe (RHQ AFNORTH). At SHAPE, we will provide either Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) or the Chief of Staff and at RHQ AFNORTH we will provide either the Commander in Chief (C in C) or the Deputy C in C. The nation filling the DSACEUR post will provide the Deputy C in C at the Regional HQ; the UK has recently taken over the key C in C NORTH post in anticipation of General Sir Rupert Smith handing over to General Stockmann as DSACEUR.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Planning Agreements

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which Government programmes allow for the use of section 106 contributions from planning agreements as match-funding; and if he will make a statement. [152491]

Jacqui Smith: Section 106 agreements are sometimes used to secure funding for school projects across all sectors. There is no obligation for match funding under such agreements, though money from a section 106 agreement could be used to part-fund a school's project. Current Government policy on use of section 106 funding is set out in circular 1/97 issued by DETR.

Teacher Vacancies

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, for each month since May 1997, for each local education authority in England, the teaching post vacancies notified to his Department. [153279]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Information on teacher vacancies in January each year since 1995, for each local education authority, is shown in table 42 of Statistics of Education, Teachers, England and Wales, 2000 edition, which is available in the House of Commons Library.

Teacher vacancies for each local authority are collected only for January of each year.

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of more than 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000, and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Mr. Joyce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidance his Department provides to schools on publications in which teaching vacancies are advertised; [155603]

(2) what guidance his Department provides to colleges on the publications in which teaching vacancies are advertised. [155625]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department does not publish guidance on this matter, which is best decided by schools and colleges themselves in the light of their individual circumstances and requirements.

Coalmining Areas (Departmental Support)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what specific support his Department has provided to coalmining communities by *(a)* region and *(b)* local education authority area since 1997. [154304]

Ms Estelle Morris: Most funding provided by the Department is distributed via local education authorities. The Department does not hold information on support

provided to coalmining communities by region. The tables set out the total funding to coalfield areas for the years 1996–97 to 2001–01 by local education authority area. The following revenue grants have been included: DfEE contributions to the standards fund; class size reduction grant; funding for education action zones; grant for nursery vouchers in 1997–98; school budget support grant; and school standards grant.

Where there are no figures against years 1996–97 or 1997–98, the authority had either been subject to local government reorganisation, or had yet to be created as a result of LGR.

£ million

	SSA	Grants	Capital
1996–97			
Kent	n/a	n/a	n/a
Staffordshire	n/a	n/a	n/a
Stoke-on-Trent	n/a	n/a	n/a
Doncaster	119.7	1.0	6.4
Warwickshire	*164.0*	*1.4*	*24.1*
Derbyshire	n/a	n/a	n/a
Leicestershire	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nottinghamshire	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nottingham City	n/a	n/a	n/a
North Yorkshire	185.9	2.0	3.9
Barnsley	76.9	0.9	3.8
Rotherham	102.4	1.1	2.5
Sunderland	114.9	1.0	8.8
Salford	82.5	0.8	7.0
Sheffield	171.0	1.6	4.9
Calderdale	77.2	0.7	1.3
Kirklees	141.5	1.7	2.7
Leeds	252.5	2.4	8.6
Trafford	76.7	0.7	3.8
Wakefield	111.6	1.2	13.4
Wigan	110.1	1.5	4.4
St. Helens	66.6	0.6	2.2
Middlesbrough	61.5	0.5	1.7
Durham	n/a	n/a	n/a
Northumberland	113.5	1.5	3.0
Newcastle upon Tyne	99.7	1.5	1.0
South Tyneside	59.0	0.7	1.5
1997–98			
Kent	n/a	n/a	n/a
Staffordshire	279.1	12.9	7.4
Stoke-on-Trent	87.0	4.3	1.6
Doncaster	118.6	5.3	1.5
Warwickshire	162.6	6.6	3.0
Derbyshire	236.4	10.7	4.0
Leicestershire	201.1	6.6	2.9
Nottinghamshire	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nottingham City	n/a	n/a	n/a
North Yorkshire	187.9	7.9	5.4
Barnsley	76.1	3.9	3.2
Rotherham	101.9	4.8	2.9
Sunderland	113.7	5.0	7.9
Salford	82.2	4.1	5.5
Sheffield	168.7	7.9	7.5
Calderdale	76.8	3.3	1.3
Kirklees	142.9	7.1	3.6
Leeds	254.0	12.3	9.2
Trafford	78.5	3.4	5.0
Wakefield	111.5	5.9	5.2
Wigan	109.4	5.5	6.5
St Helens	67.1	2.9	1.8
Middlesbrough	60.6	2.7	2.6
Durham	178.1	8.8	9.2
Northumberland	114.4	5.3	2.6
Newcastle upon Tyne	97.9	7.9	3.0
South Tyneside	59.5	3.0	1.5

£ million

	SSA	Grants	Capital
1998–99			
Kent	525.6	4.7	22.5
Staffordshire	305.8	3.8	28.6
Stoke-on-Trent	95.9	1.3	5.0
Doncaster	130.4	1.5	2.2
Warwickshire	178.0	2.6	6.3
Derbyshire	257.6	4.7	12.7
Leicestershire	215.3	3.5	6.2
Nottinghamshire	280.5	3.2	10.4
Nottingham City	111.1	2.1	2.8
North Yorkshire	206.7	3.1	8.4
Barnsley	83.3	1.8	7.2
Rotherham	109.9	1.7	6.5
Sunderland	123.9	1.6	6.9
Salford	91.0	1.5	5.5
Sheffield	184.6	3.2	14.7
Calderdale	83.5	1.3	3.0
Kirklees	156.6	2.9	4.6
Leeds	278.7	4.0	10.3
Trafford	84.9	1.1	4.1
Wakefield	*122.9*	*1.8*	*7.8*
Wigan	119.5	2.6	9.6
St Helens	73.7	0.8	3.7
Middlesbrough	65.6	1.5	2.4
Durham	194.5	3.5	11.4
Northumberland	123.3	2.3	4.5
Newcastle upon Tyne	106.5	3.0	8.7
South Tyneside	65.7	1.4	2.5
1999–2000			
Kent	553.5	14.3	21.3
Staffordshire	323.1	9.3	17.2
Stoke-on-Trent	99.5	4.2	98.5
Doncaster	136.1	5.3	5.0
Warwickshire	187.6	6.5	7.3
Derbyshire	272.4	10.3	13.0
Leicestershire	228.2	7.6	9.3
Nottinghamshire	296.00	8.6	14.0
Nottingham City	116.7	6.0	4.4
North Yorkshire	219.7	8.0	17.5
Barnsley	87.4	3.9	5.1
Rotherham	116.1	4.8	5.3
Sunderland	129.1	3.5	8.3
Salford	95.2	4.3	5.6
Sheffield	195.0	8.2	69.4
Calderdale	88.2	3.6	3.3
Kirklees	164.3	5.9	7.1
Leeds	292.4	11.3	17.0
Trafford	91.1	2.9	4.9
Wakefield	129.0	4.6	7.5
Wigan	125.3	5.4	11.4
St. Helens	76.5	1.9	4.5
Middlesbrough	68.5	3.7	2.2
Durham	203.4	8.2	12.0
Northumberland	129.3	4.8	6.2
Newcastle upon Tyne	111.0	4.6	9.2
South Tyneside	68.8	3.0	3.4
2000–01			
Kent	588.3	34.0	61.0
Staffordshire	336.8	21.5	34.2
Stoke-on-Trent	104.2	11.2	10.0
Doncaster	141.7	11.5	10.7
Warwickshire	196.7	13.2	16.6
Derbyshire	288.1	21.4	27.0
Leicestershire	241.0	15.5	21.0
Nottinghamshire	311.5	20.5	44.2
Nottingham City	120.8	13.7	9.0
North Yorkshire	232.1	16.8	23.9
Barnsley	91.4	7.7	7.0
Rotherham	121.1	12.8	10.0
Sunderland	133.3	10.6	14.2

£ million

	SSA	Grants	Capital
Salford	98.8	12.2	10.7
Sheffield	204.9	23.0	15.2
Calderdale	93.0	6.7	8.3
Kirklees	172.6	11.7	73.7
Leeds	306.6	32.1	62.2
Trafford	95.8	6.2	9.3
Wakefield	135.5	11.7	12.6
Wigan	130.5	11.2	14.1
St. Helens	80.4	5.9	6.9
Middlesbrough	70.8	7.3	4.6
Durham	212.3	17.5	19.6
Northumberland	134.9	11.9	16.0
Newcastle upon Tyne	114.6	9.9	7.6
South Tyneside	71.8	6.5	5.6

DfEE has commissioned research to look at educational participation and attainment in the coalfields.

Teacher Numbers

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers there were in *(a)* Nottinghamshire and *(b)* nationally (i) in May 1997 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [154462]

Ms Estelle Morris: The full-time equivalent numbers of regular teachers (ie excluding short-term supply teachers) in the maintained schools sector at January 1997 and January 2000 were as follows:

	1997	2000
Nottinghamshire	7,800	5,900
City of Nottingham[1]	n/a	2,100
Nottinghamshire total:	7,800	8,000
England	399,200	404,600

[1] Nottinghamshire was split into City of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire in the local Government re-organisation of April 1998.

The number of regular teachers in the maintained schools sector increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Wandsworth LEA

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the funding allocations, by scheme, to Wandsworth local education authority in each year since 1996; and what his estimates are for the 2001–02 financial year. [154791]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer my hon. Friend to the letter sent to him by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 16 February.

The total funding for Wandsworth local education authority since 1996–97 is set out as follows:

£ million

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
SSA	86.3	89.1	93.7	98.2	101.9	106.2
Grants	0.8	3.1	1.2	3.2	8.9	[1]11.0
Of which:						
Standards Fund[2]	0.8	0.9	1.2	2.9	7.1	7.7
Class size reduction	—	—	—	0.3	0.3	0.3
Education action zones	—	—	—	—	0.2	[2]0.2
Nursery vouchers	—	2.2	—	—	—	—
School standards (special grant)	—	—	—	—	1.1	2.0
School budget support grant	—	—	—	—	0.2	—
Education budget support grant	—	—	—	—	—	0.8
Capital	1.2	0.9	1.9	3.5	7.0	N/A

[1] DfEE contributions only. Figures for 2001–02 are provisional.
[2] 2001–02 funding for education action zones not included in letter of 16 February 2001 as amount had not been allocated.

In the Budget on 7 March, national increases of £100 million for school standards grant and devolved new deal for schools capital were announced. Wandsworth will benefit from these increases; the precise allocations are being calculated, and have not been included in the table above.

Real-terms national recurrent funding per pupil will rise year on year by over £200 in 2001–02 and will have risen by over £500 since 1997–98. There will be an average real-terms increase in per pupil funding of around £750 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Education Funding and Teacher Recruitment (West Sussex)

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on education funding and teacher recruitment in West Sussex. [154836]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the letter sent to him by the Secretary of State on 16 February. In the Budget on 7 March, national increases of £100 million for school standards grant and devolved new deal for schools capital were announced. West Sussex will benefit from these increases; the precise allocations are being calculated.

Regarding teacher recruitment, latest figures (January 2000) show the West Sussex teacher vacancy rate as 0.8 per cent. The average for England is also 0.8 per cent. West Sussex will benefit from the Government's existing and planned general measures to improve teacher recruitment and retention, including initiatives resulting from the additional £200 million announced in the Budget.

Fresh Start Schools (Staff Vacancies)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many unfilled vacancies for permanent members of teaching staff there were at each fresh start school on *(a)* 31 December 2000 and *(b)* 28 February; and when he expects them to be filled. [155165]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* We do not collect this information centrally. However, the Department has provided each of the 25 schools which have undergone a "fresh start" since 1997 with additional funding to support their plans for raising standards. Those fresh start schools which have encountered difficulties over teacher vacancies have been able to use these funds both for supply cover, in the short term, and to offer the recruitment and retention allowances needed to attract and keep permanent teaching staff in the longer term.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the meetings and conferences organised by his Department and agencies of his Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [155358]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information is not held centrally and could be collated only at disproportionate cost.

Jewish Schools

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* Jewish schools in the UK received public funds and *(b)* Jewish schools there were in the UK, in each of the last five years. [155618]

Ms Estelle Morris: The total number of Jewish schools and the number which received public funds as maintained schools in England as at 1 January in the last five years are as follows:

	Total number of Jewish schools	*Number of maintained Jewish schools*
1997	70	26
1998	72	27
1999	74	28
2000	78	31
2001	[1]78	32

[1] Provisional

Information about Jewish schools in the rest of the UK can be obtained from the Scottish Executive, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155283]

The Solicitor-General: In October 1999, in line with national policy, the Chichester office of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), in liaison with a number of other criminal justice agencies including courts, police and local lawyers, introduced procedures based upon the Narey proposals. All defendants charged with a criminal offence where a guilty plea is anticipated now make their first appearance before the magistrates within five working days. All other cases appear in court within 48 hours.

In April 2000, the CPS at Chichester changed its structure in line with the proposals of the Glidewell review. As a first step towards a trial unit, it established a Crown Court Committal unit. This enables the Crown Prosecution Service to place greater emphasis on serious crime cases, which are heard at both Chichester and Lewes Crown courts.

The Chichester office also has fast track procedures in place to deal with Persistent Young Offender cases heard at Crown courts and Youth courts. CPS Sussex recorded the best improvement overall in the country in terms of the time taken to bring persistent young offenders to court. The average time taken was reduced from 144 days to 84 days. CPS Sussex is working continually towards the Government's 71-day target. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the criminal justice system.

The Chichester office is also involved in the Direct Communication with Victims initiative. This provides a written explanation when the CPS either discontinues or substantially alters a charge in the Crown court cases within the initiative. In some circumstances the CPS will meet with victims to explain why a decision was taken.

The Chichester office deals with a broad range of work, including murders. One such case made legal history with the conviction of a man for murder where the victim died more than a year and a day after the assault. Using the Law Reform (Year and a day Rule) Act 1996, and with the consent of the Attorney-General, a prosecution for murder was instituted and the defendant convicted. The case was an important decision as it was one of the first occasions when a defendant, who had been previously convicted of an assault before the victim died, was later tried again in respect of the same conduct and convicted of murder.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office do not directly affect the Chichester constituency.

HEALTH

Pithing

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the implications of the EU ban on pithing on the safety of abattoir employees. [144340]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that it has undertaken an extensive public consultation on the potential impact of a ban on pithing. The risk to worker safety through involuntary kicking of stunned animals and the need for structural changes to abattoir premises in order to enable slaughtering to be carried out safely

without pithing were among the points raised in response. We have recognised these concerns and have delayed implementation of the ban until 1 April 2001 to allow abattoir operators more time to make the necessary adjustments to premises.

Safety in the workplace is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The HSE has, in collaboration with the Meat Trades Joint Working Party, developed guidelines and procedures which will help to minimise any potential risk to abattoir employees.

Tablet Blister Packs

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it the policy of the Government to seek to ensure that blister packs of medicinal tablets imported into the UK must have the day of the week identified in English; and if he will make a statement. [153042]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The requirements for the labelling of medicinal products are set out in Directive 92/27/EEC. Printing the days of the week on blister packs is not one of these requirements. In considering the proposals from importers for the labelling of imported products, the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) must ensure that these comply with the terms of the Directive. If they do, the MCA cannot prohibit the importation of the products nor insist that where the days of the week are present in a foreign language they should be translated.

It is therefore the policy of the MCA, where the days of the week are present on the blister strip in another language, to ask importers to provide a translation either on the labelling or within the patient information leaflet. In general the industry is co-operating with this policy. The MCA will continue to pursue it with individual importers on a case by case basis during the evaluation of their applications and with their trade associations.

Dental Services

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost is per patient treated under *(a)* the Cornwall Personal Dental Services Pilot and *(b)* the General Dental Service in England and Wales as a whole. [153963]

Mr. Hutton: In 1999–2000 the average cost per patient treated under the Cornwall Personal Dental Service (PDS) pilot was £65.50 and under the General Dental Service (GDS) in Cornwall the average was £42.10 per patient. A corresponding average for the GDS in England and Wales is not available because children having only an examination are not separately recorded as their treatment costs are covered in capitation payments.

An accurate comparison of figures is not possible because PDS work differs from the GDS average mix. For example, several PDS pilots deal with specialist dentistry and most do not register patients. The Cornwall PDS pilot includes general anaesthetics, special needs and orthodontic services. It is an access centre and operates through a network of 20 sites across the county, complementing the service provided by local GDS dentists. It has proved very popular with patients and is now seeing about 2,000 patients a month.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to include provision for mental health services among farmers in proposals for assistance in respect of the foot and mouth outbreak; and if he will make a statement. [155328]

Mr. Hutton: The Department is working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) in support of the development of the rural stress action plan (RSAP), which offers support to help alleviate stress in rural areas. Through the RSAP, MAFF has already made available £500,000 to support farmers as part of the Prime Minister's action plan for farming.

The RSAP group, which includes representatives from Government, the voluntary mental health sector and national farming organisations met again on 20 March this year to discuss details of future assistance, particularly in respect of the current foot and mouth outbreak. In addition, the Department of Health has also provided the Rural Stress Information Service and MIND with funding through the Section 64 scheme for projects developing support networks and access to information, care and support for people in rural areas.

Food Labelling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the red tractor symbol meets his Department's requirements in respect of country of origin food labelling. [155471]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The "British Farm Standard", denoted by the red tractor symbol, is a voluntary scheme developed by the National Farmers' Union. The presence of the red tractor symbol on a food product indicates compliance with specific farm assurance schemes. Under European competition rules, use of indications like the red tractor symbol (and other similar indications), which are indications of quality, not origin, cannot be restricted to national produce.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he takes to ensure that the basic needs of young asylum seekers are met, with particular reference to the duties of social services departments. [155933]

Mr. Hutton: Local authority social services departments have a duty under the Children Act 1989 to provide services for children in need in their area. The definition of a child in need is set out in section 17(10) of the Act including for example disabled children. If a young asylum seeker falls within that definition, social services departments have the same responsibilities to provide services to them as to other children who are also in need.

This means that local authorities must ensure that the welfare of all relevant children are safeguarded and promoted. They must assess the needs of each individual child and provide services as appropriate to meet the assessed needs. Our £885 million Quality Protects programme is designed to improve the management and delivery of children's social services and ensure that our objective of improving the life chances of children in need is met.

Primary Care Trusts (Dorset)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to ensure that the appointments process to the boards of primary care trusts in the Dorset health authority area has been conducted in accordance with the Nolan rules. [155810]

Ms Stuart: All chairs and non-officer members of primary care trusts in the Dorset health authority area have been appointed following a selection process that accords with the commissioner for public appointments' guidance on public appointment procedures. These appointments were advertised locally and all candidates were interviewed by a panel including an independent member. The recommendations made to Ministers included confirmation that the proper procedures were followed.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Government will publish its response to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee 6th Report of Session 2000–01 on Complementary and Alternative Medicine. [155983]

Yvette Cooper: The Government's response to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's 6th Report on Complementary and Alternative Medicine is published today and copies will be placed in the Library. The Government welcome the Committee's Report and believe its main recommendations will help protect the interests of patients and other consumers.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the London Underground public-private partnerships. [155958]

Mr. Prescott: Bob Kiley and I today had a full exchange on the state of progress on the PPP negotiations. Mr. Kiley had earlier written to me following the recent talks between the Government and Transport for London. I have now replied to Mr. Kiley setting out the changes to the PPP which both parties had discussed and which the Government had been prepared to consider. These were offered in an attempt to reach an overall agreement on the PPP consistent with Mr. Kiley's aim for "unified management control". I am placing a copy of my letter to Mr. Kiley in the Library.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what training was given to London Underground station staff between December 2000 and February 200] inclusive on procedures to evacuate passengers from crowded station platforms in emergencies. [154564]

Mr. Hill: London Underground inform me that they operate a programme of continual training for all of their station staff. They state that the training in evacuation procedures is an important part of this ongoing programme. Station Assistants and Station Supervisors are taught evacuation procedures as part of their initial training. When deployed to their first station after training they then have to undertake additional training (including evacuation) to become familiar with that station. London Underground inform me that evacuation plans for central stations are required to be practised every six months and that all station staff have to be included in such training practices. This additional training has to be repeated each time a Station Assistant or Supervisor transfers to another station.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if a risk assessment has been carried out on the likely severity of injuries to standing passengers in the event of an accident on the Circle and Hammersmith and City Line Underground. [154559]

Mr. Hill: Yes. I understand that London Underground have well-developed safety risk control systems, which are the subject of continuous improvement. Risk assessments have been carried out for a wide range of possible incidents on all Underground Lines. In all cases the risk to standing passengers has been assessed as 'very low'. This is considered by London Underground to be 'as low as reasonably practical' under regulations set down by the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974.

Ports

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the impact of the proposed European Directive Access to Ports Services on ports; and if he will make a statement. [154707]

Mr. Hill: The European Commission published proposals for a Directive on access to port services on 14 February as part of its Communication on Sea Ports. We have received representations on this from the Transport and General Workers Union, Hutchison Ports, the UK Major Ports Group and the British Ports Association. There are a number of important issues to be addressed in developing the Government's position on the proposals. We are submitting an Explanatory Memorandum to Parliament, and we will be consulting widely in order to assess the potential impact.

Hazardous Road Freight (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the *(a)* hazardous and *(b)* radioactive material which has been transported through the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency by road on a regular basis in the last year. [154834]

Mr. Hill: There are no regulatory requirements for transporters to notify movements of dangerous goods by road and therefore my Department does not hold this information.

Information on the movement of radioactive material is not routinely held by this Department. However, I understand from British Nuclear Fuels plc that they have made 17 shipments of new nuclear fuel from their plant at Springfields, Preston, to Heysham Nuclear Power Station, by road, in the last 12 months.

Concessionary Travel

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the cost of a concessionary travel scheme that would allow pensioners to travel for half fare on all buses in the country. [155132]

Mr. Hill: We have already guaranteed that from 1 June all pensioners (and disabled people) will receive at least half fare reductions on local buses, with a free pass. The cost of extending that to allow travel at half fare on buses anywhere in England is provisionally estimated at £25 million a year.

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155284]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The principle funding this Department has provided to Chichester District Council from 1997–98 to date is shown in the table. It includes grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on the Chichester constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Revenue Support Grant	2.577	2.272	2.149	1.969	2.363
Income from National non domestic Rates	3.304	3.339	3.644	4.089	4.073
Housing Investment Programme[2]	1.192	1.131	1.247	2.966	1.362
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	0.72	0.13	0	0	N/A
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.305	1.004	1.124	0	0
Cash Incentive Scheme	0	0.04	0	0	0
SRB Funding[3]	—	—	—	0.035	1.5
Transport Supplementary Grant	4.088	0.674	0.755	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	4.088	0.714	0.693	0	1.135
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0.871	0.925	1.326	4.562	11.289
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	[4]—	0.2486	0.2180	0.313388	—
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	[4]—	0.293252	0.579324	0.579324	0.739752

[1] Where known.
[2] Housing Investment Programme—between 1997–98 and 1999–2000 includes Annual Capital Guidelines, Private Sector Renewal Grant and Disabled Facilities Grant. From 2000 onwards, due to the single pot allocations are Annual Capital Guidelines and Disabled Facilities Grant.
[3] SRB funding covers deprived towns in West Sussex. This includes Selsey within Chichester district council area.
[4] Provisional figure.
[5] Grants not available.

Council Dwellings (Sales)

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the cost to public funds is of the discounted sales of council dwellings under Consent A3.3 in each of the last three years in *(a)* Wandsworth and *(b)* the United Kingdom; [155124]

(2) how many council dwellings have been sold to non-council tenants under Consent A3.3 in each of the last five years in *(a)* Wandsworth and *(b)* the United Kingdom. [155123]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The data collected centrally on sales and disposals of council dwellings do not distinguish between them by type of consent.

Railtrack

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers *(a)* the Government and *(b)* the Rail Regulator have to ensure the compliance of Railtrack with the 21 May deadline; and if he will make a statement. [155331]

Mr. Hill: The Rail Regulator has enforcement powers under the Railways Act 1993. Railtrack has told the Regulator that it would restore normal operation for most train operating companies by 21 May. The Regulator, having judged that Railtrack is currently in breach of its obligations under Condition 7 of its network licence, is using his powers under section 55 of the Railways Act 1993 to ensure Railtrack's compliance with that deadline. On 19 March he issued a provisional order under section 55 requiring Railtrack to restore its network to normal capability in most cases by 21 May.

Any failure to comply with the order would expose Railtrack to further action by the Regulator using his powers under the Railways Act, including his powers to impose penalties.

The Secretary of State has no enforcement powers under section 55 in respect of breaches of licence conditions.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assurances he has *(a)* sought and *(b)* received from Railtrack concerning the time scale for reinstating the railway infrastructure. [155247]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport chairs the Rail Recovery Action Group. Since its establishment in December, the Group has been assessing reports from Railtrack at least weekly on its progress in implementing its National Recovery Plan, and has been urging the company to ensure the network is restored to normal condition as soon as possible.

consistent with high safety standards. Railtrack has reiterated its commitment to delivering recovery in accordance with the timetable specified in the Rail Regulator's provisional enforcement order of 19 March.

Climate Change Levy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the impact of the climate change levy on rural enterprises, with particular reference to farms, horticultural producers, sub-post offices and small hotels; and if he will make a statement. [155270]

Mr. Meacher: I have received a wide range of representations about the impact of the climate change levy, including representations about farms, horticulture, post offices and hotels. Farms producing pigs, poultry meat and eggs are eligible to join climate change agreements to obtain an 80 per cent. reduction in the rate of levy in return for commitments to achieve agreed reductions in their energy consumption. Horticulture has been granted a 50 per cent. reduction in the rate of levy for five years and we have allocated up to £5 million over three years (subject to State Aid approval) to provide energy efficiency advice to help them to adjust to the full rate. The horticulture sector has committed itself to a voluntary agreement to reduce energy consumption as part of this arrangement. The hotels sector has already entered into a similar agreement. Small businesses in rural areas will be subject to the levy. However, the smallest businesses, with domestic levels of energy usage, will be exempt. Like other businesses, small rural enterprises will be entitled to free energy efficiency advice from the Government's Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme and from the Energy Efficiency Advice Centres funded by the Energy Savings Trust.

Motor Vehicle Body Repair Shops

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what regulations apply to motor vehicle body repair shops and the use of volatile organic compounds and other hazardous substances. [155140]

Mr. Meacher: Occupational Health and Safety legislation considered to be the most relevant to the use of volatile organic compounds and other hazardous substances in motor vehicle body repair shops is (i) Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, (ii) Highly Flammable Liquids and Liquefied Petroleum Gases Regulations 1972, (iii) Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999, (iv) Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, (v) Personal Protective Equipment at Work Equipment Regulations 1992, and (vi) Electricity at Work Regulations 1989.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to allow rural businesses in the tourist industry a payment holiday in respect of business rates as a result of losses incurred during the foot and mouth outbreak. [155106]

Mr. Meacher: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 425–26W.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to ensure that businesses whose cash flow has been significantly affected by the consequences of the foot and mouth outbreak receive immediate assistance in the form of *(a)* interest free loans, *(b)* relief on business rates and *(c)* other measures. [155157]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* I set out a package of short term help for businesses in my statement to the House on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 191–210, and further details of the discretionary hardship rate relief scheme in my answer to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 425–26W.

Incinerators

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sites which have received ash from the Edmonton incinerator since 1996, for use *(a)* in building bricks, blocks, paving stones and other building materials, *(b)* in public and private roads and streets, *(c)* in compost, potting soil, growing medium or fertiliser and *(d)* on farms, livestock/poultry holding sites and feedstuffs companies. [155314]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Section 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 imposes a duty of care on waste producers and others who have control of waste. The parties to the transfer of waste are required to keep records but information on waste transfers is not held centrally. The information available to the Environment Agency indicates that bottom ash has been consigned from the Edmonton incinerator to Ballast Phoenix Ltd. for recycling as a secondary aggregate but that ash is not otherwise consigned from the incinerator for use in *(a)*, *(b)*, *(c)* or *(d)*.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Environment Agency requested that the mixing of fly ash and bottom ash at Edmonton be stopped; when the mixing was halted; what assessment has been made of *(a)* the increase in and *(b)* toxicity of dioxin concentrations in the mixed ash; and if the toxicity falls within the range observed in urban soils. [155377]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The Environment Agency advises that it has made no such request but confirms that it was informed by the operator of the Edmonton incinerator that the mixing of precipitator ash with bottom ash ceased in August 2000. The Environment Agency has no information on the toxicity of dioxin concentrations in ash mixed before that date. However, the Agency was informed by the operator that test results showed the dioxin levels of mixed ash to be close to background levels (i.e. those found in normal urban soil).

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the studies carried out into dioxin and furan levels in and around the Byker incinerator. [155379]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The Environment Agency monitors combined dioxin and furan releases from the combustion process at the Byker Heat Station, details of which are available on the public register and the Agency website. Monitoring of local air quality outside the Byker site is the responsibility of the appropriate local authority.

Disabled People (Parking)

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress made in reviewing the Disabled Persons Parking Badge scheme. [155425]

Mr. Hill: The UK-wide review of the scheme began last autumn. Group discussions at national and local levels have taken place with disability organisations, local authorities, enforcement bodies and badge holders themselves. The next stage will be a discussion paper which will be widely disseminated to interested parties including users this spring. The results of this consultation will inform our proposals.

Waste Strategy

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to help local authorities reach the targets set by the National Waste Strategy. [155764]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Waste Strategy 2000 set targets for the recovery of municipal waste and the recycling and composting of household waste and the reduction in the landfilling of biodegradable municipal waste.

In Waste Strategy 2000 we announced that we would consult on the design and operation of a scheme of tradeable landfill permits for waste disposal authorities to meet the landfill diversion targets. We have published that consultation paper today.

Waste Strategy 2000 also announced targets for doubling the recycling or composting of household waste within three years and nearly tripling it within five years, to be underpinned by statutory performance standards for each local authority under the Best Value regime. These standards were published on 5 March.

Spending Review 2000 provided major extra funding directly to local authorities to address waste and recycling, as set out in answer to the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) on 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 200W. The new Waste and Resources Action Programme, whose funding now stands at £40 million over the next three years, will operate across all waste streams to foster markets for recycled materials.

On 10 March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced the next round of lottery funding (the New Opportunities Fund), including a programme to expand community sector waste reuse, recycling and composting. Such community sector activity can help local authorities to meet their targets.

On 23 June we issued guidance on managing the waste function within Best Value and on 5 March we published guidance to local authorities on municipal waste management strategies. These strategies will set out authorities' plans for achieving all of their targets.

Waste management was a theme in the first year of the Beacon Council Scheme. We have launched an initiative in partnership with the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Institute of Wastes Management and the Environmental Services Association to establish and maintain networks of authorities, the industry and community sectors to spread good practice.

Hazards (Employee Training)

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action is taken by his Department to ensure that site operator employees are trained as required by the Control of Major Accident Hazards regulations. [155776]

Mr. Meacher: The Control of Major Accident Hazard Regulations 1999 (COMAH) do not contain specific training requirements. They are "goal setting regulations" supported by duties on operators with the highest hazards to demonstrate in a safety report that they have taken the measures necessary to prevent a major accident. The training of staff forms an integral part of the safety management arrangements.

The COMAH Competent Authority (HSE and Environment Agency in England and Wales) assesses the safety reports that sites with the highest hazards are required to produce, and also the major accident prevention policies produced by other major hazard installation operators to ensure that they contain the necessary measures. Inspection at these installations includes checking compliance with the safety management arrangements set out in the major accident prevention policies and safety reports.

Competent Authority Inspectors also enforce a range of other health, safety and environmental legislation that include training requirements.

National Air Traffic Services

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made towards the establishment of a public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd. [155959]

Mr. Prescott: I am pleased to announce that today the Government have selected the Airline Group as the strategic partner for the National Air Traffic Services public-private partnership. The Airline Group have satisfied the Government that they will maintain the high safety standards achieved by NATS. Their strategic investment plan will provide NATS with the investment it needs to meet the demands of steadily increasing air traffic, and will guarantee the future of the new air traffic control centres at Swanwick and Prestwick. The Airline Group will also introduce management skills into NATS which will help it to operate efficiently.

The NATS public-private partnership will be regulated by the Civil Aviation Authority, which will ensure that NATS continues to operate safely, while reducing costs to users. The Government will retain a 49 per cent. shareholding to enable them to protect the public interest on strategic matters. Staff will have a direct interest in the company through a 5 per cent. stake.

Since last November, when the legislation enabling the establishment of the public-private partnership was announced, the Government have been taking the views of all sections of the aviation community on their proposals. The report on the discussions held during this three month period is being laid in the Libraries of both Houses today.

This will be the first true public-private partnership, helping to ensure the safe and efficient provision of air traffic services, and providing the opportunity for NATS to emerge as a major worldwide player in its field.

M6 Junction 34

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to upgrade junction 34 of the M6; and if he will make a statement. [155792]

Mr. Hill: The Highways Agency is aware of the problems with junction 34 on the M6. Long term plans for the junction are dependent on decisions about the proposed local authority link road between Morecambe/ Heysham and the M6. In the interim, shorter-term measures have been identified by the Agency. Bids for funds for the 2002–03 financial year will be considered on their merits and in the light of other regional priorities. I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Hilton Dawson, dated 27 March 2001:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to write to you in reply to your recent question about the plans to upgrade Junction 34 of the M6.

Safety is a top priority for the Highways Agency and we constantly monitor the operation of our network to identify where improvements are needed. In recognition of this the Highways Agency is currently working in partnership with Lancashire County Council on plans for a link road between Morecambe/Horsham and the M6. One of the route options being considered would see a link road connecting with the M6 at Junction 34. However, this would require a major change in the layout of the junction. Our long-term plans for Junction 34 very much depend on the outcome of these discussions about the link road.

In the meantime, following a study last year into the junction, a number of short-term improvements have been identified. These include extending the southbound on slip road, dualling the northbound off slip road and making improvements to the signs and road markings at the junction. A bid for funds will be made to carry out this work during the 2002/03 financial year. However any bid will be considered on its merits and in the light of other funding priorities.

If you would like any other further information, please contact the Route Manager, Bob Baldwin at Sunley Tower, Piccadilly Plaza, Manchester M1 4BE—Tel: 0161 930 5680.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent by the South East England Development Agency in lobbying activities in the last twelve months. [155930]

Ms Armstrong: We expect to see regional development agencies keep their partnership organisations, elected representatives in their regions and others in touch with developments affecting their region. It is not possible to disaggregate the costs of this liaison from RDA programme and administration budgets.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the guidelines for overseas travel by *(a)* members and *(b)* officials of regional development agencies. [155931]

Ms Armstrong: It is for the individual regional development agencies to set their own guidelines for overseas travel. The regional development agencies are expected to operate systems which are broadly in line with those for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Registered Social Landlords

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made towards meeting the commitment set out in the Government's housing policy statement "A Way Forward For Housing", to strengthen the obligation on registered social landlords to co-operate with local authorities in the discharge of their statutory housing functions. [155836]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: In the Housing Policy Statement (The Way Forward for Housing, December 2000), the Government undertook to strengthen the obligation on registered social landlords to work with local authorities on lettings. We will deliver this undertaking through best practice guidance derived from the experiences of the 27 local authority choice-based letting pilots announced on 22 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 291W, and through strengthened guidance to registered social landlords from the Housing Corporation, under S36 of the Housing Act 1996. The Corporation plans to issue for consultation a draft of its revised Statutory Housing Management Guidance in May.

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets he has set for the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre Executive Agency for 2001–02. [155951]

Mr. Hill: The Agency's principal financial target for 2001–02 is to achieve a minimum contribution to the Exchequer of £1,400,000.

An operational target has been set to achieve combined room occupancy of 600 days in the three key conference areas within the centre.

The Agency is also being required to increase the number of banqueting events by 50 per cent. It also has the following quality of service targets: overall score of value for money satisfaction of 90 per cent.; the number of complaints received to be less than two per 100 events; and an average response time when answering complaints of less than four working days.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the

right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 8 February on behalf of Sawtry parish council. [155934]

Mr. Hill: I regret the delay in this matter. A reply will be sent to the right hon. Member shortly.

Combined Heat and Power

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent investigations he has carried out into the possibility of saving energy through the use of micro combined heat and power; and if he will make a statement. [155631]

Mr. Meacher: My Department is increasing its research in new technology such as micro CHP through both our Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme and new feasibility studies for low carbon technologies. This underlines our commitment to ensuring that households, suppliers and the environment can benefit from micro CHP technology. Micro CHP will also figure in our CHP Strategy, on which we will consult in the coming months.

Business Rates (Rural Areas)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Northern Ireland about extending the provisions of the Rating (Former Agricultural Premises and Rural Shops) Bill to those areas of the United Kingdom. [155807]

Ms Armstrong: Rating in Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the Scottish Executive and Northern Ireland Executive respectively. We have kept all the devolved Administrations informed of our intentions to extend rate relief to certain rural enterprises in England.

Bilston Urban Village

Mr. Dennis Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the timescale for the development of Bilston Urban Village. [155389]

Ms Armstrong: Bilston Urban Village is a proposed "mixed-use", housing, light industrial and open space development near Wolverhampton. Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency, has made a significant investment of £5 million to date via English Partnerships funds, to work up a feasibility study in partnership with Wolverhampton metropolitan borough council. An outline planning application is expected to be submitted to the local planning authority during 2001. Commencement of the scheme will depend on the outcome of the statutory procedures.

Road Clearance

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will amend the Highways Act 1980 to bring its provisions on the clearance of snow and ice from public roads into line with those of section 34 of the Roads (Scotland) Act 1989. [155936]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 128W.

Planning Guidance

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when PPG13 will be published; and if he will make a statement. [156064]

Mr. Raynsford: We are today publishing the final version of PPG13. This is a major step towards integrating planning and transport at the local level and helping deliver the Government's 10 Year Plan for Transport. It forms a key part of our transport, urban and rural policies.

PPG13 is about getting the right development in the right place and ensuring people have a choice in transport. We want local authorities to actively manage the pattern of growth to make the fullest use of public transport and to integrate local transport investment decisions with location decisions for the major land uses.

PPG13 introduces Transport Assessments, to replace Traffic Impact Assessments, which will ensure that assessments of major development proposals cover access by all modes of transport. These assessments will help to promote development which is located and designed to provide access by a choice of modes and encourages developers to incorporate measures such as car-sharing schemes as part of travel plans. We will shortly be publishing good practice advice on undertaking Transport Assessments.

The guidance provides encouragement for well-designed and well-conceived park and ride schemes, ensuring that such proposals will be given favourable treatment through the planning system. In some circumstances, park and ride schemes may be permissible in the Green Belt, provided a thorough assessment shows the scheme to be the most sustainable of the available options.

PPG13 also carries forward proposals set out in the Rural White Paper to promote housing, jobs and services in rural service centres, including market towns. We also want local authorities to take a positive approach to farm diversification proposals to promote rural employment opportunities and to help reduce long-distance commuting to urban areas. Such diversification proposals should not be rejected where they would give rise to only modest additional traffic and would not have significant impact on minor roads.

The public consultation exercise on the draft version of PPG13 showed strong support for the guidance and for the use of national maximum parking standards for the major land uses. However, we have made changes to the standards, and how they are applied, to address business concerns and ensure the approach encourages investment in town centres and will be conducting a review of the impact of the standards over the next two to three years.

Copies of the guidance are being placed in the House Libraries and it is also available on the DETR website (at www.planning.detr.gov.uk).

Agency Targets

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets he

has set for the *(a)* Driving Standards Agency, *(b)* Driver Licensing Agency, *(c)* Vehicle Licensing Agency, *(d)* Vehicle Certification Agency and *(e)* Vehicle Inspectorate. [156079]

Mr. Hill: Key targets have been set for the agencies. They are included in the agencies' business plans. The plans also include management objectives, performance indicators and key tasks appropriate to the agencies' businesses. Copies of the business plans will be placed in the Library in due course.

The key targets for the Driving Standards Agency are:

90 per cent. of all customers to be satisfied with the overall level of service received from the Agency.

95 per cent. of candidates to have obtained a theory test appointment at their preferred test centre within two weeks of their preferred date.

The national average practical car test waiting time to be no more than six weeks.

Keep 99.5 per cent. of all theory test appointments, and 99.5 per cent. of practical test appointments that are in place two days prior to the test appointment.

90 per cent. of calls to booking offices will be answered by a human voice in no more than 20 seconds (following routing by the call handling system).

To achieve a 1.7 per cent. return on capital employed (ROCE) on statutory activities in 2000–01;

Use examiner resource efficiently by achieving an average examiner utilisation for car practical tests of 83 per cent.

The key targets for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency are:

To achieve an overall efficiency gain of 2.5 per cent;

95 per cent. of registration documents for new vehicles and changes to a registration document to be delivered within 12 working days;

95 per cent. of ordinary driving licences to be delivered within 11 working days;

95 per cent. of vocational and first provisional licences delivered within eight working days,

95 per cent. of VED refunds to be delivered within 30 working days;

95 per cent. of written replies to be delivered within seven working days;

95 per cent. of all telephone calls to be answered within 30 seconds;

95 per cent. of e-mails to be replied to within seven working days.

For 95 per cent. of available service hours, customers have lines available to the Customer Enquiry Unit;

97 per cent. of registration documents for new vehicles, changes to registration documents and driving licences to be produced without DVLA induced error;

To complete 700,000 enforcement cases.

The key targets for the Vehicle Certification Agency are:

To achieve a £100 K surplus on the commercial accounts after a 6 per cent. rate of return on capital employed has been applied.

To have at least 98 per cent. of approval certificates issued error free.

To achieve a score of at least 90 per cent. on the quality and service matrix targets shown in the Plan.

To ensure that the figure for average debtor days is 60 calendar days or less.

To ensure that invoices for Management System Certification work are issued within an average of 25 working days after completion of the chargeable work.

To achieve a higher score overall in the Spring 2001 customer satisfaction survey against key success factors compared to the score in 1998–99.

The key targets for the Vehicle Inspectorate are:

To deliver against an effectiveness and quality improvement programme.

To deliver effective road safety and environmental standards activity as agreed with DETR.

To continue to improve customer focus across VI and DVO through the implementation of initiatives in line with the Modernising Government agenda.

To break even year on year and achieve a 6 per cent. real rate of return on capital, over the period 1 April 1998—31 March 2003.

To increase value for money.

To improve performance management across the business.

To secure the long-term development of the organisation.

Departmental Expenditure Limit

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to change his Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2000–01. [156107]

Ms Armstrong: The DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) will be increased by £18 million from £35,361,468,000 to £35,379,468,000 by drawing on the Department's End Year Flexibility Entitlement announced in the Public Expenditure 1999–2000 Provisional outturn White Paper (Cm 4812). In addition there will be transfer of £2 million Provision from the Voted to the non-Voted element of this Departmental Expenditure Limit which will increase from £137,911,000 to £139,911,000. The increase in DEL will be offset by a charge to the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Community Well-being

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish statutory guidance to local authorities on community well-being. [156108]

Ms Armstrong: The Government are today publishing their guidance to local authorities on the use of their new power to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of their communities.

This broad new power will enable local authorities to take a wide range of action to address the priorities of local people, as set out in their community strategies.

Environmental Audit

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government will publish the response to the Environmental Audit Committee's report "Environmental Audit: The First Parliament". [156127]

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to announce that I have today laid in the Libraries of both Houses, copies of the Government's response to the Environmental Audit Committee's report.

I thank the Committee for their report which is a valuable contribution to our process of greening government. As our response shows, we have made a great deal of progress and have a record to be proud of.

But there is of course still much to do, and the Government look forward to discussions with the Committee about their two main recommendations for improving their audit function.

Green Ministers

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the last meeting of Green Ministers took place; what was discussed; and which Departments were represented by Ministers and which by officials. [156128]

Mr. Meacher: Green Ministers held their first meeting of this year on 19 March. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), the Green Minister at DETR spoke about sustainable development at local and regional level.

The Green Ministers Committee approved in principle a target for the purchase of renewable electricity by Departments and agreed a target to reduce water consumption across the Government estate.

The Departments represented by Ministers were: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions; Department of Health; Department for International Development; Law Officers' Department, Lord Chancellor's Department, Department of Social Security, Department of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Department for Education and Employment, the Northern Ireland Office.

Those represented by officials were: The Chancellor's Departments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage the mobile phone industry to recycle discarded phones. [155100]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

The European Information and Communications Technology Industry Association (EICTA), formerly European Trade Organisation for the Telecommunication and Professional Electronic Industry (ECTEL), have already initiated a UK mobile phone take back and recovery scheme on a voluntary basis. The Government welcome this scheme which pre-empts some of the likely requirements of the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive (WEEE) currently being considered by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The WEEE Directive is likely to result in increased levels of mobile phone recovery.

The initial ECTEL launch in 1997 involved only the mobile phone manufacturers—Alcatel, Ericsson, Motorola, Nokia, Panasonic and Philips. The extended scheme, re-launched in 1999, included the network operators—BT Cellnet, Orange, Vodafone, and One 2 One—who together with the mobile phone manufacturers are defined as "producers" for the dual branded mobile phones under the Producer Responsibility Initiative.

Under the Government's Producer Responsibility Initiative, industry is encouraged to take a share of the responsibility for what happens to their products at end-of-life and to take action to increase recovery and recycling rates. In "Waste Strategy 2000", the Government made clear their commitment to achieving substantial increase in recovery and recycling rates.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Policies (Ceredigion)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ceredigion constituency, the effects on Ceredigion of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154939]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Ceredigion since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about seven million families receive Child Benefit, and in Ceredigion 6,763 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Ceredigion the number has reduced from 1,800 to 1,200. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in Ceredigion the number has increased from 700 to 900.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 15,500 older people in Ceredigion have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 14,100 pensioners in Ceredigion will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition, we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,500 in Ceredigion. 1,300 pensioner families in Ceredigion are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Ynys Môn)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Ynys Môn constituency, the effects on Ynys Môn of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154940]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provide a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Ynys Môn since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Ynys Môn 7,541 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Ynys Môn the number has reduced from 2,500 to 1,700. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Ynys Môn from 1,100 to 900.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 15,300 older people in Ynys Môn have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 14,600 pensioners in Ynys Môn will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State Pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,900 in Ynys Môn. 2,300 pensioner families in Ynys Môn are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Caernarfon)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Caernarfon constituency, the effects on Caernarfon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154938]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Caernarfon since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Caernarfon 6,377 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Caernarfon the number has reduced from 2,200 to 1,600. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Caernarfon from 800 to 700.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 13,500 older people in Caernarfon have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 13,500 pensioners in Caernarfon will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,700 in Caernarfon. 2,200 pensioner families in Caernarfon are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Meirionnyd Nant Conwy)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Meirionnydd Nant Conwy constituency, the effects on Meirionnydd Nant Conwy of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154937]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy 4,273 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy the number has reduced from 1,300 to 800. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy the number has remained at around 400.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 10,500 older people in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy have received a winter fuel payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 10,700 pensioners

in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 4,500 in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy. 1,700 pensioner families in Meirionnydd Nant Conwy are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155281]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Chichester since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about seven million families receive Child Benefit, and in Chichester 10,303 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in Chichester the number has reduced from 1,100 to 700. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in Chichester the number has increased from 800 to 900.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 26,800 older people in Chichester have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 25,700 pensioners in Chichester will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 11,600 in Chichester. 2,200 pensioner families in Chichester are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Cunninghame, South will receive a reply to his letters of 22 November 2000 and 20 February, concerning Marie Harris of Katrine Place, Irvine. [155808]

Mr. Bayley: A reply was issued on Wednesday 21 March 2001.

Horizon Project

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the final net costs of the Horizon swipecard project to eliminate social security fraud to *(a)* public funds, *(b)* the Post Office and *(c)* the commercial promoters. [151611]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 15 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 84W, for information on the costs to the Department. The costs to the Post Office and the commercial promoters (ICL) is a matter for those organisations.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Overhead Power Lines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the setting up of a Royal Commission on the

relationship between overhead power lines and the incidence of cancer and leukaemia; and if he will make a statement. [155052]

Mr. Hain: The only representation which has been received on the setting up of a Royal Commission was the recent correspondence forwarded by the hon. Member for the Vale of York from one of her constituents, Professor Henshaw.

The hon. Lady will know that the Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation published its report: "Extremely low frequency Electromagnetic Fields and the Risk of Cancer" on 6 March 2001. (Documents of the NRPB Vol 12, No 1, 2001). Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

The independent Advisory Group that is chaired by Sir Richard Doll reports directly to the Board of the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). Its terms of reference are:

"To review work on the biological effects of non-ionising radiation relevant to human health and to advise on research priorities".

The remit covers static and extremely low frequency electric and magnetic fields (including those at power frequencies) and radio-frequency fields and radiation such as infrared, visible and ultraviolet.

The members of the Advisory Group are appointed by the NRPB on the basis of their proven research expertise. They are also independent of Government and commercial interests. Membership reflects the work of the Advisory Group at any particular time.

There is every benefit in maintaining a group that is independent and comprises a number of particularly eminent scientists. I could not foresee the need for establishing a Royal Commission on this issue.

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155278]

Mr. Caborn: The Chichester constituency has benefited from a range of initiatives that has been implemented since May 1997.

The Sussex Business Link

The Sussex Business Link, covering the whole of East and West Sussex, receives funding from the Department to assist businesses at all stages of development. The Business Link also has an independent income stream. Initiatives are aimed to reach groups of businesses that have shown a need for a more direct approach. It would not be possible to dis-aggregate the benefit for Chichester and the figures shown are for the whole area covered by the Business Link.

DTI funding for Business Link

	£000
1997–98	2,319
1998–99	2,707
1999–2000	3,171
2000–01	[1]3,693

[1] Includes £152,361 British Trade International funding

The Farm Business Advisory service supports farmers to develop and manage their businesses.

The Business Advisory Service gives easy access to a wide range of quality business services, initial business diagnosis, impartial expert advice on business issues, and practical value for money support tailored to make the most of an individual's potential.

The Export Counselling Service was a scheme initiated in 1997 to aid local businesses to develop an export market.

Other initiatives include:

British Trade International—a separately funded unit dealing with expanding the export and raising the profile of British goods abroad.

SMART awards—two awards have been made to Ocean Air Marine Ltd. totalling £126,000 to develop innovative technological ideas to improve the business.

Small Business Service—from April 2001 the Sussex Business Link will provide services on behalf of the Small Business Service. This will be a sharper and more focused service, acting as a gateway to the wide range of services available to local businesses.

Miner's Compensation

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many ex-miner claims for compensation for Vibration White Finger had been registered *(a)* by 30 October 2000 and *(b)* up to the latest date for which figures are available. [155640]

Mr. Hain: At 29 October 2000, IRISC had registered 114,000 claims in respect of Vibration White Finger, VWF. To date, the number of claims initiated is 118,000. There was a cut-off date for claims on 30 September 2000. The Department reserves its position regarding limitation for claims received after this date.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many meetings with hon. Members he has had to discuss the issue of miners' compensation since 15 January. [155639]

Mr. Hain: As Minister for Energy responsible for miners' compensation, I have had eight formal meetings with hon. Members on this issue since 15 January. I have also had a number of informal meetings. I have met hon. Members during my visits to all the coalfield regions of Britain, including several to South Wales and one to North Wales. I attach great importance to this issue, and will continue to meet hon. Members and keep them informed on a regular basis.

Arms Exports

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish a draft Bill on arms exports; and if he will make a statement. [154103]

Dr. Howells: The Government are committed to publishing a draft Export Control Bill during this Session of Parliament and intend to publish the Bill soon. Publication of the Bill in draft will give all interested parties an opportunity to comment on the Government's detailed proposals for new export control legislation.

Multinational Enterprises

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to promote and implement the revised OECD Guidelines for multinational enterprises in the United Kingdom. [156080]

Mr. Caborn: The UK Government are committed to promoting both the use of the Guidelines and their effective implementation. Primary responsibility for promoting and implementing the Guidelines in the UK rests with the UK National Contact Point, based within the Department of Trade and Industry, but working in liaison with other Government Departments and interested bodies.

The UK NCP has undertaken a number of activities to promote the Guidelines including the launching today of a booklet explaining its role and the Guidelines more generally. This is being distributed to relevant organisations and is available free of charge from DTI Publications. Copies have also been placed in the Libraries of the House.

In addition, a website has been established, www.dti.gov.uk/worldtrade/ukncp.htm. The NCP has already held meetings with UK business, trade unions, and other non-governmental organisations and will continue to do so.

Future activities include the production of a publicly available Annual Report covering the activities of the UK NCP; using Government contact with business at all levels to promote the Guidelines and the UK Government's support for them; and contributing to OECD efforts to raise awareness in non-adhering countries.

This is in addition to its main task of responding to any inquiries or concerns about the activities of Multinational Enterprises raised with the NCP.

Mirror Group Newspapers

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the inspectors investigating the affairs of Mirror Group Newspapers plc completed their report; and when it will be published. [156082]

Dr. Howells: The inspectors have now completed their report. In view of the fact that while in opposition the Secretary of State questioned whether Kevin and Ian Maxwell should receive legal aid, he has been advised by officials, who consulted independent counsel, that he should stand aside from decisions flowing from the submission of the report. The Secretary of State has accepted this advice, has not seen a copy of the report and has delegated decisions on the report to me.

I have considered this matter carefully and decided that publication would be in the public interest.

I therefore intend to publish the report before the end of March 2001.

Employment Conditions (Contracted-out Staff)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will take steps to reduce disparities between staff in contracted-out public services who are transferred on TUPE terms and other employees of the contractor. [156083]

Mr. Byers: The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employees) Regulations are designed to preserve the continuity of employment and protect the rights of those affected by business transfers. All employees have already benefited from the framework of basic minimum standards introduced by this Government. We are nevertheless examining whether unfair disparities between different groups of workers doing the same work for the same employer may arise where one group retains rights as a result of a TUPE transfer following contracting-out and others are then employed under different terms and conditions of employment. This will be considered in parallel with our wide-ranging review of the TUPE Regulations, on which we intend to consult in the summer.

Byker Plant

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much public subsidy has been provided each year since 1979 to the Byker plant. [155382]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The Byker plant received support from the Fossil Fuel Levy under NFFO-1 arrangements between 1992 and 1998. No public support has since been provided.

Information on the amount of support provided to individual projects under NFFO arrangements is commercially confidential to the contracting parties.

Renewables

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how developers of renewable energy and technology businesses will have access to the further money he referred to on 6 March 2001, *Official Report,* column 465. [155550]

Mr. Hain: The allocation between technologies of the further money for renewable energy announced by the Prime Minister on 6 March is subject to the recommendations of the Performance and Innovation Unit who will be reporting later in the year.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps his Department takes to promote renewable energy. [155773]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend, the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) and for South Swindon (Ms Drown) on 22 March 2001, *Official Report,* columns 463–65.

Low Sulphur Petrol

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many garages in England and Wales sell low sulphur petrol. [155651]

Mr. Hain: My department estimates that 68 per cent. of total UK petrol retail sites have converted to ultra-low sulphur petrol (ULSP). This corresponds to 77 per cent. of total petrol sales being ULSP. There are no separate figures for England and Wales.

Palestine

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what initiatives his Department has undertaken to encourage British companies to invest in the territory under the administration of the Palestinan National Authority. [155449]

Mr. Hain: Trade Partners UK, in conjunction with the British Consulate-General Jerusalem, provide a wide range of services including advice and information for

British companies considering doing business in the territories under the administration of the Palestine National Authority. In November 1999 in conjunction with the Middle East Association, Trade Partners UK organised a seminar in support of the Bethlehem 2000 Project. In July 2000 the Export Promoter for West Bank and Gaza arranged with the support of the BC-G Jerusalem and the Institute of Packaging, two seminars in market and earlier this year Trade Partners UK organised an inward mission to a UK exhibition for the hospitality industry.

Medicines

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to support the reform of the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights agreement to improve poor people's access to essential drugs and medicines. [155480]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 348W.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his policy is on the proposed introduction of TRIPs plus laws; and if he will make a statement. [155482]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The UK and EU have no intention of seeking to impose on other countries intellectual property rights regimes that are more stringent than the minimum standards of TRIPs. Standards higher than these are a matter of policy for individual governments to decide.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce compulsory licences to reduce the price of drugs to treat HIV/AIDS and related infections under the TRIPs proposals. [155479]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Compulsory licences are a matter for national law. I have no plans to introduce compulsory licences to reduce the price of drugs to treat HIV/AIDS and related infections in the UK market. I also refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 349W.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received regarding the introduction of compulsory licences to reduce the price of drugs to treat HIV/AIDS and related infections under the TRIPs proposals. [155478]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* None in respect of the UK which is the only market where the Government would have the right, in certain circumstances, to issue a compulsory licence. I also refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 348–50W.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the use of World Trade Organisation-sponsored trade sanctions against developing countries which produce and export cheap generic medicines used in the treatment of HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. [155481]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Generic medicines are those which are off patent and are therefore not covered by the TRIPS Agreement. Copies of patented drugs can be legitimately made under the TRIPS Agreement through voluntary or, in certain circumstances, compulsory licensing arrangements. There are no examples where, consequent upon the decision of a Dispute Settlement Panel, WTO sanctions have been imposed on intellectual property rights grounds.

Sub-post Offices (Cornwall)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former non-Crown sub-post offices there were in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155737]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that data on the post office network are not held on a Parliamentary constituency basis.

Miners' Pensions

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a decision in respect of sacked miners' eligibility for pensions; and if he will make a statement. [154641]

Mr. Hain: The Department is giving full consideration to responses to the consultation document issued on this subject last year and I will make a full statement in due course.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the United Kingdom Government are taking to encourage investment by UK companies in Sudan. [155148]

Mr. Caborn: Trade Partners UK, in consultation with the British Embassy in Khartoum as necessary, provides frank and comprehensive information about the investment climate in Sudan. In particular, we point out current FCO travel advice and sign-post companies to relevant web based resources.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Young Offenders

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been set aside to provide payment to private consultants to achieve the Government's pledge with regard to young offenders; and if such funding will be available in future years. [155846]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Youth Justice Board has provided £49,075 in 1998–99, £1,624,932 in 1999–2000 and £2,879,237 in 2000–01 for private consultants to tackle delays in the youth justice system including with persistent young offenders. It will provide further funding in 2001–02.

Police Numbers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) of 22 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 323–28W, on police numbers, if he will provide a breakdown by rank of police strength for each force and for England and Wales as a whole at 31 January. [155941]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested details are in the table.

Police strength figures as at 31 January 2001

Police force	*Chief constables*	*Assistant chief constables*	*Superintendents*	*Chief inspectors*	*Inspectors*	*Sergeants*	*Constables*	*Total*
Avon and Somerset	1	3	20	34	146	447	2,318	2,968
Bedfordshire	0	2	13	14	51	138	813	1,031
Cambridgeshire	1	2	15	12	72	208	999	1,309
Cheshire	1	3	16	26	102	331	1,543	2,021
Cleveland	1	2	24	2	74	207	1,116	1,426
Cumbria	1	2	8	14	49	162	813	1,049
Derbyshire	1	3	23	23	88	282	1,397	1,816
Devon and Cornwall	1	4	35	35	143	415	2,294	2,927
Dorset	1	2	15	22	64	201	1,034	1,339
Durham	1	2	19	23	81	213	1,258	1,596
Essex	1	3	26	42	132	441	2,214	2,859
Gloucestershire	1	2	10	18	55	169	905	1,160
Greater Manchester	1	6	80	90	333	970	5,387	6,867
Hampshire	1	3	34	43	166	551	2,653	3,451
Hertfordshire	1	3	22	29	108	278	1,513	1,954
Humberside	1	2	21	22	97	274	1,485	1,902
Kent	1	4	27	43	144	477	2,612	3,308
Lancashire	1	3	32	34	157	506	2,512	3,245
Leicestershire	1	3	16	21	95	268	1,617	2,021
Lincolnshire	1	2	10	16	61	182	918	1,190
London, City of	1	2	10	12	46	103	537	711
Merseyside	1	4	43	49	170	604	3,205	4,076
Metropolitan police	5	29	186	386	1,218	4,077	18,959	24,861
Norfolk	1	2	12	22	67	211	1,082	1,397
Northamptonshire	1	2	11	10	52	164	921	1,161
Northumbria	1	4	40	58	182	542	3,041	3,868
North Yorkshire	1	2	11	10	63	210	1,003	1,299
Nottinghamshire	1	3	20	18	110	293	1,814	2,258
South Yorkshire	1	4	39	49	175	499	2,424	3,190
Staffordshire	1	2	19	23	101	342	1,651	2,138
Suffolk	1	2	13	15	55	168	880	1,133
Surrey	1	3	16	22	92	298	1,655	2,088
Sussex	1	5	32	38	167	445	2,163	2,851
Thames Valley	1	4	44	35	185	549	2,906	3,723
Warwickshire	1	2	13	10	42	126	748	942
West Mercia	1	3	17	33	92	288	1,464	1,899
West Midlands	1	4	60	48	301	981	6,043	7,438
West Yorkshire	1	6	47	69	240	637	3,804	4,804
Wiltshire	1	2	14	14	59	179	845	1,114
Dyfed-Powys	1	2	13	18	47	178	804	1,063
Gwent	1	2	11	15	59	198	979	1,265
North Wales	1	2	13	26	68	231	1,091	1,432
South Wales	1	4	30	38	162	448	2,421	3,103
Total all forces	46	151	1,180	1,580	5,969	18,489	95,841	123,256

Notes:

1. These figures are in terms of full-time equivalents, and have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Consequently, the force figures do not necessarily add precisely to the total.
2. The figures exclude secondment to NCS, NCIS, central services and inter-force units.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) of 22 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 323–28W, on police numbers, if he will list the *(a)* wastage and *(b)* recruitment figures for each police force in England and Wales for the period 30 September 2000 to 31 January. [155940]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested details are in the table.

Total officer recruitment and wastage
1 October 2000 to 31 January 2001

Police force	*Recruitment*	*Wastage*
Avon and Somerset	56	58
Bedfordshire	48	26
Cambridgeshire	63	25
Cheshire	47	34
Cleveland	31	17
Cumbria	22	22

Total officer recruitment and wastage
1 October 2000 to 31 January 2001

Police force	*Recruitment*	*Wastage*
Derbyshire	51	18
Devon and Cornwall	71	34
Dorset	53	26
Durham	32	19
Essex	97	58
Gloucestershire	31	20
Greater Manchester	199	88
Hampshire	89	71
Hertfordshire	52	64
Humberside	49	53
Kent	128	63
Lancashire	78	40
Leicestershire	31	24
Lincolnshire	44	18
London, City of	14	21
Merseyside	92	74
Metropolitan police	594	337
Norfolk	36	26
Northamptonshire	29	18
Northumbria	92	38
North Yorkshire	24	19
Nottinghamshire	75	22
South Yorkshire	71	50
Staffordshire	26	25
Suffolk	37	24
Surrey	79	36
Sussex	103	65
Thames Valley	82	47
Warwickshire	40	17
West Mercia	56	26
West Midlands	231	117
West Yorkshire	92	85
Wiltshire	42	21
Dyfed Powys	36	18
Gwent	28	24
North Wales	47	30
South Wales	116	24
Total all forces	3,304	1,942

Notes:

1. Recruitment and wastage figures are in terms of numbers of officers (whereas the total strength figures are in full-time equivalents).

2. The force figures exclude transfers to and from other England and Wales forces.

3. For the reasons stated above, the previous strength total plusrecruitment minus wastage does *not* equal the current strength total.

Airwave

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has invited the Health and Safety Executive to advise on the health and safety implications for police officers of using Airwave equipment; and if he will make a statement. [155809]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are aware of the issue. It is conducting its own independent assessment based on available information.

I have asked both the Defence Evaluation Research Agency and the National Radiological Protection Board to conduct reviews of the relevant science. The result of these two exercises will be published. If, during the course of these exercises, any issue arises which suggests a risk to health, it will be made public without awaiting the publication of final reports.

In addition, I anticipate that further research in areas that are directly relevant to the technology used in Airwave, will be undertaken within the independent Mobile Telecommunications and Health Research Programme. The Health Research Programme has been initiated by the Government in response to the Stewart Report on mobile phone health issues and is focusing on emerging technologies.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) told *(a)* him, *(b)* Ministers and *(c)* officials in his Department that the telephone conversation about Mr. S. P. Hinduja's naturalisation application between the right hon. Member and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), which took place in June 1998 was private. [155819]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to paragraphs 5.77–5.83 and paragraph 5.209 of Sir Anthony Hammond's report "Review of the Circumstances Surrounding an Application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja in 1998" (HC287) which was published on 9 March 2001.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) for what reasons Mr. S. P. Hinduja's naturalisation application was prioritised in 1998; and if he will make a statement; [155821]

(2) if Mr. S. P. Hinduja's second naturalisation application was prioritised because of the involvement of *(a)* the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and *(b)* the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien). [155817]

Mrs. Roche: The full circumstances of Mr. S. P. Hinduja's naturalisation application are detailed in Sir Anthony Hammond's review which was published on 9 March 2001.

The detail of the priority afforded to the application is given at paragraphs 5.166 to 5.177 of the review.

The general guidance for handling requests for priority treatment of citizenship applications is given at Annexe D of the review.

Hammond Inquiry

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department has taken on the recommendations of the Hammond report (HC 287). [155815]

Mr. Straw: Chapter 9 of Sir Anthony Hammond's report recommends that Departments review their Private Office working practices on the monitoring and recording of telephone calls and general record keeping. My Department has put in hand such a review in order to ensure that consistent arrangements are in place across Private Office.

In paragraph 5.191 of the report, Sir Anthony Hammond notes that a number of measures have been put in place since 1998–99 to improve the working practices of the nationality group of the Integrated Casework Directorate. Caseworkers have been reminded of the need fully to document action and decisions in all cases.

Parliamentary Candidates (Credentials)

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what contact his Department has had with the British National Party concerning the verification of the credentials of their parliamentary candidates and their access to party election broadcasts; [155483]

(2) what discussions he has had with electoral registration officers about ensuring the verification of the credentials of British National Party candidates in respect of their access to party election broadcasts; [155484]

(3) what safeguards he is introducing to ensure the verification of the credentials of parliamentary candidates in relation to their access to party election broadcasts. [155485]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Subject to sections 11 and 37 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, the allocation of party election broadcasts is a matter for the broadcasting authorities (that is, the British Broadcasting Corporation, Independent Television Commission, Radio Authority and Sianel Pedwar Cymru). Section 11 of the Act requires the broadcasting authorities, in determining their policy on party political broadcasts (including party election broadcasts), to have regard to the views of the Electoral Commission. Section 37 of the Act provides that only parties registered under Part II of the Act may qualify for such broadcasts.

We have held no discussions with electoral administrators concerning the British National Party's eligibility to qualify for an election broadcast. We have had no discussions with the British National Party and would not be disposed toward having any.

In response to concerns that unscrupulous candidates had in the past misled electors into supporting their nomination, the Representation of the People Act 2000 made it an offence for a person to include in his nomination paper any fraudulent or fraudulently obtained signatures of persons purporting to act as a candidate's seconder or assentor.

Replica Guns

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the availability of replica guns, with special reference to those which fire ballbearings. [155635]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is a range of different types of replica firearms available in this country, some of which are capable of discharging projectiles and some of which are not.

As regards the first category, controls will depend on whether any projectile which is expelled is capable of inflicting a lethal injury. For example, fully functioning replicas of historic guns, whether breech loading or muzzle loading, are subject to the full control of the firearms legislation. Replica breech loading cartridge firing pistols are prohibited weapons which may only be held with the express authority of the Secretary of State. The possession of replica air weapons capable of lethal performance is governed by the wider provisions of the Firearms Act 1968 as amended and such weapons cannot be sold to a person under 17 or given to a person under 14. They are also subject to the provisions of the Firearms (Dangerous Air Weapons) Rules 1969.

Replicas which fire small plastic pellets or, in some cases, steel ball bearings with insufficient energy to penetrate the skin are not regarded as lethal barrelled weapons. Nor are blank firing replicas which cannot readily be converted to fire a live round, and realistic non-firing replicas. Such guns do not fall under the controls of the Firearms Act 1968 as amended and may freely be bought by anyone.

Under the Toys (Safety) Regulations 1989 any toy gun which discharges a hard projectile must not have an energy level in excess of 0.08 joule.

The Government recognise the concerns which have been expressed in relation to the misuse and ready availability of realistic replica guns and are looking carefully at the possibility of introducing additional controls. This is a difficult and complex matter, not least because of difficulties of definition, and the Firearms Consultative Committee have been asked to consider the detailed implications of any changes and to report back.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 31 January regarding a constituent, Ref. 2093/1. [155811]

Mrs. Roche: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 488W.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received a report from the Operation Antler team of the Wiltshire police regarding its inquiries into allegations relating to experiments on NHS patients for biological warfare purposes during the 1960s at the chemical and biological defence establishment at Porton Down; and if he will make a statement. [154763]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No, but I have received oral briefings on Operation Antler itself during a visit to Wiltshire Constabulary and from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. In addition officials and members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary have from time to time discussed matters arising from it with Wiltshire Constabulary.

Asylum Support

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's forecast is for the average cost of asylum support, expressed as a figure per asylum seeker, in the financial year 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [152873]

Mrs. Roche: Asylum seekers are currently supported either by payments under arrangements put in place following the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 from the Department of Social Security, or by local authorities, or for newer applicants following the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, directly by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). The costs of all three methods of support are met from the Home Office budget, subject, in the case of local authorities, to agreed unit cost limits. Based on current forecasts of cost and estimates of the average number of asylum seekers supported for the year,

the average forecast cost in 2000–01 of supporting an asylum seeker (ie an applicant for asylum or a dependant of one) who has requested support, is £6,100 for the whole year. These costs include accommodation or Housing Benefit where provided.

Oakington Reception Centre

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are used to determine which asylum seekers should be sent to Oakington Reception Centre; what the qualifying nationalities for detention at Oakington are; how many and what percentage of new asylum seekers from each of the nationalities listed in the instructions were sent to Oakington in the last three months for which figures are available; on what grounds the nationalities listed in the instructions are selected; and if he will make a statement. [155568]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Applicants are referred to Oakington where it appears that their application can be decided quickly, including those which may be certified as manifestly unfounded, and there are no other circumstances which would make their claim unsuitable for Oakington. Nationality is a factor, although not the only factor, in deciding whether a case is suitable for consideration at Oakington as the country of origin has a bearing on the likely complexity of the claim. Information on nationalities currently potentially suitable for consideration at Oakington is provided in the table. Operational constraints, for example the availability of interpreters, limit the range of nationalities than can, in practice, be dealt with at Oakington at any one time.

Applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and those cases referred to Oakington, December 2000 to February 2001[1]

Nationality	Total 'applications'[2]	Cases referred to Oakington	Percentage sent to Oakington
Albania	395	125	32
Bangladesh	215	38	18
Bolivia[3]	10	0	0
Brazil[3]	10	0	0
Cameroon[3]	85	0	0
China	380	190	50
Ivory Coast	85	0	0
Czech Republic	280	167	59
Estonia	20	8	42
Ghana	45	14	31
Hungary[3]	*	0	0
India	355	75	21
Iraq	2,130	167	8
Kenya[3]	60	0	0
Latvia	40	18	45
Lithuania	60	15	25
Nigeria	130	65	51
Pakistan	585	112	19
Poland	190	89	47
Romania	430	85	20
Slovakia	5	3	43
Slovenia[3]	5	0	0
Tanzania	25	9	38
Ukraine[3]	135	0	0
Uganda	80	22	27
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	745	117	16
Zimbabwe	390	212	54

[1] Provisional figures
[2] Figures are rounded to the nearest 5. "*" denotes 1 or 2
[3] Recently introduced nationalities

Note:
Referrals to Oakington in December 2000 to January 2001 do not necessarily relate exactly to applications in that period

Criminal Justice Review

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the outcome of the criminal justice review undertaken by Lord Birt. [155151]

Mr. Straw: The work undertaken by Lord Birt was considered alongside that undertaken by the Home Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Law Officers' Department and Her Majesty's Treasury in preparing the Government's strategy document, "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead" (Cm 5074), which was published on 26 February 2001.

Departmental Policies (Regent's Park and Kensington, North)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including individual statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect upon Regent's Park and Kensington, North of his Department's policies since May 1997. [155351]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Regent's Park and Kensington, North constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was awarded £117,000 for a six-camera system covering two residential areas in North Kensington, Swinbrook estate and St. Quintin Park. The scheme aims to reduce incidents of assault, criminal damage and vehicle crime on both estates.

Youth Offending

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) Youth Offending Team (YOT) covers the entire borough. Its aim is to reduce offending by children and young people aged 10–17. During 2000–01 the YOT dealt with 170 new cases. This represents approximately one in 70 of the youth population. The borough attributes its apparently low offending rate to the success of partnership arrangements aimed at reducing crime including the YOT, as well as the excellence of its Youth Service and Social Services Departments (as evidenced by recent Ofsted and Joint Review inspections). Robbery, burglary and violent

offences are a priority for the YOT and its partners for 2001–02. The Youth Justice Plan contains objectives to develop intensive supervision programmes for persistent young offenders, develop an anger management programme and to share intelligence with the Police Service in relation to the most prolific young offenders in the Royal borough.

The YOT contracts with the Divert Trust for the delivery of a mentoring scheme. This scheme provides positive adult role models for young offenders. 17 volunteers from RBKC are currently on the scheme. RPS Rainer have been contracted to provide a bail supervision service aimed at reducing offending on bail as well as decreasing non-attendance at court. The YOT is part of the Royal borough's Community Safety Strategy and has specific targets to meet around early intervention work, support and guidance for parents of young offenders and the development of an assessment framework. The RBKC YOT piloted the new assessment framework called ASSET. The team continues to be part of the research programme investigating the efficacy of ASSET. The YOT places a particular emphasis on early intervention. During 2000–01, 70 per cent. of young offenders given a Final Warning took part in a rehabilitation programme, (despite the fact that attendance is voluntary). A sample of 50 cases showed only five occurrences of re-offending. This re-offending rate is lower than the previous cautioning rate. A course for young people at risk of offending or school exclusion called "Chance to Change" is run annually. Last year only one of 12 attendees subsequently re-offended.

In addition to statutory community orders, the YOT operates a groupwork programme for male and female offenders (separately), aimed at tackling anti-social behaviour and improving life skills. The YOT also operates a Youth Inclusion Programme in the north of the borough aimed at providing an intensive programme for the 50 young people in the area most at risk from offending. This programme is run in partnership with the Royal borough's Youth Service. The YOT has operated as a catalyst for developing joint work within partner agencies. Links with the voluntary sector have been strengthened and the incorporation of a victim perspective has brought a whole new dimension to youth justice interventions.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Regent's Park and Kensington, North to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Racism

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the National Union of Students regarding the operation of racist groups on college and university campuses. [155452]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have not discussed this matter with the National Union of Students (NUS) nor have I been asked to meet the NUS to discuss this issue. The Government are fully committed to tackling racism and anti-Semitism wherever it occurs. We have laws, such as the law on incitement to racial hatred, to deal with those who seek to stir up racial hatred. The question of whether groups on college or university campuses are breaching these laws is a matter for the police.

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives his Department is undertaking to monitor websites which contain anti-semitic material. [155451]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government condemn those who use the internet to distribute racist material of this kind. The law on incitement to racial hatred applies to material on the internet which comes within our jurisdiction.

Monitoring criminal activity is a matter for the police. In November last year my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced that the Government were making available £25 million to the police over the next three years to initiate the implementation of a national high-tech crime strategy. That will enhance the capability of law enforcement to investigate crime, including racially-motivated crime, more effectively where new technology is used.

Additionally, the Government are assisting the Internet Watch Foundation to set up a complaint hotline which will enable the public to report racially inflammatory material they find on the internet.

Prisoners (Gender Reassignment)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people who are currently serving a prison sentence *(a)* have undergone some part of the gender reassignment process, *(b)* are undergoing treatment for gender reassignment and *(c)* have requested an assessment for gender reassignment. [155267]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not routinely collected centrally on the number of prisoners with gender dysphoria, or who are receiving treatment for that condition in prison. However, 16 cases of prisoners needing assessment, care or treatment for gender dysphoria have been drawn to the attention of Prison Service Headquarters in recent years.

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155287]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be available shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested, although set out are examples relating to the Chichester constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Two schemes submitted by Chichester district council were awarded a total of approximately £320,000. Selsey CCTV Provision was awarded over £125,000 for a five-camera system to cover the High Street shopping area. The scheme aims to reduce overall crime in the Selsey parish by 15 per cent. over three years, with incidents of criminal damage, violence against the person and vehicle crime greatly reduced.

Midhurst CCTV Provision was awarded almost £195,000 for eight cameras to cover the length of the main shopping area, Midhurst Grammar School and surrounding residential areas. The scheme will reduce overall crime in the Midhurst parish area by 15 per cent. over three years, with incidents of criminal damage, violence against the person and vehicle crime greatly reduced.

Youth Offending

The West Sussex Youth Offending Team (YOT) comprises staff and resources from West Sussex County Council, Sussex police, the Probation Service and the health authority and is a countywide service. It brings together staff from the five partner agencies to form an integrated, operational team. The YOT has been involved at a strategic and operational level in the key issues around 'speeding up youth justice', which has assisted in bringing down the average times for the processing of all youth cases, including Persistent Young Offenders. The court service has been improved by providing informed and proactive court duty officers to the increased number of scheduled youth courts, to promote the issues which assist in reducing unnecessary delays in the processing of young offenders.

A Remand Management Service has been established in partnership with RPS Rainer. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of young people being remanded to custody and local authority accommodation. A mentoring service, in partnership with Divert and the Crime Reduction Initiative has achieved the recruitment of over 30 trained mentors matched with the high-risk and persistent offenders. In partnership with Parentlink, a parenting support programme offers both voluntary and mandatory programmes to parents of teenagers in trouble. A substance and alcohol misuse counselling service, which is a partnership between West Sussex Health Authority, the Drug Action Team (DAT) and Crime Reduction Initiative has been set up using DAT development funds and charitable funding. West Sussex county council and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children are working in partnership on a young abusers assessment and treatment project which is aimed at young people who sexually abuse other children and young people. The YOT are also involved in an appropriate adult project. This aims to recruit and train volunteers to meet the requirements of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 in providing trained adults to custody suites to assist in the interviewing of arrested children and young people.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Chichester to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Prisoner Education

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the provision of education and skills training to inmates of HM prisons; [155772]

(2) what plans he has to improve the provision of education to inmates of Her Majesty's prisons. [155771]

Mr. Boateng: I would refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) on 14 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 172W.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* provision of ITC skills training programmes in HM Prisons there is and *(b)* plans he has to extend such provision. [155751]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service is working to include Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the education provision of all Prison Service establishments. The Service held an Information Technology (IT) conference in London on 21 March and it is intended to follow this up by creating a steering group to facilitate IT strategy and policy for all prison education departments. The Prison Service is developing a number of pilots including the University for Industry/"learn direct" in six establishments, aimed at enhancing basic and key skills using interactive computing technology; the European Computer Driving Licence in the Yorkshire and Humberside area; the computer repair and maintenance (CRAM) project, in conjunction with the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) in Brighton, to teach prisoners how to repair

computers and linked to a job search programme; the Leonardos pilot, a tri-national project run by the probation service to enhance learning for different nationalities.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to encourage inmates of HM prisons to participate in distance learning. [155770]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has arrangements for eligible prisoners to undertake degree and other higher education courses with the Open University. Many prison education departments facilitate open learning through the National Extension College while some use courses provided by the National Distance Learning College. In the longer term the Prison Service partnership with the University for Industry will provide access for prisoners to distance learning packages.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has plans to make the internet accessible to inmates of HM Prison Service. [155768]

Mr. Boateng: There are no plans to provide prisoners with unrestricted direct access to the Internet. Many prison education departments have internet accessible computers allowing information to be downloaded by the relevant member of staff when required.

Prisoners do have access to internet based learning material through the Learn Direct partnership. There are also a number of education departments that have CD-ROM based learning material with the aim of improving literacy and numeracy, thereby avoiding the need for direct internet access.

Foreign Nationals

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to replace the application forms for foreign nationals wishing to apply for leave to remain in the United Kingdom. [155987]

Mrs. Roche: The current application forms are valid for use until 14 April 2001. Revised forms will be prescribed before then and should be available by the end of March 2001. From the time they are issued until 14 April 2001, applications may be made on either the newly prescribed forms or the current versions. Only the new forms may be used for applications made on or after 15 April 2001. Copies will be placed in the Library as soon as they are available.

Animal Rights Extremism

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to combat animal rights extremism. [156062]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have included a number of measures in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, currently before Parliament, aimed at combating the activities of animal rights extremists. These include a new power for police to remove protesters from outside homes; measures to strengthen provisions on the sending of malicious communications; and a system to prevent disclosure of the home addresses of Directors of vulnerable companies.

We have also consulted closely with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to encourage a consistent approach to enforcement in this area. A consultation document is being issued tomorrow, 28 March, setting out a package of measures in this area, and copies will be placed in the Library.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* live sheep and *(b)* live pigs were exported for (i) slaughter, (ii) further fattening and (iii) breeding in 2000 broken down by country of destination. [147060]

Ms Quin: The total number of live sheep and live pigs certified for export from the UK during 2000 for slaughter, further fattening and breeding are shown in the following table:

Country of destination	*Breeding*	*Fattening*	*Slaughter*
Live sheep			
Belgium	178	593	—
Denmark	—	—	2,170
France	1,233	199,327	—
Germany	86	30,003	—
Greece	—	4,350	—
Republic of Ireland	255	3	120
Italy	—	51,912	—
Netherlands	39	304,809	—
Portugal	—	3,800	300
Spain	20	32,769	—
Switzerland	376	—	—
Tristan da Cunha	80	—	—
United Arab Emirates	15	—	—
Total	2,282	627,566	2,590
Live pigs			
Austria	9	—	—
Belgium	13,454	—	—
Canada	42	—	—
Cyprus	336	—	—
Czech Republic	150	—	—
Denmark	121	—	—
France	2,458	—	—
Germany	40,158	—	—
Greece	716	—	—
Republic of Ireland	1,261	200	61,393
Italy	5,498	—	—
Japan	2,285	—	—
Latvia	1,736	—	—
Malaysia	731	—	—
Mexico	529	—	—
Netherlands	16,898	—	—
Poland	252	—	—
Portugal	404	—	—
Romania	418	—	—
Slovakia	41	—	—
South Korea	1,235	—	—
Spain	8,861	—	—
Thailand	1,200	—	—
United States of America	24	—	—
Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo	617	—	—
Total	99,434	200	61,393

Owing to a computer malfunction which occurred at the end of 2000, the above figures exclude some exports which took place during the month of December 2000.

These figures are derived from the computer system used to issue export health certificates and are subject to updating and amendment.

Horseracing

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has given to the British Horseracing Board about the holding of *(a)* horseracing fixtures in general and *(b)* the Cheltenham Festival in March; and if he will make a statement. [152288]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* On 5 March my Department provided the British Horseracing Board with a detailed veterinary assessment of the conditions necessary to reduce the risk of spreading foot and mouth disease through horserace meetings. The key conclusions are as follows:

(i) No meeting should be held within three kilometres of an infected premises.

(ii) No livestock have been on the racecourse or areas accessible to the public within the previous 28 days.

(iii) No livestock are present in adjoining fields during the 24 hours prior to and during the race meeting.

(iv) All members of the public are restricted exclusively to hard areas, stands and enclosures (not in field areas) during a race meeting.

The decision as to whether individual meetings, including the Cheltenham Festival, should proceed is a matter for the race organisers and racecourse owners. If required, the Foot and Mouth Order 1983 provides powers to prohibit the holding of any sporting or recreational event inside an infected area.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will speed up the arrangements for valuing animals that have to be slaughtered because of foot and mouth disease. [156065]

Ms Quin: An Order has been made to change the valuation procedure for animals slaughtered for foot and mouth disease. This Order gives farmers the option of payments at standard rates, or of having animals valued by a valuer. This is intended to help speed up the valuation process and so ensure that animals can be slaughtered as quickly as possible.

The standard rates of valuation are as follows:

	£
Sheep	
Breeding ewes (in lamb/lamb at foot)	90
Cull/draft ewes	32
Hoggets (male and female old season's lamb)	55
New season's lamb	60
Rams	150
Pigs	
Gilts	190
Breeding sows	130
Cull sows	80
Piglets on sow	18
Stores: Breeding units (weaners)	30
Stores: Finishing unit	55
Boars	520
Cattle	
Clean cattle: steers (under 30 months old)	600
Clean cattle: heifers (under 30 months old)	500
Clean cattle: young bulls (under 30 months old)	580
Breeding cows	1,100
Breeding heifers	900
Breeding bulls	1,000
Cull cattle (including clean cattle over 30 months old)	325

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has given to county councils about the disinfection of vehicles using public roads near locations associated with outbreaks of foot and mouth disease. [153840]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* The Foot and Mouth Order 1983 sets out requirements for the disinfection of vehicles that enter or leave an infected premises. While there are no powers or EU rules to require the disinfection of vehicles that pass adjacent to such premises, MAFF has posted advice on its website about the precautionary measures people should take in the vicinity of livestock farms.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that meat imported for the Ministry of Defence and local authorities does not come from countries infected with foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [154010]

Ms Quin: All meat imported to the UK for human consumption must comply with Community animal and public health provisions that require meat to be accompanied by veterinary certification and to come from approved establishments in approved countries. These permit the importation of meat from some countries where foot and mouth disease is present but only where the veterinary authorities have contained the disease in specific regions. Community rules permit imports of meat from those regions only if it has been deboned and fully matured and is therefore not considered to present a risk of spreading foot and mouth disease. Countries to which these controls currently apply are Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay. However, because of their foot and mouth disease situation meat may not currently be imported from South Africa, Swaziland or Argentina. There is, and I envisage, no exemption from these general rules for the Ministry of Defence or for local authorities.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with farmers and farm organisations over his Department's decision increasingly to restrict herds where inconclusive reactions to foot and mouth tests are found. [154036]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* Ministers have held regular and wide ranging meetings with farming and other organisations since the earliest days of the foot and mouth outbreak. Restrictions are imposed on herds where disease is suspected to exist. Disease may be confirmed on clinical grounds alone if the State Veterinary Service is satisfied that animals are clearly exhibiting signs of the disease. Where doubt exists as to whether the clinical symptoms actually relate to foot and mouth disease, samples are taken for testing. The testing process will ultimately lead to a positive or negative

result. On occasions it may be necessary to take further samples before a clear result is obtained, particularly a negative. Restrictions will not be lifted until it is certain that the disease is not present.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how frequently his Department's website relating to the foot and mouth crisis is updated; and if he will make a statement. [154282]

Ms Quin: The Ministry's website www.maff.gov.uk relating to foot and mouth disease is updated at least twice a day. We recognise the importance of putting a wide range of information on the internet to assist farmers and the industry, and will continue to ensure that we provide a comprehensive and timely service.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what equipment for handling carcases of slaughtered livestock infected by foot and mouth disease was transported from Marsh Farm, Fambridge, Essex to Wick Farm, Layer-de-la-Haye, Essex; how and when it was transported; and what measures were taken to disinfect equipment before it was transported. [154314]

Ms Quin: *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* One teleporter, hired from Sonic Rail Services Ltd., was moved under its own power with a MAFF escort on 10 March 2001 between 19.00 hours and 20.30 hours. Before being transferred between premises the teleporter was fully disinfected in accordance with the Foot and Mouth Disease Order 1983. The disinfection was supervised by a MAFF official.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the risk of foot and mouth being spread throughout Shropshire by vehicles transporting infected carcases, to the rendering plant at Widnes. [154485]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 513–14W.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence he has received indicating a linkage between foot and mouth disease and Welshpool market; and if he will make a statement. [154557]

Ms Quin: We have confirmed a number of cases of foot and mouth disease in animals which have passed through Welshpool market. Further epidemiological investigations are continuing, the results of which will be published.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans are in place to use the rendering plant at Marsh Barton, Exeter for foot and mouth cases. [154436]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Following the successful introduction of rendering foot and mouth carcases at the Prosper de Mulder plant in Widnes, carcases have been sent to the plant at Marsh Barton since 16 March. Further plants at Great Torrington in Devon and at Paisley are now also being used.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish a list of suspected foot and mouth sites on his Departmental website at the time of signature of form C. [154492]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* Details of premises under form C are now placed on the Ministry's website. This will be updated once a day.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what methods of slaughter were used for killing livestock at Wick Farm, Layes-de-la-Haye in Essex; and what assessment he has made of the extent to which the methods used complied with the required animal welfare standards. [154719]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The susceptible livestock were slaughtered by licensed slaughtermen using captive bolt, an approved safe method of slaughter.

Fisheries

Dr. Godman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to seek to ensure that Polish fishing vessels are prohibited from fishing in the North Sea and the Irish Sea; and if he will make a statement. [155442]

Mr. Morley: The Government's objective for fisheries is to ensure that any quotas granted to Poland and other acceding member states cover only those areas and stocks for which they already have recognised track records. As Poland has no track record in fishing in the North Sea and Irish Sea since the establishment of the Common Fisheries Policy it will not receive any quota for these upon accession.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the pesticides approvals granted and extended by him for spraying in connection with genetically modified crops, indicating *(a)* the approval reference number, *(b)* the date where applicable of (i) approval and (ii) extension, *(c)* the permitted annual maximum area to be treated, *(d)* the date, where applicable, of (iii) expiry and (iv) extension of the approval, *(e)* the active ingredients and the products approved and *(f)* the company or other person holding the approval. [154337]

Ms Quin: The only approvals that we have specifically granted for the use of pesticides on genetically modified crops are experimental approvals. Unlike commercial level approvals, experimental approvals are not published for reasons of commercial confidentiality.

We are, however, in the process of reviewing the current arrangements to provide for greater openness and transparency. In the meantime the Pesticides Safety Directorate have been asked to seek the consent of the relevant approval holders to the release of the information requested. I will write with as much of the information requested as is consistent with proper safeguards for commercial confidentiality. Copies of the letter will be made available to the Libraries of the House.

SCOTLAND

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the average percentage increase in salaries

of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the senior civil service, was in her Department for 2000–01. [152791]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The average performance-related increase in consolidated basic pay for staff of the Scotland Office was 5.6 per cent. An average non-consolidated performance bonus of £528 was also paid to staff who performed to a higher level.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many special advisers were employed by the Scottish Office in *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97; and at what cost. [154254]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* During both years there were two special advisers in post at any one time at a cost of £76,855 in 1995–96 and £92,587 in 1996–97.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Policies (Chichester)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Chichester constituency, the effects on Chichester of she Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155286]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good-quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

The Arun, Chichester and Horsham Community Legal Services Partnership (CLSP), which covers the Chichester constituency, is one of 165 CLSPs throughout England and Wales.

Within Chichester, the Legal Services Commission awarded contracts for 2000–01 to the value of £111,339. The contracts cover a range of categories and these include family, employment, housing, mediation, mental health and personal injury.

Thames Valley Courts

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department which courthouses in the Thames Valley magistrates courts committee area *(a)* do not meet the statutory requirements for disability and *(b)* do not comply with the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 with regard to custody cases. [155814]

Jane Kennedy: The Thames Valley magistrates courts committee has made an assessment of its accommodation. Based on this assessment, the courthouses at Banbury, Bicester, Bracknell, Didcot, Maidenhead, Newbury, Oxford, Reading, Slough, Thame, Wantage and Witney do not fully meet the current statutory requirements for disability. The custody areas at Banbury, Oxford and Witney courthouses require work to remove potential ligature points and install panic alarms. Works will be carried out during the 2001–02 financial year to improve this position.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for how many hours each courtroom in the Thames Valley magistrates courts committee area was used in each of the last three years. [155813]

Jane Kennedy: Sitting hours were collected for the calendar year up to the end of 1998, and for the financial year from April 1999 onwards. No data were collected centrally for the period January to March 1999. Data are given for the three completed quarters in the current financial year. The information is in the table.

		Sitting hours		
Courthouse	*Courtrooms*	*January-December 1998*	*April 1999-March 2000*	*April 2000-December 2000*
Abingdon, Oxon	1	520.10	Closed	—
5 King George V Road, Amersham	1	608.50	568.00	268.00
5 King George V Road, Amersham	2	368.00	298.25	120.00
Walton Street, Aylesbury	1	1,111.75	990.25	837.75
Walton Street, Aylesbury	2	459.75	726.00	695.50
Walton Street, Aylesbury	3	993.00	657.75	546.25
Warwick Road, Banbury	1	1,073.00	928.15	756.20
Warwick Road, Banbury	2	864.00	924.30	737.80
Warwick Road, Banbury	3	278.00	164.30	95.45
Windsor End, Beaconsfield	1	433.00	559.75	306.50
Windsor End, Beaconsfield	2	677.75	241.75	664.75
Queen's Avenue, Bicester	1	785.00	553.45	485.80
Queen's Avenue, Bicester	2	249.00	378.15	301.40
Town Square, Bracknell	1	869.75	923.75	539.25
Town Square, Bracknell	2	578.25	483.25	375.50
Town Square, Bracknell	3	59.50	72.67	6.25
Verney Close, Buckingham	1	272.25	246.00	147.00
Mereland Road, Didcot	1	459.40	798.30	693.00
Mereland Road, Didcot	2	96.80	60.60	89.50
Northfield End, Henley On Thames	1	232.10	Closed	—
Bridge Road, Maidenhead	1	783.25	942.30	841.50
Bridge Road, Maidenhead	2	465.00	539.85	472.00
Bridge Road, Maidenhead	3	227.00	331.80	282.00

Courthouse	Courtrooms	Sitting hours: January-December 1998	April 1999-March 2000	April 2000-December 2000
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	1	675.00	3,080.65	540.85
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	2	770.00	344.45	631.25
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	3	1,295.00	640.05	952.20
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	4	1,090.00	595.05	898.25
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	5	570.00	393.80	486.30
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	6	520.00	355.65	382.70
301 Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes	7	460.00	202.70	862.40
Mill Lane, Newbury	1	972.00	904.50	651.75
Mill Lane, Newbury	2	786.50	694.25	520.50
Mill Lane, Newbury	3	145.00	193.00	145.50
Speedwell Street, Oxford	1	1,340.40	1,397.10	850.00
Speedwell Street, Oxford	2	1,043.20	1,067.40	898.00
Speedwell Street, Oxford	3	1,022.80	1,120.50	861.00
Speedwell Street, Oxford	4	707.80	796.20	774.00
Speedwell Street, Oxford	5	564.70	535.40	603.75
Speedwell Street, Oxford	6	48.70	35.80	170.25
Civic Centre, Reading	1	971.25	833.00	617.25
Civic Centre, Reading	2	1,189.25	1,189.75	832.00
Civic Centre, Reading	3	1,131.50	1,211.25	847.75
Civic Centre, Reading	4	606.50	548.00	468.50
Civic Centre, Reading	5	761.00	771.00	564.25
Civic Centre, Reading	6	366.00	258.25	258.50
Chalvey Park, Slough	1	667.75	1,195.25	820.25
Chalvey Park, Slough	2	710.00	1,064.75	835.50
Chalvey Park, Slough	3	517.50	558.05	400.00
Lower High Street, Thame	1	668.10	600.60	292.00
Lower High Street, Thame	2	113.20	93.10	28.00
Church Street, Wantage	1	349.20	430.20	328.75
Church Street, Wantage	2	104.70	79.50	44.00
Alma Road, Windsor	1	542.25	Closed	—
Alma Road, Windsor	2	278.75	Closed	—
Welch Way, Witney	1	643.00	539.90	417.00
Welch Way, Witney	2	419.00	434.30	268.95
Easton Street, High Wycombe	1	946.00	791.00	519.50
Easton Street, High Wycombe	2	1,200.00	958.95	961.00
Easton Street, High Wycombe	3	720.00	527.25	628.00
Easton Street, High Wycombe	4	750.00	594.25	646.75
Wycombe	Directions	—	39.50	45.00
Grand totals	—	38,130.20	36,462.97	29,313.05

Notes:
1. Thames Valley MCC was created in April 1999.
2. Data for the earlier year is the aggregation of Berkshire and Oxfordshire MCC and Buckinghamshire MCC.

Extra-Statutory Scheme (Northern Ireland)

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what criteria the Lord Chancellor will use to assess applications for funding from the extra-statutory ex-gratia scheme, in Northern Ireland. [156081]

Mr. Lock: I can advise my hon. Friend that my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor will consider each application for funding from the Extra-Statutory Scheme on its individual merits and in the round. In so doing the Lord Chancellor will have regard to:

(a) whether the issues raised in the application fall outside the scope of a coroner's inquest;

(b) whether the applicant would qualify financially for full civil legal aid in other circumstances;

(c) whether an effective investigation of the death by the state is needed, and whether the inquest is the only way to conduct it;

(d) whether the applicant has a sufficiently close relationship to the deceased to warrant funding;

(e) whether an alternative to public funding is available;

(f) whether the applicant needs representation in order to participate effectively in the inquest—for example, because there are unusually complex questions of law or fact, or evidential difficulties, or because of the level of representation of others who have an interest in or are involved in the inquest;

(g) whether there is a significant wider public interest in representation being provided;

(h) the views of the coroner, if expressed; and

(i) any other matters which appear to be relevant to the individual circumstances of the case.

The Lord Chancellor is writing to interested parties to invite their views on the criteria.

The consultation exercise for these criteria will conclude on 30 June 2001. In the meantime and until the Lord Chancellor reaches a conclusion on the final criteria to be adopted, he will apply the criteria set out to any applications for funding from the extra-statutory fund.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Parades Commission

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the persons who have served on the Parades Commission from the date of the coming into effect of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, giving in each case the date of the original appointment, the dates of its expiry and subsequent extension, and, in the case of each member who resigned before their term of office expired, the date of their resignation and the reason they gave for their resignation. [155601]

Mr. Ingram: The table lists the members of the Parades Commission, together with their dates of appointment, expiry date, subsequent extension if relevant, and resignation date. The reasons given for resignation are a personal matter for the individuals concerned which it would be inappropriate for me to disclose.

Member	*Appointment date*	*Expiry date*	*Extension*	*Resignation date*
Alister Graham	March 1997	February 1999	1 year	—
David Hewitt	March 1997	February 1999	1 year	—
Frank Guckian	March 1997	February 1999	1 year	—
Berna McIvor	March 1997	February 1999	—	February 1998
Roy Magee	March 1997	February 1999	—	December 1997
Glenn Barr	February 1998	February 2000	—	April 1998
Tommy Cheevers	February 1998	February 2000	—	April 1998
RoseAnne McCormick	February 1998	February 2000	—	—
Aidan Canavan	February 1998	February 2000	—	—
Barbara Erwin	June 1998	February 2000	—	—
Billy Martin	June 1998	February 2000	2 years	—
Tony Holland	February 2000	—	—	—
John Cousins	February 2000	—	—	—
Reverend Roy Magee	February 2000	—	—	—
Peter Osborne	February 2000	—	—	—
Sir John Pringle	February 2000	—	—	—
Peter Quinn	February 2000	—	—	—

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sierra Leone

15. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Sierra Leone. [154101]

Mr. Wilson: Our policy remains to repel the rebels, restore the peace process, and to help rebuild the country. Sierra Leone still has a considerable way to go. But I am encouraged by the start, on 14 March, of the UN peacekeeping force UNAMSIL's deployment forward into rebel held areas.

I also welcome the unanimous adoption of UNSCR 1343 (2001) on 7 March, imposing sanctions on Liberia. We co-sponsored this resolution in response to the UN Expert Panel report, which clearly identified Liberian President Taylor as the primary supporter of the Revolutionary United Front rebels. UNHCR 1343 is designed to persuade President Taylor and his associates to cease their malign activities in the region.

Coca Crops

16. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Bolivian Government on the drugs trade in coca crops. [154102]

Mr. Battle: We take every opportunity to discuss drugs with the Bolivian authorities. On 28 February I confirmed to the Bolivian Minister of Justice the UK's continuing support for his Government's efforts. We have contributed over a million pounds in counter-drugs assistance to Bolivia since 1997 and I am pleased to announce to the House that I have just approved a further contribution of £100,000 towards a crop survey in Bolivia's Yungas region to identify areas of land currently being used for illicit coca cultivation.

Cyprus

17. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his latest assessment is of the prospects for the reunification of Cyprus. [154104]

Mr. Vaz: The UK strongly believes that the current UN settlement process, launched in December 1999 by the UN Secretary General, offers an excellent opportunity to achieve a just and lasting settlement in Cyprus. This is in the interests of all concerned. The UN process is currently at a sensitive and difficult stage but the UK has every confidence in the ability of the UN to find a way to resolve the current difficulties and move forward. To that end we will continue strongly to urge all those involved to remain fully and positively engaged in the search for a solution.

Burma

18. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy on Burma following the International Labour Organisation's decision on forced labour conditions. [154105]

Mr. Battle: In 1997 the European Community suspended GSP privileges to Burma in reaction to the use of forced labour there. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment wrote to employers and workers groups in the UK on 18 February, asking them to draw the ILO decision to their members' attention and to consider how to give effect to the ILO

Resolution. We too are actively considering what further steps HMG could take; I discussed this issue with ILO Director General Somavia on 21 March in Geneva.

Brazil

19. **Mr. Lammy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Government of Brazil regarding the problem of forced labour. [154106]

Mr. Battle: We are in regular contact with the Brazilian authorities on a broad range of human rights issues, including forced labour.

During talks between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Brazilian Government in Brasilia in December last year, Embassy officials again raised our concerns about the use of forced labour in Brazil. We have subsequently passed on a copy of Anti-Slavery International's latest briefing on forced labour to Brazil's National Secretariat for Human Rights.

Human Rights (Colombia)

20. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made on human rights in Colombia to the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights. [154107]

Mr. Battle: We are very concerned about increasing levels of violence in Colombia in recent months, particularly directed at trade unionists such as Wilson Borja and other human rights defenders. We have raised our concerns directly with the Colombian authorities. I issued a statement on 13 February reiterating our concerns. The President of the European Union intends to issue a statement on the situation in Colombia on behalf of all EU member states at the 57th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights taking place in Geneva at the moment.

I did discuss these matters in Geneva last week with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson.

Hawk Aircraft

21. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last made representations to the Indian Government on the question of a purchase of Hawk aircraft. [154108]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Defence raised this issue with the Indian Government during their respective visits to India in January and December.

East Timor

22. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the prospects for elections in East Timor. [154109]

31. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the prospects for elections in East Timor. [154118]

34. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the prospect for elections in East Timor. [154121]

Mr. Battle: Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Head of the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), announced on 16 March that the first democratic election for an 88-member constituent Assembly will be held on 30 August 2001. These elections will mark a key stage in the transition towards an independent state, expected in early 2002.

Luxembourg

23. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the state of bilateral relations between Britain and Luxembourg. [154110]

Mr. Vaz: Relations with Luxembourg are traditionally very good. Ministers and officials have frequent contact with their Luxembourg counterparts at EU meetings. There were also four substantive bilateral ministerial meetings in 2000, including a meeting between the two Prime Ministers in London. The Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) visited Luxembourg on 21 March to speak on welfare and pensions reform and meet her opposite numbers and there are plans for my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to have talks with his opposite number Madame Polfer. Trade relations thrive, with the UK exports to Luxembourg reaching £219.8 million last year.

China

25. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next plans to visit China; and if he will make a statement. [154112]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will visit Beijing from 24–25 May to attend the ASEM (Asia-Europe) Foreign Minister's meeting.

Zimbabwe

26. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the South African Government concerning the economic crisis in Zimbabwe. [154113]

Mr. Wilson: I discussed our concerns over Zimbabwe with South Africa's Deputy Foreign Minister on 6 March. We welcome President Mbeki's expressed intention to meet President Mugabe soon to discuss the situation in Zimbabwe.

29. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on bilateral relations with Zimbabwe. [154116]

Mr. Wilson: Given the long shared history between our two countries, we would wish to have better relations with the Government of Zimbabwe. But that is not possible while the Government of Zimbabwe pursue their current policies, which are damaging the economy of the country and its international reputation.

Terrorism (Israel)

27. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Palestinian National Authority in relation to terrorist attacks in Israel. [154114]

Mr. Wilson: The Government condemn all acts of violence in the middle east, and call on both parties to take steps to reduce the violence and build confidence. This of course includes action where possible to prevent terrorist acts. We take every opportunity to raise this with both Palestinian and Israeli representatives. The European Council in Stockholm on 23 March called for the immediate resumption of security co-operation and urged both parties to do all in their power to end violence, restrain extremism and minimise incitement and provocations.

Illegal Drugs

28. **Mr. Efford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent initiatives to tackle the international trade in illegal drugs. [154115]

Mr. Battle: This Government are at the forefront of international efforts to combat the drugs trade. Our aim, as stated in the 10-year drugs strategy, is to halve the availability of those Class A drugs which cause the greatest harm, particularly heroin and cocaine.

Kashmir

30. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the human rights situation in Kashmir. [154117]

Mr. Wilson: We remain deeply concerned about the human rights situation in Kashmir, including reports of abuses by security forces and militants. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed this issue with his Indian counterpart, Jaswant Singh, during talks in London in November last year. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Democratic Development (Third World)

32. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the chairman of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy on the development of democracy in the third world. [154119]

Mr. Battle: We take a close interest in the democracy building activities of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and are in contact with the Chairman of the Board of Governors. In this financial year £4,325,500 of FCO funds has been channelled towards successful WFD activity in a range of countries, with a particular focus on Africa, the Balkans and the Former Soviet Union.

Middle East

33. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress in the middle east peace initiative. [154120]

Mr. Wilson: Following a successful EU Troika visit to the region, Heads of State and Government discussed the situation in the middle east at the European Council in Stockholm on 23 March. The Council reaffirmed the Union's determination to contribute to peace, stability and future prosperity in the middle east. To that end it requested the EU High Representative Javier Solana to explore how the EU can play an enhanced role in promoting the resumption of the peace process. While there has been an overall reduction in the level of violence in the past two weeks, we remain deeply concerned at the continuing tensions and instability. We urge both parties to take immediate parallel steps to address the current crisis.

Libya

35. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Libya. [154122]

Mr. Wilson: The United Kingdom has full diplomatic relations with Libya. We are constructively engaged with Libya and continue to encourage them to play a positive role in the international community.

Vojvodina

36. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the situation in Vojvodina. [154123]

Mr. Vaz: We welcome the recent, constructive dialogue between Belgrade and Vojvodina. This is a further encouraging sign that a mutually agreed and lasting constitutional settlement can be reached on a redefinition of autonomous powers for the province.

St. Helena

37. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects British citizenship to be restored to residents of the island of St. Helena. [154124]

Mr. Battle: We are fully committed to introducing legislation to give British citizenship to the people of St. Helena and the other Overseas Territories. We will make parliamentary time available to introduce the legislation for this measure as soon as practicable. Preparatory work to agree the principles of such a bill along with drafting Instructions for the Parliamentary Counsel has been completed.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

38. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the charter of fundamental rights on EU law; and if he will make a statement. [154125]

Mr. Vaz: The Charter of Rights is a political declaration. It is not legally binding. It creates no new powers or tasks for the EU and does not modify powers

or tasks defined by the Treaties. It sets out fundamental rights, freedoms and principles that the EU should respect when going about its daily business, and it promotes the visibility of those rights.

Democratic Republic of Congo

39. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department is taking to assist the peace process in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [154126]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for International Development had separate meetings with President Kabila on 13 March. We pressed him to implement the Lusaka Agreement, assured him of our continued political and practical support and stressed that those who fail to honour their commitments would be held to account by the international community.

European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress towards the ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. [155984]

Mr. Vaz: I am pleased to announce that the UK has today ratified the Charter. In doing so, we have undertaken a binding commitment to protect and preserve Welsh, Scottish-Gaelic, Irish, Scots and Ulster-Scots as an essential part of our cultural heritage. We are considering the case for Cornish to be included. Our Instrument of Ratification lists the specific provisions, in Part III of the Charter, which we have undertaken to promote the use in public life of Welsh, Scottish-Gaelic and Irish. Copies of the Charter and the Instrument of Ratification have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 28 March 2001

DEFENCE

Ro-ro Ferries

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) of 28 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 665W, if the British seafarers referred to by the Chief of Defence Procurement are required to be sponsored reserves; [155391]

(2) how much his Department intends to charge AWSR Shipping Ltd. for managing the subcontract with Harland and Wolff for two ro-ro ferries; and what safeguards his Department has put in place to ensure that when on his Department's business all six ro-ro ferries are manned by British seamen. [155317]

Mr. Hoon: AWSR Shipping Ltd. will manage the shipbuilding contract with Harland and Wolff on the MOD's behalf until the ships are delivered to the company. Negotiations continue with AWSR for the PFI service contract, which we expect to be signed within the next few months. The terms will reflect the cost of the shipbuilding contract management service to the Ministry of Defence.

AWSR Shipping Ltd. have bid, and will be required under contract, to provide British seafarers eligible to be called out as sponsored reserves to crew all six ships when on Ministry of Defence business.

HMS Albion

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total cost is of the building of HMS Albion; if she is on schedule and to budget; what the expected in-service date is; and if he will make a statement. [155806]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The unit production cost of HMS Albion including its Landing Craft and the Integrated Communications System is approximately £385 million. This is within the approved budget. The expected in-service date of the vessel is March 2003, as announced on 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 26W.

Armoured Vehicle Training

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the costs of basic training of the crews of armoured vehicles are; what the costs were in each of the last three years; how many people were trained in each of the last three years; how many staff were employed to do this training; and if he will make a statement. [155805]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* Basic and advanced training of armoured fighting vehicle crewmen is undertaken at Armour Centre, Bovington by a combination of military, Ministry of Defence civilian and contractor's staff. Neither numbers of staff nor costs can be broken down between these categories; the following information is therefore provided.

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
Personnel trained			
Basic trainees (Phase 2)	709	847	823
Advanced trainees (Phase 3)	1,671	1,897	1,842
Staff employed			
Military staff	279	270	310
MOD civilian staff	139	139	137
Contractor's staff	circa 300	circa 300	circa 300
Total running costs (£ million)	25.047	25.219	27.451

[1] Projected for financial year 2000–01

MESAR Radar Trials

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the contracts awarded since 1 May 1997 under the MESAR radar trials letter of offer and acceptance concluded under the 1985 strategic defence initiative memorandum of understanding, along with the name of the contractor and the date of the award. [154795]

Mr. Hoon: Two contracts have been awarded since May 1997 under the relevant letter of offer and acceptance. A contract was let with BAE Systems dated 16 February 1999 and another with Roke Manor Research dated 3 March 1999.

Armed Services Units (Members' Visits)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list alphabetically by constituency those hon. Members who have been on visits organised by his Department outside the United Kingdom to armed services units based or deployed abroad in the last three years. [154770]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Whenever possible, visits by Members of Parliament to armed forces units based or deployed overseas are accommodated dependent on operational commitments at the time.

Armed Forces Training

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in which countries members of the British armed forces have been deployed to train *(a)* overseas Government military personnel and *(b)* military personnel of organisations opposing an overseas Government since 1971. [155961]

Mr. Spellar: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Veterans

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the members of the *(a)* Veterans Forum and *(b)* Veterans Task Force. [155319]

Dr. Moonie: We will not take a final decision on the membership of the Veterans Forum and the Veterans Task Force until their shape, role and agenda have been discussed in more detail with the range of interested parties, including the main veterans' representative groups. However, we currently expect the Task Force, under my own Chairmanship to include Ministers from the Department of Health, the Department of Social Security, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and the Department for Employment and Education, as well as the relevant Scottish and Welsh Departments, the Northern Ireland Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department. I will also chair the Veterans Forum which will include members from the major veterans' representative groups. We will ensure that the smaller representative groups are able to present their views and concerns to the Forum.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* new money and *(b)* new manpower his Department has allocated to the handling of veterans affairs. [155320]

Dr. Moonie: The Veterans initiative will be supported by three new executive staff, together with the budget and support staff required for their effective working. We cannot at this stage predict what new measures might come out of the work of the Veterans Task Force and Forum. We will be commissioning early research into veterans issues and their handling, in addition to that already planned within current departmental programmes. The funding of new measures will be addressed as they are identified.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons responsibility for veterans affairs has been reduced, from Minister of State to Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State level. [155327]

Dr. Moonie: The appointment of a designated Veterans Minister, with responsibility across Government Departments for ensuring that veterans' concerns are understood and addressed in a holistic manner, represents a clear enhancement rather than a reduction in commitment. This change, together with the establishment of a dedicated Ministerial Task Force, reflects the Government's determination that veterans' issues should be handled in a co-ordinated way to ensure a properly integrated approach to veterans and their concerns.

Service Personnel (Commemoration)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the establishment of a memorial to commemorate the service personnel killed on duty by terrorist attack since 1945. [155321]

Dr. Moonie: A project team has been established to take this proposal forward. At this early stage, no criteria have yet been established to determine who would or would not be included on the memorial. This will be carried out by a scoping study in consultation with ex-service organisations and other interested bodies. Further information will become available in due course.

Deployed Forces Facilities

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* current and *(b)* proposed NAAFI retail facilities in (i) Bosnia and (ii) Kosovo. [155325]

Mr. Spellar: Current NAAFI retail facilities located in Bosnia are:

Butmir—one shop

Sipovo—one shop

Mrkonjic Grad—one shop

Sanski Most—one shop

Glamoc—one shop

Banja Luka—one shop.

Current NAAFI retail facilities located in Kosovo are:

Pristina—six shops

Podjevo—one shop.

NAAFI has just finished an extensive programme of providing new, and refurbishing existing, facilities in the Balkans. No further retail facilities are currently planned.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, on how many occasions since May 1997 the staff inspector has reported on staffing levels in the office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. [155347]

Mr. Kirkwood: Since May 1997 the staff inspector has reported on staffing issues in the office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on three occasions:

1. August 1997, job evaluation review of the post of Personal Assistant to the Commissioner.
2. July 1998, upgrading of the post of Personal Assistant to the Commissioner following introduction of new pay and grading structures.
3. September 2000, review of workload.

Parliamentary Works Directorate

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on the changes in the structure and practices of the Parliamentary Works Directorate. [155229]

Mr. Kirkwood: I understand that, in accordance with the Braithwaite Review of the Serjeant at Arms' Department, the Parliamentary Works Directorate is currently being divided. By 1 April 2001, the Works organisation, which serves both Houses of Parliament, will consist of an Estates Director concerned with strategy, long-term planning, property management and heritage and curatorial matters, while a Directorate of Works Services will be responsible for the delivery of in-year projects, the placing of contracts, maintenance and the management of capital projects.

Further information on these arrangements will be available to hon. Members in the future edition of the Members' Handbook. The Works Helpdesk will remain available for contact by hon. Members on extension 4747.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Local Authorities

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to encourage British local authorities to share their expertise with counterparts in developing countries. [155672]

Clare Short: DFID supports the Commonwealth Local Government Forum's Good Practice Scheme. The scheme brings together local government authorities, so far mainly in the UK and Africa, to exchange best practice on local government management and services. I have recently approved a UK contribution of £2 million covering the next five years of the scheme.

Disability Issues

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to share British expertise in handling disability issues with the Governments and peoples of developing countries. [155671]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development is currently supporting more than 40 projects and programmes around the world with a focus on the rights and needs of people with disabilities. In the past year we have approved nearly £40 million of new funding for work in this area. The global drive to reduce poverty will also bring many benefits, in reducing some of the key causes of disability and improving the quality of life and opportunities for people with disabilities.

DFID's strategy on disability is set out in an issues paper published last year, called "Disability, poverty and development". We work closely with Governments, the voluntary and private sectors, and the bilateral and multilateral donor communities, to ensure that disability is addressed in the context of the fight against poverty and the realisation of human rights for all.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the Sudanese Government's commitment to promoting poverty eradication and development; and what her estimate is of the amount spent by the Sudanese Government on *(a)* health, *(b)* education and *(c)* the armed forces in the last 12 months. [155143]

Clare Short: The Sudanese Government's draft Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper will provide an opportunity to consider poverty reducing social and economic programmes. We do not have reliable estimates of the amount spent on health and education although indications suggest that allocations for social sector spending by the central Government are increasing.

Palestinian Authority

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much economic aid has been given to the Palestinian Authority by the United Kingdom in each of the last six years. [155619]

Clare Short: The UK provides bilateral development assistance to the Palestinian Authority and, more broadly, assists Palestinians through our contributions to the EC and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Our programme with the Palestinian Authority supports sustainable economic and social development that benefits the poor. We do this by seeking to support the Middle East Peace Process and improve Palestinian health care, education, access to water and sanitation, gender equality, integration into the global economy and the effectiveness and accountability of the Palestinian Authority. We provide technical assistance rather than direct funding to the Palestinian Authority.

The breakdown of our assistance for the last six years is as follows:

	UK bilateral assistance (£ million)	*UK multilateral assistance (EC and UNRWA)*
1994–95	5.4	20.6
1995–96	3.5	18.0
1996–97	6.1	21.1
1997–98	6.1	22.7
1998–99	5.1	20.9
1999–2000	8.0	—

[1] 1994 calendar year
[2] Not yet available

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committee

Ms Kelly: To ask the Prime Minister when he will lay the Intelligence and Security Committee's Interim Report before Parliament. [156139]

The Prime Minister: I have today laid the Intelligence and Security Committee's Report before Parliament. Following consultation with them over matters which could not be published without prejudice to the continued discharge of the functions of the intelligence and security agencies and in accordance with the Intelligence Services Act 1994, I have excluded the Confidential Annexe.

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Prime Minister what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work his Office has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155670]

The Prime Minister: None.

Jonathan Powell

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of Jonathan Powell appearing before Select Committees. [155473]

The Prime Minister: Civil Servants attend select committees where appropriate.

Cancer Consultants

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Prime Minister what responsibility he had for determining the target figure in the NHS Plan for additional non-surgical cancer consultants. [155409]

The Prime Minister: I agreed the overall targets in the NHS Plan in discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work his Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155665]

Mr. Chris Smith: The only work commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997 has been to conduct a sample of charities. The cost of the work was £293.

Colin Martin

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if Colin Martin complied with the terms of the licence granted by his Department to work on the wreck of the Hanover; and what the duration of the licence is. [155956]

Mr. Alan Howarth: To the Department's knowledge Mr. Martin has complied with the terms of the licence granted to him to excavate the wreck site of the Hanover. The licence issued to Mr. Martin in August 1997 does not have a time limit.

Jockeys (Compensation)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to compensate self-employed jockeys who have lost income as a result of the suspension of races during the foot and mouth outbreak. [155440]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has the lead responsibility for the Rural Task Force which was set up as a direct result of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. No Governments have paid compensation in such circumstances. We are however offering a package of measures to help those adversely affected by the outbreak which my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment announced to the House on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 191. The Rural Task Force will be continuing its work and further measures will be announced as appropriate.

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what specific information the BBC collects on applications for the concessionary television licence scheme. [155419]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing administer the free licence scheme as agent for the BBC. They collect the information necessary to check the entitlement of applicants to the concession; to manage the concession within the general television licensing system; to satisfy the Department of Social Security and the National Audit Office that the sums claimed by the BBC represent free licences and refunds properly issued and legitimate administrative expenses; and to demonstrate the efficiency and value for money of the administrative arrangements.

Applicants for the free over-75 licence are requested to provide their name, address, date of birth and national insurance number. The first two pieces of information are required to run the television licensing database; the third and fourth are used to check entitlement to the concession by comparison with the information provided for that purpose by the Department of Social Security.

Digital Satellite

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he has taken to ensure that domestic satellite receivers are able to pick up unscrambled digital satellite channels. [155266]

Janet Anderson: All domestic satellite receivers are capable of picking up unscrambled satellite channels. However, as satellite services are receivable across international frontiers, all digital satellite channels, including the UK free-to-air services available on digital satellite, are scrambled for copyright reasons.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled by Ministers since 1 January. [155244]

Mr. Chris Smith: No ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled during this period, but a small number of meetings have had to be postponed or rearranged in response to other pressures.

Disabled Access

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department is taking to ensure the hotel industry meets the requirements of disability legislation. [155460]

Janet Anderson: We are committed to widening access to tourism opportunities for all, including disabled people. We are encouraging the hotel sector to recognise the importance of meeting the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 not only because it is a legal requirement but also because it makes sound business sense. For example last year my Department organised a Disability Conference, "Towards 2004", where we engaged with our sectors, including tourism, concentrating on the requirements and implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. In additional, the English Tourism Council have recently published "Accessible Britain 2000–01" which is an official guide for disabled people to Quality Assured National Accessible Scheme accommodation.

We are also drawing the hotel sector's attention to the wide range of publications produced by the Disability Rights Commission, including information to service providers and owners of small business on the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and showing ways in which they can respond positively to the needs of disabled customers.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of hotels in the United Kingdom have adequate accessibility for the disabled to *(a)* buildings, *(b)* restaurants and *(c)* showers and baths. [155463]

Janet Anderson: We do not have this information. However, all businesses which provide a service to the public, including hotels, have a duty placed on them under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Since 1 October 1999 service providers have had to make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people in the way they provide their services. From 2004 they will also have to make "reasonable adjustments" to the physical feature of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access.

The English Tourism Council (ETC) have published "Accessible Britain 2000–01" which is an official guide for disabled people to Quality Assured National Accessible Scheme accommodation. The ETC are currently reviewing the expanding the National Accessibility Standards to ensure that they are in keeping with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Housing Capital Improvement

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each housing capital improvement in *(a)* Westminster and *(b)* Kensington and Chelsea since May 1997. [155350]

Mr. Raynsford: The following housing capital improvement schemes have been allocated funding from the Department in the City of Westminster and the Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea since 1 May 1997:

City of Westminster

£

Nature of funding (examples include:)	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Estate Action—Lisson Green Estate	6,000,000	2,060,000	1,701,400	2,201,400	4,227,600
Estate Action—Mozart Estate	3,055,000	3,600,000	600,000	485,400	0
Housing Investment Programme (HIP)	10,275,000	7,554,000	8,385,000	25,535,000	17,346,000
Basic Credit Approvals (HRA element)[1]	1,872,000	2,372,000	3,655,000	17,483,000	[2]
Major Repairs Allowance	[3]	[3]	[3]	[3]	11,580,932
Capital Receipts Initiative	2,039,000	6,618,000	7,176,000	0	0
Total	23,241,000	22,204,000	21,517,400	45,704,800	33,154,532

[1] The amount of Basic Credit Approvals (HRA element) for 2001–02 is not available at this time.
[2] Not available.
[3] Grant introduced from 1 April 2001.

With the exception of Estate Action funding, it is for the local authority to decide where, within its boundaries, these resources are invested.

Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea

£

Nature of funding (examples include):	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Housing Investment Programme (HIP)	6,358,000	5,723,000	6,306,000	16,395,000	12,910,000
Basic Credit Approvals (HRA element)[1]	2,921,000	2,210,000	2,968,000	7,444,000	[2]
Major Repairs Allowance	[3]	[3]	[3]	[3]	11,580,932
Capital Receipts Initiative	1,095,000	3,119,400	4,319,000	0	0
Total	10,374,000	11,052,000	13,593,000	23,839,000	24,490,932

[1] The amount of Basic Credit Approvals (HRA element) for 2001–02 is not available at this time.
[2] Not available.
[3] Grant introduced from 1 April 2001.
Note:
No current Estate Action Funding

The Royal borough received Round 6 Single Regeneration Budget funding for the "Raising the Dalgarno" scheme. However the allocation is used for community capacity building with other funding elements utilised in the 'bricks and mortar' part of the scheme. For the programmes listed it is for the local authority to decide where, within its boundaries, these resources are invested.

Housing (Battersea)

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each housing capital improvement project financed by his Department in Battersea since 1 May 1997. [155126]

Mr. Raynsford: The following housing capital improvements schemes have been allocated funding from the Department in the London Borough of Wandsworth since 1 May 1997.

£

Nature of funding (examples include):	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Housing Investment Programme (HIP)	10,147,000	8,249,000	8,484,000	20,832,000	13,123,000
Basic Credit Approvals (HRA element)	2,368,000	0	535,000	12,728,000	—
Major Repairs Allowance	—	—	—	—	14,772,563
Capital Receipts Initiative	2,741,341	8,722,000	7,716,000	0	0
Total	15,256,341	16,971,000	16,735,000	33,560,000	27,895,563

Not available
Grant introduced from 1 April 2001

For the programmes listed above, it is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Battersea. It is for the local authority to decide where, within its boundaries, these resources are invested.

The amount of Basic Credit Approvals (HRA Element) for 2001–02 is not available at this time.

In addition to the programmes listed, the London Borough of Wandsworth has received Single Regeneration Budget funding in respect of improvements to the Arndale Estate:

£

Nature of funding (examples include):	*Single Regeneration Budget (round 3)*
1997–98	51,000
1998–99	65,000
1999–2000	297,000
2000–01	906,000
2001–02	3,043,000

Sellafield MOX Plant

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his reply on the Sellafield MOX plant, 18 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 296W, if he will place in the Library a copy of the revised economic case for the MOX plant prepared by BNFL. [148659]

Mr. Meacher: My Department and the Department of Health have today published a consultation paper inviting public comments on BNFL's proposals for operating the Sellafield MOX plant. This includes a copy of BNFL's latest evaluation of the economic case for the plant.

The DETR and MAFF invited public comments on the company's plans in 1999 and the further consideration of the case needed to take into account the consequences of the data falsification incident at BNFL's MOX demonstration facility. BNFL have now submitted a revised economic case and it is right to give people a further opportunity to comment.

Independent consultants are also being appointed as a parallel procedure to evaluate the economic case put forward by BNFL. The consultation will last eight weeks and consultants will report in around 10 weeks. The consultees will not therefore see the consultants' report but the consultants will take account of the responses to the consultation exercise in reporting back to the Departments.

When the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Secretary of State for Health have considered all relevant information, including the consultant's report and the responses today's consultation, they will then decide whether the MOX manufacture, which it is proposed should be carried out at the Sellafield MOX plant, is justified.

The DETR and DoH are inviting comments until 23 May, and hope that people will take advantage of the opportunity to comment on this important proposal.

Ribble Estuary (Radiation)

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what impact the construction of the Ribble Link between the Lancaster Canal and the River Ribble will have on radiation levels in the Ribble estuary. [155230]

Mr. Meacher: Plans for the construction of the Ribble Link have included environmental assessments of the potential impact on radioactivity levels in the estuary and associated areas. These assessments indicate that the impact on the river and the estuary will be very low. The estimated increases in the levels of radioactivity are 3 per cent. and 0.2 per cent. respectively. The assessments also indicate that the radiation dose impact of the work to members of the public will be insignificant. The dose to those most likely to be affected—Ribble netsmen and consumers of local fish—is calculated to be less than 2 microSieverts a year. This is 2 per cent. of the relevant public dose limit from man-made sources of 1,000 microSieverts. (The average dose from background radiation is 2,200 microSieverts a year.) The estimated dose levels are below the levels of regulatory concern set in the relevant legislation.

The Environment Agency will continue to undertake its own independent environmental radioactivity monitoring programme of the River Ribble and the estuary area and will publish the results in its annual report.

Wrecks

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent representations he has received concerning the damage caused to wrecks by divers; [155156]

(2) what plans he has to introduce legislation controlling diving around wrecks; [155150]

Mr. Hill: There have been no representations that my Department has been able to identify.

My Department has no plans for legislation with regard to non-military wrecks. However, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence issued a consultation document on 14 February 2001 concerning the enactment of the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. A copy of the consultation document is in the Libraries of the House.

London Boroughs (Grants)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* each category of grant and *(b)* the amount of each grant paid by his Department to each London borough in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–1999, (iii) 1999–2000 and (iv) 2000–01; and what the projected figure is for 2001–02. [155427]

Ms Armstrong: The data requested by my hon. Friend are not readily available and will take some time to compile. I will therefore write to my hon. Friend with the information and place a copy of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Rail Renationalisation

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the cost of renationalising the rail network and train operating companies. [155598]

Mr. Hill: It is not possible to produce an accurate estimate of the cost of renationalising the rail network and train companies. However, Railtrack's market capitalisation, based on its current share price, is some £4 billion. The cost of renationalising Railtrack would be significantly more than that because, for example, all Railtrack's spending would be a charge to public expenditure.

Housing Associations (Severance Payments)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements are in place for the supervision of housing associations in relation to severance payments to staff; and if he will make a statement in respect of the Liver Housing Association in Liverpool. [155547]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Housing Act 1996 prohibits registered social landlords from making payments or providing benefits to their staff which are non-contractual without the consent of the Housing Corporation.

Liver Housing Association has been the subject of a statutory inquiry by the Housing Corporation. The inquiry was prompted by Liver's plan to make severance payments to three senior directors worth over £1.7 million as part of a proposed merger with Grosvenor Housing Association. The Corporation's inquiry found that certain members of Liver's Board had been responsible for mismanagement in handling the construction of redundancy, retirement and severance policies and in the application of those policies to the three directors. The Corporation has used its powers to make three new appointments to strengthen Liver's Board. The proposed merger between Liver and Grosvenor will require the approval of the Corporation.

Canal Closures

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with British Waterways about the level of charges for hire boat licences they will impose this year on operators affected by canal closures. [155251]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* Decisions on the level of charges for hire boat licences are an operational matter for British Waterways. They recognise that canal closures have presented difficulties for waterway businesses and have agreed to defer the date for payments of hire boat licences from 1 April 2001 to 1 June 2001. This arrangement applies to both those who pay by instalments and those who pay in a single payment.

I refer the hon. Member to my statement to the House on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 191–210, when I reported on the work of the Rural Taskforce. We are developing a package of measures to alleviate the immediate financial hardship of small businesses in rural areas which have been hit by the sudden drop in visitors and other knock-on effects of foot and mouth disease. The taskforce will continue its work and we will want to consider any further Government response in light of the latest developments.

Cycling

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage people to cycle more. [155464]

Mr. Hill: The Government are committed to tripling the number of cycling trips from a 2000 base by 2010 and quadrupling them from a 1996 base by 2012. £8.4 billion of Government funding has been provided to local authorities in the recent local transport settlement. This will help to promote sustainable transport measures, including cycling. The cycling strategies included in the authorities' local transport plans should identify gaps in the local cycle network and result in improvements to the cycling infrastructure. Initial monitoring suggests that the strategies will result in considerable additional provision for cycling.

We are also actively marketing the main message of the National Cycling Strategy. Early outcomes are the launch of an NCS website and production of a promotional video. We are also currently running a series of cycling seminars throughout England aimed at local authorities, major employers and health and education practitioners.

Abandoned Coal Mines

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the annual tonnages of methane discharged into the atmosphere from abandoned coal mines in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [155580]

Mr. Meacher: In 1994, the Watt Committee on Energy estimated that the net flow of methane from abandoned coal mines was likely to be negligible. Recognising the great uncertainties involved, and the extent of mine closures, my Department has sponsored a study of information currently available with a view to including this source in the UK greenhouse gas inventory. This indicates that emissions from abandoned coal mines constitute a declining source and could currently be in the range 20,000 to 300,000 tonnes of methane per year, or between 0.05 per cent. and 0.8 per cent. of total UK greenhouse gas emissions in 1990. We do not have separate estimates fro England and Wales.

Climate Change

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the construction industry on adapting for climatic change. [155616]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had no specific discussions with the construction industry on the subject of climate change. However my Department is in regular contact with the construction industry on a wide range of environmental issues, including those specifically related to climate change. Since I launched our strategy for more sustainable construction: "Building a Better Quality of Life" a year ago, my colleagues and I have been encouraging the industry and its clients to address the issues set out in that strategy, including the reduction of greenhouse gases, by eliminating wasteful and polluting practices which contribute to climate change.

My Department supports research aimed at raising awareness within the construction industry on the implications of climate change. We have recently commissioned a study jointly with the Scottish Executive, the Environment Agency and others to prepare guidance on the flood proofing of buildings and to look at what further research needs to be done in this area. We support the UK Climate Impacts Programme at the University of Oxford to help organisations assess their vulnerability to climate change. We have also invited the Construction Research and Innovation Strategy Panel to consider what research the construction industry needs on climate change.

I commend the recent report from the Foundation for the Built Environment on "Potential Implications of Climate Change on the Built Environment" which sets out ways in which the construction industry can adapt to meet these challenges.

Incinerators

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which firms have provided testing of *(a)* ash residues and *(b)* air emissions at the Byker, Edmonton, SELCHP, Tyseley and Teesside incinerators since 1996. [155336]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The information is as follows:

Tyseley

(a) The firm that has provided testing of ash residues is EUS Ltd.

(b) The firms that have provided testing of air emissions are:

CRE Group Ltd. for the Environment Agency

EUS Laboratories Ltd. for Tyseley Waste Disposal (the operator) and during commissioning for Birwelco (the construction engineers)

AEA Technology for Birwelco during commissioning

Byker

(a) The firm that has provided testing of ash residues from is Energy Supplies Ltd. Analysis was carried out by the former Warren Springs Laboratories.

Ash analyses have also been carried out by the Environment Agency's own laboratories as part of the Agency's prosecution investigation (court date adjourned to 1 May).

(b) The firms that have provided testing of air emissions are:

NIFES Ltd., Altrincham 1992–93

EUS Laboratories Ltd., Manchester 1994–95

EMCO Ltd., Reading 1996 to present.

In 1995 HM Inspectorate of Pollution engaged ENTEC, Newcastle, to carry out stack monitoring as a check against the operator's own compliance monitoring.

SELCHP

(a) The firms that have provided testing of ash residues are:

WRc/Rechem

AEA Technology

(b) The firms that have provided testing of air emissions are:

AEA Technology

EUS Laboratories Ltd.

CRE Group Ltd.

Edmonton

(a) The firms that have provided testing of ash residues are:

BCRA

CRE Group Ltd.

(b) The firms that have provided testing of air emissions are:

Symonds Travis Morgan

EUS Laboratories Ltd.

Resources Environmental Consultants Ltd.

CRE Group Ltd.

Teesside

(a) The firms that have provided testing of ash residues are:

Analytical and Environment Services Ltd. (AES Ltd.)

EUS Laboratories Ltd.

(b) The firm that has provided testing of air emissions is AES Ltd.

Department Policies (North Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Devon constituency, the effects on North Devon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155907]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The principal funding that this Department has provided to North Devon and Mid Devon District Councils and to Devon County Council in the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 is shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on North Devon constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
North Devon District Council					
Revenue Support Grant[2]	3.811	3.352	3.315	3.250	3.559
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	2.718	2.765	2.988	3.317	3.294
Housing Investment Programme	[3]0.840	0.858	0.980	[4]2.035	[5]0.900
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	1.770	1.585	[6]0.927	[7]0	—
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.177	0.577	0.541	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.047	0.025	0	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.016	0.016	0.016	[8]0.016	[8]0.016
Capital Challenge[9]	0.004	0.013	0.380	0	0
Mid Devon District Council					
Revenue Support Grant[2]	1.917	1.842	1.769	1.695	1.894
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	2.096	2.118	2.286	[3]2.567	2.547
Housing Investment Programme	[3]0.744	0.667	0.747	[4]1.772	[5]2.554
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	0.570	0.324	0.182	[7]0.191	—
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.171	0.581	0.538	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.100	0.080	0	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.047	0.047	0.047	[8]0.047	[8]0.047
Capital Challenge[9]	0.120	0.880	0	0	0
Devon County Council					
Revenue Support Grant[2]	[10]266.389	155.634	158.924	150.930	166.866
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	[10]205.912	138.460	151.558	173.050	170.054
Local Government Reorganisation Supplementary Credit Approval	1.812	0.765	0	0	0
Transport Supplementary Grant	1.738	1.238	1.861	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	1.738	1.238	1.861	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	2.560	1.214	2.842	10.281	20.703
Rural Bus Challenge Grant[11]	0	0	0.640	0.300	[12]—
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	1.409	1.409	1.409	1.799
Capital Challenge[9]	2.694	2.257	1.554	0	0

[1] Where known
[2] The amounts of Revenue Support Grant and Income from National Non-Domestic Rates shown for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are the revised amounts allocated under "The Location Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98 Amending Report 1999" and "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998–99 Amending Report 2000" respectively
[3] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from the previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98
[4] Single Housing Pot introduced from 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP
[5] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02 with the introduction of a new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in a sound condition. Mid Devon's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £1.712 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation above. North Devon's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £0 million
[6] North Devon District Council was not eligible for Housing Revenue Account subsidy in 2000–01 as it held no properties in its HRA
[7] Estimated
[8] Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals
[9] Provisional
[10] Devon was subject to a Structural Change Order on 1 April 1998. The figures for Revenue Support Grant and National Non-Domestic Rates quoted for Devon County Council for 1997–98 include an amount for the areas covered by The City of Plymouth and The Borough of Torbay. The figures for 1998–99, 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 exclude the amount for the areas covered by The City of Plymouth and The Borough of Torbay
[11] Rural Bus Challenge figures represent awards—actual spend profiles for schemes may cover more than one year
[12] N/K

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)

Parts of the constituency are included in two SRB schemes. Funding provided for these schemes since 1997–98 is included in the table.

£ million

SRB scheme	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	[1]2001–02
VISIONS	0.099	0.217	0.233	n/a	n/a
Forches	n/a	0.018	0.033	0.076	n/a

[1] Where known

European Funding

Parts of North Devon Constituency were included in the South West Objective 5b programme that closed for new applications at the end of 1999. North Devon District in the constituency is included in the designated South West Objective 2 area which stands to benefit from £108 million of European Funds over the next seven years.

Rural Taskforce

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions the Rural Taskforce has had on support for the racing industry during the foot and mouth outbreak. [155441]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The Rural Taskforce has discussed measures to alleviate the impact of foot and mouth on all affected rural businesses

including the racing industry. The Taskforce welcomes constructive suggestions. I announced to the House on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 191–210, a preliminary package of measures which the Taskforce had discussed earlier that day.

Supported Housing Places

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many supported housing places will be needed to meet the 2003 target set for the Government's Teenage Pregnancy Programme; how many such places have already been and are in the process of being provided; how many applications to provide new places have been received; and how many have been funded. [155786]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Although precise data are not available, we estimate that around 1,500 units of supported accommodation will be needed to meet the Government target that by 2003 all teenage lone parents under 18 who cannot live with their family or partner should be placed in supervised semi-independent housing with support rather than in an independent tenancy.

An audit of existing provision of supported accommodation for housing teenage parents undertaken by local authorities as part of the 2000 Housing Investment Programme identified between 4,000 and 5,000 units of accommodation as available for lone parents with onsite or floating support, of which around two thirds (2,749 units) was available for teenage parents under 18 years of age. However, it is doubtful whether all of this accommodation is located in line with need or is of sufficient quality to meet the support requirements of teenage parents.

Local authorities are responsible for assessing the need for additional accommodation for teenage parents within their areas. Currently 128 new units of accommodation for teenage parents are being funded through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme (ADP). Next year's Approved Development Programme includes 205 new units of accommodation. In addition under the new Safer Communities Supported Housing Fund, £4 million has been allocated to provide 134 new units of accommodation for teenage parents and bids have been received to provide floating support for nearly 200 units of accommodation. The Housing Corporation will be announcing shortly the number of floating support bids, which it will be approving for funding in 2001–02.

Encams

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets have been set for Encams for waste awareness as a condition of funding. [155763]

Mr. Meacher: Encams' flagship waste awareness initiative is the Waste Theme Month that it co-ordinates each October. This year DETR grant of £30,000 funded its entire costs: promotional activity that included leaflets, newspapers, a theme month pack and a national seminar, all of which Encams evaluated through a questionnaire. The programme met all three targets set for it in the 2000–01 Corporate Plan agreed with DETR Ministers, which were:

(i) to increase the action generated by 10 per cent. on that for the previous year;

(ii) to distribute information to 500 organisations; and

(iii) to have 25 per cent. of evaluation questionnaires returned.

Waste and litter awareness and action feature across a range of Encams' grant funded activities, notably the Just Bin It campaign (formerly called National Spring Clean), and People and Places programme and the Seaside Awards. We are currently negotiating a Corporate Plan with Encams Ltd. which will set out performance targets for all its 2001–02 grant-aided work, including work to promote waste awareness. When we agree this Plan later in the year I will deposit a copy in the Libraries of the House.

Recycling

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if the "Are you doing your bit" and "Use it: Recycle it" campaigns are active; [155917]

(2) if he will make a statement on the impact of the "Are you doing your bit" and "Use it: Recycle it" campaigns. [155766]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The "Are you doing your bit" campaign, which promotes water conservation, waste reduction, energy efficiency and transport messages, has been running since 1998. My hon. Friend also mentions "Use it: Recycle it", which is a reference to the "Are you doing your bit" campaign's "Use it again" waste and recycling website.

Research into awareness, motivation and actions by individuals, has been commissioned to assess the campaign's impact and inform its strategic approach.

Research conducted in December 2000, a month after the most recent advertising, showed high levels of campaign recognition: nine out of 10 people recognised the campaign; seven out of 10 said that the advertising made them think they should be doing their bit; over six out of 10 say they had started or increased campaign actions in the last 12 months.

The campaign's success in 2000–01 also included more than 48,000 visitors to the interactive roadshow in 24 locations and approximately 1,060 pieces of media coverage generated on campaign messages. In addition, there have been almost 70,000 visitors to the campaign websites www.doingyourbit.org.uk and www.useitagain.org.uk since their launch in May 1999 and April 2000 respectively.

National Waste Strategy

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding sources will be used in order to deliver the National Waste Strategy. [155765]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: In the National Waste Strategy, the Government have set out their objectives for sustainable waste management over the next 20 years. The Spending Review 2000 provided substantial extra

resources for waste and recycling over the next three years to begin to deliver these objectives, as set out in the reply to the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) on 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 200W.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department estimates it will cost to deliver the National Waste Strategy. [155767]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Government's Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) for the National Waste Strategy is set out in "Waste Strategy 2000" (Cm 4693–2, Annexe C). The RIA models differing assumptions about the growth in waste arisings and the development of different waste treatments over this period and suggests additional costs ranging from £3.4 to £7.7 billion (present value of costs from 2000 to 2020).

Trunk Road Improvements

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to add to the targeted programme of trunk road improvements. [156106]

Mr. Hill: The regional planning bodies brought forward proposals for 30 schemes which could be separately progressed from the Multi Modal Studies (which are currently looking at solutions to problems within main trunk road corridors). These schemes have been assessed using the New Approach to Appraisal (NATA) and I have arranged for copies of the appraisal summary tables to be placed in the Library. We have also sought the views of the Government's statutory advisers (English Nature, the Countryside Agency, English Heritage and the Environment Agency) on the proposed schemes. Having considered the NATA appraisals and comments from the statutory advisers we have decided to add the following schemes to the targeted programme of improvements:

M62 Junction 6 Improvement

A1 Peterborough—Blyth Grade Separated Junctions

A14 Haughley New St.—Stowmarket Improvement

A38 Dobwalls Bypass

A46 Newark—Widmerpool Improvement

A595 Parton—Lillyhall Improvement.

These schemes will now be taken forward by the Highways Agency in consultation with the statutory advisory bodies to ensure that any concerns which they might have are properly addressed in developing detailed designs for the schemes. Every effort will be made to minimise impacts on sensitive sites.

In addition, I am also able to announce today that, after further studies undertaken since the 1998 Roads Review, the following schemes are being added to the targeted programme of improvements:

A3 Hindhead Improvement

A30 Bodmin-Indian Queens Improvement.

We believe these eight major schemes will be widely welcomed. They will benefit road users by reducing congestion and improving safety, create safer and healthier environments for local communities by the removal of through traffic and, in some cases, contribute to regeneration initiatives. Close co-operation with the statutory advisory bodies in developing scheme designs will ensure that important sensitive sites are protected.

The Highways Agency will also take forward the following smaller schemes recommended by the regional planning bodies as part of the recent consultation exercise and costing less than £5 million as part of their programme of local network management schemes.

M40/A404 Handy Cross Junction Improvement

A1(M) Junction 60–62 Improvement

A66 Long Newton Grade Separated Junction.

We are informing the regional planning bodies about our decisions.

Light Rail Schemes

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about light rail schemes. [156078]

Mr. Hill: I am today announcing decisions on three schemes, as follows:

Leeds Supertram

Following completion of our appraisal of the proposed Leeds Supertram system of three light rail lines, we are satisfied that the project passes the test for Government funding to be made available and that it should be taken forward as a single scheme. We have also agreed a funding package with the promoters which includes a local contribution towards scheme costs.

Orders have been made under the Transport and Works Act 1992 giving powers for the scheme. However, these cannot come into force until a special parliamentary procedure has been completed, because the orders authorise the compulsory purchase of open space, for which no land is to be given in exchange. Funding approval is given on the assumption that this process is completed satisfactorily.

South Hampshire Rapid Transit

Following completion of our appraisal of the South Hampshire Rapid Transit project, we are satisfied that the project passes the tests for Government funding to be made available. Subject to the scheme receiving Transport and Works Act (TWA) powers and no material change to the scheme as submitted, we intend to provide funding and have agreed a package with the promoters which would include a local contribution towards scheme costs.

This decision is given solely in respect of the economic appraisal of the scheme as submitted to us and the associated funding arrangements. It does not in any way indicate any view that I may take on the TWA application that is currently being considered on its own merits, having regard to the Inspector's report of the inquiry.

Bristol and South Gloucester Rapid Transit

In accordance with the policy set out in my Department's Guidance on Local Transport Plans, Bristol City Council and South Gloucestershire Council sought a provisional view on the economic appraisal for the Bristol and South Gloucester Rapid Transit scheme, prior to seeking the necessary powers under the Transport and Works Act (TWA). I am aware that the authorities are continuing to work on some aspects of the proposed scheme. However, I am satisfied that, on the basis of the available information, were the current proposals and their

appraisal to be confirmed by the authorities following that further work they would pass our economic appraisal tests for deciding eligibility for funding.

This provisional view is given solely in respect of the economic appraisal, and does not in any way indicate any view that I may take on any subsequent TWA application. Any such application would be determined entirely on its merits in the light of all the relevant considerations, and only after all interested persons had been given a full opportunity to state their views.

Should TWA powers be obtained, final approval of the project for funding would depend both on whether an updated economic appraisal, reflecting any changes to the scheme as a result of the TWA process or any other developments, demonstrates that the project still represents good value for money and on conclusions of a satisfactory agreement on funding.

South East England Development Agency

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the business experience of each member of the South East England Development Agency. [155957]

Ms Armstrong: Short biographies of each of the board members of the South East England Development Agency have been placed in the Libraries of the House. These are also available on DETR's website at www.detr.gov.uk and SEEDA's website at: www.seeda.co.uk.

Greenock Semi-Conductor Plant

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive a copy of the report of the Health and Safety Executive's study of employees' health at the National Semi-Conductor plant in Greenock; and if he will make a statement. [155259]

Mr. Meacher: This study is being taken forward by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as a matter of priority. Work to trace members of the work force is nearing completion. HSE will then link this to information on deaths and cancer registrations to determine which workers have suffered cancer. The final report is currently expected to be published in late summer 2001.

Planning Permission

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to speed up the action taken against businesses which operate without planning permission. [155947]

Mr. Raynsford: Local planning authorities have a wide range of discretionary enforcement powers to enable them to deal swiftly and effectively with unauthorised development that is harming amenity in the neighbourhood. Last August we announced improvements to enforcement appeal procedures which will increase their speed and efficiency. We are now preparing the necessary statutory instruments and guidance to implement the changes.

Planning Appeals

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to allow people who protest against a planning decision to appeal against favourable decisions by local councils. [155948]

Mr. Raynsford: Local people already have the opportunity to make their views known on development proposals before local planning authorities determine planning applications. There is also the right to challenge the grant of planning permission by a local planning authority by seeking judicial review. We have no current plans to introduce a third party right of appeal against authorities' decisions to grant planning permission.

Rent Service

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets he has set the Rent Service for 2001–02. [156138]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Key targets have been agreed for the Agency. They are included in the Agency's Business Plan, which includes management objectives, performance indicators and key tasks. Copies of the Business Plan will be placed in the Library in due course.

The key targets for The Rent Service are:

to deliver Statutory performance targets in 95 per cent. of cases;

to achieve the following customer service targets against Housing Benefit applications:

process 80 per cent. of Determinations Without an inspection within three working days;

process 80 per cent. of Determinations With an inspection within 15 working days;

process 85 per cent. of Pre-Tenancy Determinations within four working days;

process 70 per cent. of Redeterminations within 15 working days.

to complete 80 per cent. of Fair Rent Determinations within 40 working days;

to increase the number of cases determined per employee by a minimum of 5 per cent. per year whilst reducing the cost per case by a minimum of 5 per cent. per year in real terms, with no reduction in the quality of service provided.

A21

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has decided to agree to the National Trust's proposals for a bridge across the A21 Lamberhurst Bypass at Scotney. [156140]

Mr. Hill: I am pleased to say that following discussion with the Trust over the last few months. I have asked the Highways Agency to develop proposals to maintain the existing access to Scotney Castle and remove the severance caused by the bypass. Further development work will now be undertaken leading to the publication of those proposals in the summer.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the key targets for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency for 2001–02. [156141]

Mr. Hill: I will shortly lay in the House library a copy of the Agency's Business Plan which includes its key targets for 2001–02. The key targets are:

to complete the review of the statutory safety regime for fishing vessels of 12–24 metres and to prepare a Code of Practice for these vessels by January 2002.

to implement the internationally agreed revisions to Chapter V (Safety of Navigation) of the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention in time for the implementation date of 1 July 2002;

to achieve full implementation of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW95) by 1 February 2002;

to complete at least 95 per cent. of the agreed programme of vessel inspections;

to decide on the search and rescue response to accidents and life-threatening situations, and initiate action if necessary, within five minutes of being alerted in at least 95 per cent. of cases;

to implement the agreed recommendations of the UK SAR (Search and Rescue) Helicopter coverage and provision review by 31 March 2002;

to implement the agreed recommendations of the Emergency Towing Vessel (ETV) review by 31 March 2002;

to establish measurable efficiency indicators covering: search and rescue activities; the survey and inspection service; and Agency management, by 31 July 2001;

to undertake customer surveys to assess the level of customer satisfaction with the work carried out by MCA, with particular emphasis on the operational side of the business, and to establish benchmarks for future surveys, by 31 March 2002.

Planning Inspectorate

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets he proposed to set the Planning Inspectorate agency for 2001–02. [156323]

Mr. Raynsford: The Planning Inspectorate continues to play a key role in improving the efficiency and certainty with which the planning system delivers quality services to business and other users. I have therefore set demanding key performance targets for the Inspectorate for 2001–02. These include tougher targets for handling planning appeals in line with our Public Service Agreement targets.

The tougher appeals targets I am setting the Inspectorate to continue improving its service to customers makes it essential that all parties to the appeals process play their part by cooperating with the Inspectorate in meeting deadlines and agreeing dates offered for inquiries.

The targets for 2001–02 are as follows:

Timeliness

80 per cent. of all planning appeals decided by written representations to be determined within 16 weeks;

80 per cent. of all planning appeals decided by hearings to be determined within 22 weeks;

80 per cent. of all planning appeals decided by inquiries to be determined within 30 weeks;

to provide an Inspector for development plan inquiries in at least 90 per cent. of cases on the date requested by the local authority, provided that the objection period has ended and at least six months' notice has been given;

to deliver 90 per cent. of Inspectors' reports on development plan inquiries to local authorities according to timescales agreed under service agreements.

The table shows the Planning Inspectorate's performance against its timeliness targets for 1998–99 to 2000–01.

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
80 per cent. of all planning appeals should be decided within the following number of weeks:			
Target			
Written representation	18	18	17
Hearings	24	24	23
Inquiries	36	36	33
Achieved			
Written representation	17	18	17
Hearings	27	22	20
Inquiries	41	34	31

Efficiency

To generate a 3 per cent. improvement in the use of running costs compared to 2000–01.

Quality

To satisfy the Advisory Panel on Standards, and thus the Secretary of State and the National Assembly for Wales, annually and following rigorous monitoring, that the quality of all the Inspectorate's work is being maintained at a high standard, with 99 per cent. of its casework free from justified complaint.

Information and Guidance

To survey customer satisfaction with the Inspectorate's performance in handling rights of way cases and to act upon the results.

Housing PFI Schemes

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the outcome of the second round of applications for housing private finance initiative schemes. [156324]

Mr. Raynsford: I am announcing today the names of 12 local authorities with whom my Department will work on the development of a second round of housing PFI schemes.

The authorities are: Ashford borough council, the London borough of Camden, the London borough of Islington, the London borough of Hackney, Leeds City council, The London borough of Lewisham, Manchester City council, The London borough of Newham, North East Derbyshire district council, Oldham metropolitan borough council, Rochdale metropolitan borough council, and Sandwell metropolitan borough council.

Whether schemes ultimately proceed will depend on authorities working up business cases which satisfy the scrutiny of the inter-Departmental Project Review Group (PRG), which considers all local government PFI schemes seeking central government support. Endorsement by PRG is essential before schemes can proceed to EU competition.

These projects are all aimed at tackling the backlog of renovation and repairs in existing council housing and many include wider estate regeneration proposals. They form an important element in authorities' wider housing and regeneration strategies.

PFI credits worth £760 million are available to support housing PFI schemes in the current spending review period. There will be a further opportunity for authorities to apply for support later this year.

Exclusion Zone Footpaths

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he plans to give relating to the use of footpaths in exclusion zones; and if he will make a statement. [155271]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

Government published advice to the general public on countryside activities and visits, based on guidance from the Chief Veterinary Officer, on 16 March. Further guidance for local authorities on use of footpaths will be issued shortly.

TREASURY

Census 2001

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will break down the publicity budget for publicising the 2001 census; what the timetable is for the publicity campaign; what its objectives are; what initiatives are being taken to target specific ethnic groups and regions; what are the objectives of each; and what initiatives are being prepared to make children aware of the census. [146679]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 23 January 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Kevin McNamara, dated 28 March 2001:

As National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your question asking for a breakdown of the publicity budget for the 2001 Census and other matters related to the publicity of the Census (146679).

The breakdown of the paid publicity budget for the period 2000/01 to 2001/02 is:

Main advertising campaign: £4,728,000

Other publicity activities: £933,000

A carefully planned calendar of public relations events has been organised enabling Census Area Managers to run successful local, yet nationally coherent, campaigns.

The objectives of the overall publicity campaign are to establish the necessary level of advance awareness of the Census across the population and to build up public confidence in the Census as a socially worthwhile exercise that is undertaken in the strictest confidence. The banner logo 'Count Me In' aims to encourage universal self-inclusion in the Census.

The campaign encompasses both paid and free media with the latter being instigated at local level by Census Area Managers working to a centrally co-ordinated PR calendar. Local PR in England has also benefited greatly through a strategic partnership with BBC Local Radio.

The full range of ethnic titles will be used to advertise the Census to ethnic minorities as a component within the main campaign designed to address these communities in a sympathetic and appropriate way.

The Census form questions and the information leaflet have been translated into 24 commonly used foreign languages—in addition to Welsh in Wales—and will be available from April 1, as will the dedicated Language Helpline which can offer help in 12 languages. In addition, an ethnic version of the promotional video has been produced using an Asian celebrity, which we hope to place in unused air-time on Asian cable TV.

Customised press notices associated with all the main PR events will be disseminated to all ethnic minority media outlets. For our Recruitment Blitz the press notice directed at ethnic minority media carried a supporting quote from Civil Service Commissioner Karamjit Singh CBE, and we specifically targeted metropolitan areas at 14 sites around the country where there would be good links with local TV and radio as well as a high concentration of ethnic minority populations. Our partnership with BBC Local Radio has gained us influence over the BBC's Asian Language Network, which has already run a number of Census promotions.

These several activities complement the Community Liaison Programmes pursued at local level by Census Area Managers with the overall aim of raising general public awareness about the census, facilitating the enumeration to ensure the fullest possible coverage and helping to provide a source of potential field staff.

The Census2001 Count Me In website contains a wealth of material about the Census in general including a number of factsheets as well as covering specific areas such as recruitment.

There are two major initiative to make children and teachers aware of the Census:

CensusAtSchool is an outline census for schoolchildren asking questions with youth appeal (covering topics such as mobile phone/pet ownership; football team; height of children compared with 1830s). There are on-line classroom activities that will enable the findings to be analysed using statistical techniques. The results from *CensusAtSchool* attracted major national and regional press coverage when released in February. The national findings are available on the website *www.censusatschool.ntu.ac.uk* for schools to make comparisons of local and national trends.

Census In School is an educational package for teachers containing modules dealing with the use of Census information which is mapped to the National Curriculum. A CD-ROM version is attached to each pack, and these have been distributed to both junior and secondary schools.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the number of workers in Scotland who have benefited from the introduction of the statutory minimum wage, broken down by employment sector. [155777]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Douglas Alexander, dated 28 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of people in Scotland who have benefited from the National Minimum Wage (NMW) by employment sector (155777).

The Office for National Statistics has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than NMW rates for 1998, 1999 and 2000. These estimates are based on an improved methodology using data from the New Earnings Survey (NES) and Labour Force Survey (LFS). This methodology provides the best estimates for the number of jobs in the UK paid below low hourly rate thresholds. Estimates for the United Kingdom and Government Office Regions, including Scotland, are posted on the National Statistics website at: www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour_market/nmw_lowpay_tables.asp

The new methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NFS and LFS, in measuring low pay. Estimates based on this methodology are not available for the number of jobs paid below NMW rates in Scotland broken down by employment sector.

Red Diesel

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual savings to the *(a)* quarry, *(b)* aviation, *(c)* farming, *(d)* manufacturing and *(e)* other industries arising from the rebated rates of duty on red diesel. [154699]

Mr. Timms: Data on payments of duty on rebated gas oil do not indicate the end-use; therefore no estimate has been made of the annual savings to different industries resulting from the rebated rates of duty on red diesel.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual savings to industry from using red diesel instead of ultra low sulphur diesel. [154700]

Mr. Timms: Rebated gas oil, also known as red diesel, is liable for duty at the rate of 3.13 pence per litre and is used in excepted vehicles and as a heating and industrial fuel. Assuming the current level of use, raising the rate of duty on gas oil to the rate applying to Ultra Low Sulphur Diesel would raise additional duty revenues of around £3 billion. In practice the additional revenue would be significantly less than this because a fourteenfold increase in the duty rate would reduce the demand for rebated gas oil.

Business Costs (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how much the Treasury estimates that small and medium enterprises in Wales will have to pay under the climate change levy; [154554]

(2) by how much he estimates that costs to small and medium enterprises in Wales will decrease as a consequence of the reduction in employers' National Insurance Contributions. [154556]

Mr. Timms: The climate change levy will be revenue neutral overall, and broadly neutral between services and manufacturing. The levy will raise an estimated £1 billion in its first year, all of which will be recycled back to business via a 0.3 percentage point cut in employers' National Insurance Contributions and through support for business energy efficiency. The effect on any specific business sector or area will depend on a number of factors, including their future energy consumption, their levels of employment, eligibility for discounts, use of exempt renewable energy or combined heat and power, and the extent to which they take up energy efficiency advice and the enhanced capital allowances for energy saving investments.

Banks

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he has taken in the year since the publication of the Cruickshank report to reduce the excess profits being earned by the leading clearing banks identified by the report. [155594]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hón. Gentleman to the Government's response to the Cruickshank report, which was published on the 4 August 2000, and to Chapter Three of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report, which was published on 7 March 2001.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what change has taken place in the share of the four leading clearing banks in the current account market since the publication of the Cruickshank report. [155597]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As I told the Treasury Select Committee on 30 January (ref: para. 452) the share of the four leading clearing banks in the current account market when the Cruickshank report was published was around 68 per cent. It is now around 70 per cent.

Performance Information

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on the recommendation in the Performance and Innovation Unit report "Wiring it Up" to develop a strategy for performance information. [156221]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A strategy for performance information "Improving Performance Information"—setting out the initiatives the Government have put in place to improve performance information—was published today.

As part of the strategy a guide to performance information: "Choosing the right FABRIC: a Framework for Performance Information" has also been published.

This document is published jointly by the Treasury, the Cabinet Office, the National Audit Office, the Audit Commission, and the Office for National Statistics and contains principles behind performance information.

I am placing a copy of both documents in the Libraries of both Houses. The documents can also be found on the Treasury website at www.hm-treasury.gsi.gov.uk/perform_info.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the outcome was of the most recent meeting of the Standing Committee on preparations for EMU. [156222]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The most recent meeting of the Standing Committee took place on 22 January 2001. I have arranged for copies of the minutes to be placed in the Library of the House.

Smuggling

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has made of the extent of excise duty lost in the smuggling of fuel; and what targets he has set for the reduction of smuggling of tobacco, alcohol and fuel. [155944]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs have made no estimates relating specifically to excise duty lost from the smuggling of fuel into the UK.

Customs' targets for reducing tobacco smuggling and cross-Channel alcohol smuggling are set out in the "Tackling Tobacco Smuggling" document published on 22 March 2000, a copy of which is available in the Library. There is no specific target for fuel.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Bell Canada (Madagascar)

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what investigations *(a)* he and *(b)* Oftel have carried out into incidences of a UK-licensed telecommunications operator short-terminating calls in the UK between Bell Canada customers and Madagascar. [155835]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* Neither the Government nor Oftel have received any representations about the short termination of calls between Bell Canada customers and Madagascar, and no investigations have been carried out. Oftel will investigate any complaints made to them that an operator licensed under the Telecommunications Act might be acting in breach of its licence.

Nuclear Power

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from British Energy regarding the future of new nuclear power plant development in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the rest of the UK. [155848]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* None.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what provision will be made for parliamentary scrutiny of lists of acceptable destinations for exports under the framework agreement concerning measures to facilitate the restructuring and operation of the European defence industry; [155487]

(2) if exports with significant United Kingdom participation, agreed under the framework agreement concerning measures to facilitate the restructuring and operation of the European defence industry, and exported from and licensed by another of the parties to the agreement, will be included in the United Kingdom annual report on strategic export controls; [155489]

(3) what process will be used to draw up a list of acceptable destinations for exports under the framework agreement concerning measures to facilitate the restructuring and operation of the European defence industry; and what role industry will play in this process; [155486]

(4) if the *(a)* range, *(b)* quantity of items and *(c)* eventual end-users covered by a global project licence will be clearly identified in the annual report on strategic export controls under the framework agreement concerning measures to facilitate the restructuring and operation of the European defence industry. [155488]

Dr. Howells: The annual report on strategic export controls will provide details of all export licences issued by the UK relating to framework agreement projects in a similar way to current reporting.

The process to draw up lists of acceptable destinations or White Lists is set out in Article 13(3) of the framework agreement. The Ministry of Defence, with support from both DTI and FCO is continuing discussions with other participating countries on the modalities of the operation and maintenance of the White Lists. Industry will continue to be consulted on these discussions as proposals are developed. These White Lists will represent declarations of interest in potential export opportunities by the company involved and as such are commercially sensitive. It would not therefore be appropriate to publish these lists. The lists themselves will not function as export licences and exporters will still have to apply for export licences from the country from which the final export will take place. The UK will continue to apply high levels of transparency through our annual reports on strategic export controls to such licensing decisions and will encourage other countries, including other participating countries, who are all signatories to the EU Code of Conduct, to be equally open.

The publication of this information will mean there will be no reduction in the level of Parliamentary scrutiny of these export licensing decisions.

Reprocessed Uranium

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what quantities of reprocessed uranium have been sold by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. and for what purposes in each of the last three years. [154420]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Details of BNFL's commercial transactions—including its trade in uranium products—are a matter for BNFL and its customers.

Departmental Policies (North Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Devon constituency, the effects on North Devon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155902]

Mr. Caborn: The Department has provided the following support for businesses in North Devon Constituency since May 1997.

Regional Selective Assistance (RSA)

RSA is a capital investment grant linked to the creation or safeguarding of jobs in designated areas of need (the Assisted Areas). Five RSA grant offers totalling £0.574 million have been made to businesses in the North Devon Constituency, to support projects with a total capital expenditure of £3.5 million, and to create and safeguard a total of 344 jobs.

Enterprise Grants

The Enterprise Grants scheme is a simplified scheme that was introduced in April 2000 to help small firms undertake fixed capital investment projects. One application for £0.012 million in the North Devon Constituency is currently being appraised.

Business Link

PROSPER Business Link has provided services to small businesses in the North Devon Constituency since 1997. These include general and specialised advice to help businesses grow, export development counselling, Information and Communications Technology advice, and a full range of specialist information. From April 2001 these services will be provided by the Small Business Service operating through a franchise awarded to a

PROSPER-led partnership. This new service will be more customer focused ensuring that services are driven by local need.

Central Railway

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) who from *(a)* regional development agencies, *(b)* regional assemblies and *(c)* other organisations was invited by the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), to attend his meeting with Central Railway plc on 28 February; who attended the meeting; and if he will make a statement; [155825]

(2) by what date the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Central, asked regional development agencies and regional assemblies to report their views on the Central Railway project following the meeting of 28 February; [155822]

(3) what were the conclusions of the meeting of 28 February between the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Central, representatives of Central Railway plc and regional representatives; [155823]

(4) what contacts there have been between *(a)* the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Central and *(b)* other Ministers in his Department and representatives of Central Railway since 1 January; [155824]

(5) what was the purpose of the meeting on 28 February between the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Central and representatives of Central Railway plc. [155826]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* I have had a number of private meetings with representatives of Central Railways in my capacity as Member for Sheffield, Central.

Post Offices

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* sub and *(b)* main post offices there were in the Romsey constituency in (i) 1992, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 2001. [155855]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that data on the post office network are not held on a parliamentary constituency basis.

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many ex-miner claims for compensation for respiratory disease there were *(a)* as at 30 October 2000 and *(b)* at present. [155643]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* At 29 October 2000, IRISC, the Department's claims handlers, had registered 124,376 claims in respect of respiratory disease. To date, the number of claims initiated is 141,158 and, on average, 1,000 new claims continue to be registered each week.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the average settlement figure for those ex-miners who have settled their claims under the fast-track procedure. [155644]

Mr. Hain: Before September last year, expedited offers of between £1,050 and £5,750 were made to claimants in full and final settlement following spirometry (the first stage of the medical process). As a result of the fast-track initiative in September, these offers were increased to between £2,050 and £14,500, the offer being dependent on spirometry results and underground working history with British Coal. In addition, eligibility was broadened to include some claimants who were previously ineligible for an expedited offer. Those who had offers made under the old tariffs received a top-up in line with the new awards. The average settlement figure is £4,700.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the time-scale is for processing claims for compensation from ex-miners and their families in each of the centres in Wales; and what the target date is for the completion of this work for existing cases in each such location. [154839]

Mr. Hain: It is difficult to say how long it will take before the last claim is assessed in Wales. New claims can still be made and nationally there are about 1000 new claims each week. We aim to assess the remainder of the most injured and eldest miners and widows by spring 2002.

MAP resources within South Wales are being increased. We recently opened a new centre in Ammanford, and I will be attending the opening of a further new centre in Ystrad Mynach on 30 March. In North Wales, as the right hon. Member is aware, Healthcall have been asked to cease assessments in May at the centre in Wrexham. They are, however, investigating alternative sites in the area for the Portakabin modular unit with the help of the local council. In addition, Healthcall are in the process of equipping mobile testing units to be used as and when the need arises. With these changes in prospect it is difficult to set targets now for handling the existing claims.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of claims for compensation for *(a)* chronic bronchitis and emphysema and *(b)* asthma his Department will receive from ex-miners and their families in Wales in the next 12 months. [154819]

Mr. Hain: It is difficult to forecast the number of further claims of compensation for respiratory disease, including those with chronic bronchitis and emphysema, expected in Wales. Nationwide, there are currently around 1,000 new claims initiated in respect of respiratory disease each week. The number of claims is currently about 140,000.

As to claims for asthma, this is not a condition for which British Coal were found liable and it is therefore not compensable under the British Coal Respiratory Disease Litigation.

Electronic Signatures

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on how the Government propose to implement the EU's framework directive on electronic signatures. [156223]

Mr. Byers: I have today issued a consultation document on how this Directive should be implemented in the UK. Copies of the document have been placed in the Library of the House and are available on the DTI web site.

Late Payments

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many payments were made by his Department in each of the last five years to suppliers in which compensation was paid due to late payment. [R] [155791]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* This information is not held centrally and could therefore be answered only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps his Department has taken to improve its late payment record. [R] [155789]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The Department has put in place tighter controls in order to improve its performance on the prompt payment of invoices.

Departmental Policies (Newbury)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Newbury constituency, the effects on Newbury and west Berkshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154576]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* West Berkshire has benefited from a broad range of initiatives that have been implemented since May 1997.

The Thames Valley Business Link

The Thames Valley Business Link receives funding from the Department to assist businesses at all stages of development. The Business Link also has an independent income stream. The Business Link covers both Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. Initiatives are aimed to reach groups of businesses that have shown a need for a more direct approach. It would not be possible to dis-aggregate the benefit for west Berkshire and the figures shown are for the whole region covered by the Business Link.

The Business Link's services are widely marketed and include the following initiatives.

DTI Funding for Business Link

Financial year	*£000*
1997–98	2,288
1998–99	2,108
1999–2000	2,938
2000–01	n/a

Diagnostic Consultancy Service—This scheme is aimed at businesses to help them find and rectify problems within the company.

Farmer's Advisory Service—This scheme supports farmers to develop and manage their businesses. The rural nature of west Berkshire has led that area in particular to benefit from this initiative.

Business Advisory Service

The Business Advisory Service gives easy access to a wide range of quality business services, initial business diagnosis at no extra cost, impartial expert advice on business issues, and practical value-for-money support tailored to make the most of individual business potential.

Export Counselling Services—This was a scheme initiated in 1997 to aid local businesses to develop an export market. (Funds were in addition to those given.)

Financial year	*£*
1997–98	52,500
1998–99	50,000
1999–2000	25,000

Other initiatives include:

British Trade International—a separately funded unit dealing with expanding the export and raising the profile of British goods abroad.

SMART awards—four west Berkshire businesses have been awarded funds to develop innovative technological ideas to improve their business.

The Berkshire Small Business Service

The Small Business Service will take over from the current Business Link in April 2001 and will deliver a sharper and more focused service by acting as a gateway to the wide range of services available to local businesses.

Export Licences

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to speed up the granting of export licences; and if he will make a statement. [155637]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* Licences to export arms and other goods whose export is controlled for strategic reasons are issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry acting through the DTI's Export Control Organisation (ECO). All relevant individual licence applications are circulated by the DTI to other Government Departments with an interest as determined by those Departments in line with their policy responsibilities. These include FCO, MOD and DfID. There are regular meetings between officials in these Departments to identify specific ways of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the export licensing system, as well as to discuss particular licence applications.

The Government take very seriously their responsibilities for exercising effective export controls. All relevant export licence applications to export strategic goods are rigorously assessed on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria.

The Government are working hard to reduce processing times for export licence applications. We have set demanding targets for processing Standard Individual Export Licence (SIEL) applications. The aim is to provide a substantive response to such applications within 20 working days. The targets are set out in a Service and Performance Code published by the ECO, and information on performance against these targets is set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls. However, these targets do not apply to applications concerning Iran, Iraq or to applications for licences to export goods which are subject to control

solely because of UN Sanctions. This is because there are special licensing procedures for those destinations, which reflect the Government's concerns.

Strategic export licensing is and must be a joined-up process. All applications are processed expeditiously and with care. However, some cases raise particularly difficult issues and these may take longer to process. But, where cases are outstanding with other departments for longer than the relevant target period the ECO systematically monitors and reminds them so that cases are resolved as quickly as possible.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the list of products which must obtain licences for export; and if he will make a statement. [155638]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The lists of goods which are subject to export control are continuously under review as part of the UK's obligations under the various International Proliferation and Arms Control Conventions and Regimes. These organisations conduct periodic or continuous reviews of their lists and changes are negotiated, and agreed, as necessary.

The UK's implementation of these changes is carried out by means of amendments to national secondary legislation (the Export of Goods (Control) Order and the Dual Use Items (Export Control) Regulations 2000) or amendments to EC Council Regulations.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will make decisions on export licence application numbers 19065, 19460, 19856 and 19679, submitted by P.W. Allen and Company, Tewkesbury. [155636]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* Licences to export arms and other goods whose export is controlled for strategic reasons are issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry acting through the DTI's Export Control Organisation (ECO). A decision has been reached on application 19065, and the company was informed of that decision by the ECO on 2 March 2001.

A decision has not yet been reached on the other three applications. Decisions will be taken as quickly as possible consistent with the need to give full consideration to the issues involved.

Fireworks

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the local authorities with the worst record for *(a)* injuries and *(b)* death due to fireworks in the UK. [155994]

Dr. Howells: Information on firework injuries and deaths is broken down by NHS Trust area rather than local authority area. As such, therefore, it is not possible to identify local authorities in the way my hon. Friend requests.

Details of 1999 injuries (there were no deaths) have been placed in the Library of the House and can be interrogated on the DTI website http://www2.dti.gov.uk/. Figures for 2000 should be available shortly.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to promote energy from offshore wind. [155762]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The Government are taking a number of steps to promote the development of offshore wind. We believe that this technology will have an important role to play in helping us to meet our renewables targets.

Offshore wind will be eligible for the new Renewables Obligation that the Government are proposing to introduce in October this year. In addition, in view of the early stage of development of offshore wind, the Government are planning to provide capital grants to support its development. Of the £250 million allocated for renewables support over the next three years, at least £49 million has been allocated specifically for offshore wind and further sums may be allocated in the light of the recommendations of the Performance and Innovation Unit, due to be published later this year.

The grants will be used to fund a number of early demonstration projects for offshore wind. The aim is that these will reduce the costs involved to a more acceptable level, and provide those involved with a bank of knowledge and experience to enable them to pursue more ambitious projects on a commercial basis.

The Government are also determined to provide a more streamlined consents process for offshore wind. The existing arrangements are fragmented and the proposal is for DTI to act as a "one-stop-shop" for planning and consents. I launched a consultation paper of 20 February and views are sought by 23 April.

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work his Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155663]

Dr. Howells: Our records show that the Department, since 1 May 1997, has commissioned no statistical surveys from GGC/NOP. However, the following table lists all statistical surveys that the Department has commissioned from NOP and partnerships since 1 May 1997. The table provides the nature of the work commissioned and the date of origin but excludes contractual costs as a matter of commercial confidence between parties under Exemption 13 of the code of Practice on Access to Public Information.

Statistical surveys commissioned from NOP since 1 May 1997

Title	*Date originated*	*Name of contractor*
Business Information Security Survey 1998	13 October 1997	NOP Business
Benchmarking Development of the Information Age	29 September 1998	NOP/Spectrum Strategy Consultants
Business Information Security Survey	11 October 1999	NOP

BNFL

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what dates regulatory approval was given for the reprocessing of irradiated MOX fuel by BNFL at Sellafield; and if he will make a statement. [155549]

Mr. Hain: BNFL has not sought regulatory approval to reprocess irradiated MOX at Sellafield.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much irradiated MOX fuel has been transported to Sellafield from each of BNFL's foreign customers in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [155554]

Mr. Hain: Irradiated MOX has been received by BNFL at Sellafield from BNFL customers in Switzerland and Germany. Details of the quantities involved and the timing of these deliveries are a commercial matter for BNFL and its customers.

Better Regulation Task Force

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations the Better Regulation Task Force has received regarding the consultation paper on the Government's proposals for regulation of the private security industry in England and Wales opposing the *(a)* regulation of in-house employees, *(b)* regulation of security system installers and *(c)* security companies; and if he will list the organisations making representations in each case. [155465]

Mr. Stringer: I have been asked to reply.

The Better Regulation Task Force in its report, 'Fit Person Criteria', which was published in May 1999, made recommendations on the regulation of the private security industry.

Organisations contacted by the Better Regulation Task Force, as part of its study, are listed in Annexe F of the report, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Subsequent to publishing the report, the Task Force received one letter referring to the Government's consultation paper on the regulation of the private security industry. It came from the Association of Chief Police Officers Intruders Alarm Group and it supported the Government's proposals.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many employees of the Magistrates Courts Service have *(a)* had their salaries cut and *(b)* been downgraded as a consequence of his reorganisation of the magistrates courts. [155456]

Jane Kennedy: The Department does not collect data on either aspect of this question. The staffing arrangements for magistrates courts are for individual magistrates courts committees.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the longest distance is that an accused person is expected to travel to attend a magistrates court; and what this distance will be under the new administrative arrangements being considered by her Department. [155455]

Jane Kennedy: I am not considering any "new administrative arrangements". I understand West Yorkshire Magistrates Courts Service have consulted on possible changes to Petty Sessions Areas within the county. The consultation period is now closed and the magistrates courts committee (MCC) met yesterday to discuss the outcome.

There is no set distance someone is expected to travel to attend a magistrates court. The concept of "local justice" will differ depending on the MCC area concerned. As a locally managed service, each magistrates courts committee is responsible for providing an efficient and effective service to court users. It is for the committee to decide whether its number and location of courthouses meet its needs as it has the best knowledge of the local area.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations she has had from the Magistrates Association and other groups involved in the civil justice system expressing concern over plans to rationalise the court areas of the magistracy. [155454]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department has not received any representations from either the Magistrates Association or other groups involved in the civil justice system expressing concern over plans to rationalise the court areas of the magistracy either in West Yorkshire magistrates courts committee area or any other magistrates courts committee area.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police

5. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent representations he has received concerning the implementation of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. [154343]

Mr. Ingram: The most significant recent exchange on this issue was at Hillsborough on 8 March when the two Governments met all pro-Agreement parties on this and other matters.

6. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will announce the Government's plans in relation to compensation for pre-1982 police widows and their families. [154344]

Dr. Reid: On 21 March I was pleased to announce that the Government had decided to double the amount of the lump sum payments recommended in the Steele Report to be made to the pre-November 1982 police widows.

9. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the reforms of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. [154347]

Mr. Ingram: The Government are committed to the implementation of the recommendations of the Patten report on policing in Northern Ireland. A major programme of change is under way, and I want to pay tribute to the commitment with which the police service

is taking it forward. As the joint statement issued by the British and Irish Governments on 8 March said, we hope that discussions with political parties will result in agreement on remaining issues in June.

12. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress he has made in implementing reform of the Northern Ireland Police Authority. [154350]

Mr. Ingram: The Government are grateful to members of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland for agreeing to stay on for a short period. This will ensure police accountability while we continue discussions before establishing the new Policing Board.

15. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to promote exchanges between the police service in Northern Ireland and the Garda Siochana. [154353]

Mr. Ingram: The issue of exchanges will be addressed through the framework of a formal Agreement on policing co-operation between the British and Irish Governments.

Matters of North-South co-operation on policing covered by the Patten Report have already been discussed in a number of meetings with the Irish Government.

25. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on progress on recruitment to the new police service in Northern Ireland. [154363]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland gave earlier to the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley).

Paramilitary Violence

7. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on violent incidents related to paramilitary groups in the last four weeks. [154345]

Mr. Ingram: During the period 15 February until 15 March there have been two deaths, 26 shooting incidents and nine bombing incidents relating to the security situation. During the same period there have been 18 paramilitary style shootings, nine attributed to Loyalist and nine attributed to Republican groups. Twenty-six paramilitary assaults have taken place, 16 attributed to Loyalist groups and 10 attributed to Republican groups.

16. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the incidents of terrorist violence which have taken place so far this month. [154354]

Mr. Ingram: The following tables provide the information requested.

Security situation statistics from 1 March 2001 to 15 March 2001

	Number
Deaths	1
Shooting incidents	16
Bombing incidents	4

Shootings

The following types of incidents are included:

Shots fired by terrorists

Shots fired by the security forces

Paramilitary style attacks involving shootings

Shots heard (and later confirmed)

Other violent incidents where shots are fired (e.g. armed robbery)

Bombings

An individual bombing incident may involve one or more explosive devices. Incidents recorded include explosions and defusings. Incidents involving hoax devices, petrol bombings or incendiaries are excluded.

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks

	By Loyalist	*By Republican*
Shootings	6	6
Assaults	9	8

Note:

Figures for 2000–01 are provisional and may be subject to minor adjustment.

Peace Process

8. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process. [154346]

10. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. [154348]

14. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [154352]

22. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process. [154360]

26. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on progress on the peace process. [154364]

Dr. Reid: Substantial progress has been made in implementing the Belfast Agreement. There remain several outstanding issues to be resolved if the institutions are to flourish as we wish, principally policing reform, decommissioning and the normalisation of security arrangements. The constructive all-party discussions at Hillsborough on 8 March provided a basis on which I believe that these issues can be addressed and resolved in the coming months.

27. **Judy Mallaber:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the impact on the peace process of a stable economy in Northern Ireland. [154365]

Dr. Reid: The strength and stability of the Northern Ireland economy in recent years has been an important factor in creating the right conditions for advancing the peace process. Political progress has in turn had a positive effect on the economy, bringing tangible benefits to everyone and so helping to encourage support for further progress.

Decommissioning

11. **Mr. Day:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made on the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives in Northern Ireland. [154349]

13. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the decommissioning of illegally held weapons in Northern Ireland. [154351]

17. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospects for removing illegally-held weapons in Northern Ireland. [154355]

19. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made on the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives in Northern Ireland. [154357]

23. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many illegally held arms and explosives have been decommissioned in Northern Ireland since 10 April 1998. [154361]

Mr. Ingram: I welcome the report issued by the Decommissioning Commission last week announcing its re-engagement with the IRA and I see this renewed contact as the basis for further progress. Discussion can now move forwards, away from talking about whether decommissioning will happen to how it will happen. It is vital that all the paramilitary groups on ceasefire engage fully and actively with the Commission so that the issue of illegally held arms can be resolved once and for all, and I look forward to early and positive reports from the Decommissioning Commission that progress is being made. I am confident that with the steps the Government are taking to implement all of the outstanding elements of the Belfast Agreement, we are creating the right context for such progress to be made.

20. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many illegally held arms and explosives have been decommissioned in Northern Ireland since 10 April 1998. [154358]

Mr. Ingram: Since the signing of the Belfast Agreement on 10 April 1998, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning has reported carrying out one decommissioning event.

Nine weapons were included in the list of items belonging to the Loyalist Volunteer Force that was decommissioned in accordance with Commission procedures on 18 December 1998.

Also included was a quantity of ammunition, five detonators, two pipe bombs, two weapons stocks, and assorted magazines.

Foot and Mouth

18. **Rev. Martin Smyth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the First Minister regarding compensation for non-farm enterprises affected by the foot and mouth outbreak. [154356]

Dr. Reid: I have discussed a range of issues relating to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease with Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and with Northern Ireland Ministers, including the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Northern Ireland Executive is fully involved in the Government's Rural Task Force, which has been set up to consider the wider economic impact of the current foot and mouth outbreak. The Minister for the Environment announced a package of measures on 20 March and the Executive will be considering how that package will apply in Northern Ireland.

Security Situation

21. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the current security situation. [154359]

Mr. Ingram: The main paramilitary groups are maintaining their ceasefires; however, there remains a continued threat from dissident paramilitaries as evidenced by the recent 1,100 lb bomb discovered in South Armagh and recent attacks on the Belfast to Dublin railway line. The security forces continue to thwart the attempts of these groups to destroy the peace process.

24. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what his policy is regarding the normalisation of security in Northern Ireland. [154362]

28. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what his policy is regarding the normalisation of security in Northern Ireland. [154366]

Mr. Ingram: Government remain committed to normalisation of security as quickly as the threat allows. Major progress has already been made. Since the ceasefire 42 military bases have been demolished, closed or vacated. There are currently under 13,500 troops in Northern Ireland, the lowest level since 1970. Over 3,000 troops have left the Province since the current ceasefires were declared.

In the longer term, the number of army bases will reduce to no more than 20, to include sites in Londonderry, Belfast, Coleraine and Dungannon. However, these further measures will very much depend on the removal of the threat from dissident republicans and continued progress towards a normal civil society.

Robert Hamill

29. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what further investigations have been undertaken into the death of Robert Hamill. [154367]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Ulster Constabulary is conducting an ongoing investigation, under the supervision of the Office of the Police Ombudsman, into the circumstances surrounding the death of Mr. Hamill.

CABINET OFFICE

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical

work her Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155667]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Cabinet Office has not commissioned any such work from GGC/NOP.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Randall: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled by Ministers since 1 January. [155246]

Marjorie Mowlam: Meetings between Ministers and hon. Members are sometimes postponed, but they are rarely cancelled.

Since 1 January this year we have no record of any Cabinet Office Minister cancelling a bilateral meeting with an hon. Member.

Modernising Government

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the Government's policy is towards incorporating public feedback via the internet into the process of policy formation and the taking of decisions; and if she will make a statement. [155318]

Mr. Ian McCartney: In line with our published Code of Practice on written consultations, it is our policy that from January 2001 all written consultations are published online and that responses can be made via email. A register of all consultations is published on ukonline.gov.uk.

In addition to online written consultations, ukonline.gov.uk also provides a number of discussion forums on a range of issues. Registered users of ukonline.gov.uk may submit their opinions to these discussion groups and comment on the other opinions published online.

We are currently considering how best to make use of the internet in terms of broadening and deepening participation in the democratic process. We will be consulting widely on our policy in this area, including via the internet, as it develops.

SCOTLAND

Carpet Manufacturing

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions she has had with *(a)* industry and *(b)* others about the future of Scottish carpet manufacturing. [153578]

Mrs. Liddell: I meet with a wide range of organisations to discuss Scottish industry in general including the future of the manufacturing sector. Financial support for specific industries is primarily the responsibility of the Scottish Executive.

The carpet manufacturing industry is of great importance to the Scottish economy and therefore has been granted the maximum level of support allowed under State Aid rules. I understand further financial support may, however, be available in the next financial year.

I remain available for any further discussion that may be valuable to the industry.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the meetings and conferences organised by her Department and agencies of her Department which have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* postponed owing to foot and mouth disease; and if she will make a statement. [155369]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* No work of my Department has been adversely affected by foot and mouth disease.

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work her Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155668]

Mrs. Liddell: No work has been commissioned from GGC/NOP.

HEALTH

Surgical Instruments (Sterilisation Techniques)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to receive the results of the research he commissioned into the effective sterilisation of surgical instruments by alkaline hydrolysis at elevated temperature. [147865]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The results of our research into the effects of alkaline hydrolysis at elevated temperatures on the sterilisation of surgical instruments are expected this summer.

"Don't Give up Giving up" Campaign

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the extent to which the "Don't Give up Giving up" campaign has achieved its objectives. [148855]

Yvette Cooper: Quarterly surveys of smoking attitudes and awareness of the campaign are being carried out and results indicate that the "Don't Give up Giving up" campaign is well recalled and is communicating effectively with the target audience.

In the period before the advertising was resumed (1 June 2000 to 20 August 2000) calls to the NHS smoking helpline averaged 4,497 per month. Since advertising began again on 21 August 2000 the monthly call average has been 16,600.

The website "givingupsmoking.co.uk" has had over 39,000 distinct individual visitors since its launch in December 1999. More than 7,000 of these were in January of this year.

This information is shared regularly with those working in tobacco control and cessation through regular campaign updates.

Preliminary results of the general household survey of smoking prevalence in 2000 will be available later this year.

Our tobacco education campaign, launched in December 1999, is aimed at persuading smokers to give up and non-smokers, particularly children, not to start. As part of the broader campaign we are planning dedicated sub-campaigns aimed at pregnant women, ethnic minorities etc.

Retained Organs Commission

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the delay in the publication by the Retained Organs Commission of national guidance; and when he expects hospitals to be able to answer the inquiries being made by next of kin. [151566]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 452W. The guidance referred to was published on 9 March and details are available on the Commission's website at www.nhs.uk/retainedorgans.

NHS Dentists

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists were employed by the National Health Service in each of the last three years in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Devon. [153737]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The number of dentists employed by the National Health Service at 30 September in each of the years 1998 to 2000 is given in table 1 for each of the dental services for England and Devon. Issues relating to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are matters for the devolved authorities.

Table 1: Number of dentists (head count) at 30 September each year

	1998	*1999*	*2000*
England			
Hospital Dental Service[1]	2,220	2,250	2,190
Community Dental Service[1]	1,380	1,370	1,340
Personal Dental Service[2]	0	148	326
Salaried Service	186	137	131
Total [1]	3,800	3,900	3,990
Devon			
Hospital Dental Service[1,4]	40	30	40
Community Dental Service[1]	20	30	20
Personal Dental Service[2]	0	0	0
Salaried Service	18	18	17
Total [1,3]	80	80	80

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest ten

[2] Includes some self-employed dentists and their dentist employees

[3] Some dentists work in several services and are counted in each service

[4] Clinical assistants are excluded from the Devon figures. They are employed on a sessional basis and generally work less than one day a week

Dentists providing dental services in the General Dental Services are not employees of the NHS. The number of principal dentists who were on health authority lists to provide dental services and their assistants and vocational dental practitioners are shown in table 2.

Table 2: Number of General Dental Service dentists (head count) at 30 September each year

	1998	*1999*	*2000*
England	17,247	17,721	18,049
Devon	397	424	445

Cancer Centre (Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received on the selection of York as an intermediate frequency cancer centre; and if he will make a statement. [154705]

Yvette Cooper: I understand the Department has received representations at a local level which are currently being considered and will be responded to accordingly.

The National Health Service guidance for upper gastrointestinal cancer was published in January 2001. It recommends, in line with previous guidance for breast, colorectal, lung and gynaecological cancer, that care should be delivered by specialist multidisciplinary teams. Recommendations about the appropriate catchment population for services for individual cancers are in line with their incidence.

The Yorkshire cancer network is currently reviewing the implications of the implementation of the national guidance across the county. York is a cancer unit which provides diagnostic and treatment services for the more common cancers to the local population.

The network wishes to ensure that the high level of surgical expertise available in cancer units such as York are harnessed within the specialist multidisciplinary teams. While it is probable that all surgery for the rarer sites such as cancer of the pancreas will be undertaken in the cancer centre in Leeds, the recommendations for the configuration of services for upper gastrointestinal cancer have still to be agreed by the network.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which intermediate frequency cancer centre will be intended for use by patients living in north Yorkshire. [154706]

Yvette Cooper: Access to cancer centre services is based upon the area of residence for individual patients. Residents of Hambleton and Richmondshire are served by the Middlesbrough cancer centre. Residents in the eastern coast area of north Yorkshire are served by the Hull cancer centre and residents for the remainder of north Yorkshire are served by the Leeds cancer centre.

Modernisation Fund

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much is in the Modernisation Fund; how it is proposed that local health organisations can access it; and if he will make a statement. [155108]

Mr. Denham: The modernisation fund was set up following the comprehensive spending review in 1998. Since then, investment in the National Health Service under the modernisation fund has totalled almost £4 billion.

The modernisation fund has been superseded by the additional funding secured as part of the spending review 2000 for investment in the delivery of the NHS Plan.

NHS Shared Services Project

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been allocated to the NHS shared services project; how much has been top-sliced from allocations to health authorities to pay for it; what this project comprises of; if he will indicate the cost of each component; and if he will make a statement. [155110]

Mr. Denham: For the financial year 2001–02, £31.5 million has been allocated to the shared services in the National Health Service project. This sum was transferred out of health authority allocations. The project comprises two elements. Firstly, the establishment of two shared service centre pilots, and secondly the procurement of a national integrated human resources and payroll system. The shared service centre pilots are expected to cost £8.5 million and the national integrated human resources and payroll system £23 million in 2001–02. The benefits to the NHS of a shared services approach will be better, more relevant and more timely information, with resources being released for frontline care. Shared services is an important platform in the modernisation programme for the NHS.

Non-residential Services

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will issue the statutory guidance on charges for non-residential services; and if he will publish the non-residential charges for services for the elderly applied by London boroughs. [155125]

Mr. Hutton: We plan to issue the statutory guidance on charges for home care and other non-residential social services later this summer. Publication of a local council's charges policy for non-residential social services is a matter for the council concerned.

Multiple Sclerosis Nurses

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on the employment by the NHS of MS nurses whose salaries are paid by drugs companies. [155248]

Mr. Denham: Employers have to satisfy themselves that sponsorship arrangements are properly conducted and are in the best interests of the National Health Service. Guidance entitled "Commercial Sponsorship: Ethical Standards for the NHS" was issued by the Department in November 2000. This guidance supplemented and updated "Health Service Guidance 1993(5) Standards of Business Conduct for NHS Staff" which was issued in January 1993.

Copies of the "Commercial Sponsorship: Ethical Standards for the NHS" guidance are being placed in the Library—a copy of HSG 1993(5) is already there.

NHS Staff Registration

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will extend the state registration period for NHS staff beyond one year to allow NHS staff from overseas to obtain work permits valid for over a year. [155275]

Mr. Denham: Registration periods for health professionals are a matter for the relevant regulatory bodies. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment informs me that work permits are issued for the length of the contract of employment, up to a maximum of five years.

Clinical Educators

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to *(a)* increase the number of supervisory allowances for NHS clinical educators and *(b)* invest in additional post-graduate training for educators and locum cover for their existing caseload. [155274]

Mr. Denham: National Health Service staff participate in education and training as clinical educators as part of their overall duties. Separate fees are not therefore payable but some staff are employed for additional sessions to enable them to cover duties associated with training. General practitioners receive a trainers grant where they undertake training responsibilities. This will increase to £6,100 per year from 1 April.

We have invested £3 million over the past two years in providing training for trainers in medicine. We are working with key stakeholders to support trainers for all health professionals.

Employers arrange locum cover where they feel it is necessary.

Nurses

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make ward allowance awards available to out-patient department and rehabilitation/clinical unit nurses. [155276]

Mr. Denham: Ward Environment Budgets were introduced on 1 October last year. Each budget will be worth a minimum of £5,000 in 2001–02. The budgets can be spent on whatever the ward sisters and charge nurses who manage the ward consider will best enhance and humanise patient care or improve the working lives of staff.

All wards can have a budget. No types of ward are excluded. In the vast majority of cases it will be clear which units within a hospital are a ward. At the margins there may however be some doubt whether a particular unit constitutes a ward for the purposes of these budgets. Where there is doubt, the hospital managers will decide how a ward is defined within their hospital with a view to delivering the spirit of this initiative.

NHS Training

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to use recently retired senior clinical NHS staff to assist in the training of new NHS recruits. [155277]

Mr. Denham: We shall continue to ensure that new staff/students have appropriate, high quality support and are taught by those with practical and recent experience of their professions. National Health Service trusts have been asked to establish "keep in touch" schemes whereby a register is kept of retiring staff willing to do casual work or assist with the mentoring of students.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what resources he plans to allocate to employ locum cover for NHS staff undertaking development training. [155273]

Mr. Denham: The allocation of resources to employ locum cover for NHS staff undertaking development training is a matter for NHS employers to determine in the light of local service priorities.

Osteopaths Act

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress his Department is making in its investigation of the General Osteopathic Council; and if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Osteopaths Act 1993. [155423]

Yvette Cooper: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Roger Gale) on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 451W.

General Practitioners

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the dates of the meetings between the Department of Health and the National Assembly for Wales where the knock-on effects of providing additional funding to each general practitioner practice in England for *(a)* doctors' pay and *(b)* extra doctors in Wales were discussed. [155630]

Mr. Denham: Ministers and officials meet representatives of the National Assembly for Wales and of the other devolved Administrations routinely to liaise on devolved policy matters.

NHS (St. Ives)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS registered dentists there were in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155745]

Ms Stuart: This information is not held centrally and has been provided by Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority.

The table shows the numbers of dentists employed in the St. Ives and Carbis Bay area of Cornwall:

St. Ives and Carbis Bay

Year	*Dentists employed*
1992	5
1997	5
2001	6

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* private and *(b)* public sector residential nursing homes there were in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155747]

Mr. Hutton: The table shows the number of private nursing homes for the health authority of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Health Authority at 31 March in each of the years 1992, 1997 and 2000. Information is not available at constituency level and is not yet available for 2001. There are no public sector nursing homes.

Number of private nursing homes in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Health Authority, 1992, 1997 and 2000—as at 31 March

Year	*Number*
1992	81
1997	82
2000	73

Source:
RH(N) Form A 2000, KO36 form 1992 and 1997

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients there were per general practitioner in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1987, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 2001. [155746]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is in the table.

Unrestricted Principals and Equivalents (UPEs)[1] in Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority (HA)[2]—average list size

	UPEs	*Patients*	*Average list size*
1987	264	473,231	1,793
1992	298	481,625	1,616
1997	306	489,202	1,599
2000[3]	312	497,968	1,596

[1] UPEs include Unrestricted Principals, Personal Medical Services (PMS), contracted General Practitioners (GPs) and PMS salaried GPs.
[2] Data relate to Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Family Practitioner Committee for 1987, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Family Health Services Authority for 1992 and Cornwall and Isles of Scilly HA for 1997 and 2000. The HA boundaries between 1987 and 1992 may not be coterminous.
[3] Latest available data. Data for 2000 relate to 30 September; earlier years relate to 1 October.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies for general practitioners there were in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155742]

Ms Stuart: This information is not held centrally and has been provided by Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority.

There have been no unfilled vacancies in St. Ives during the past 10 years.

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many appointees to the boards of primary care trusts have declared political activity for *(a)* the Labour Party, *(b)* the Conservative Party, *(c)* the Liberal Democrats and *(d)* other parties; and in each case what percentage this represents of the total number of appointments made. [155812]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The number of people who have accepted appointment as a chair or non-officer member of the 164 primary care trusts that will be operational from April 2001 and who have declared political activity is given in the table.

Political Party	Number of appointees	Percentage of total number of appointees
None declared	391	66.72
Conservative	35	5.97
Independent	7	1.19
Labour	119	20.31
Liberal Democrat	28	4.78
Other	6	1.02

Doctors' Performance Monitoring (Racial Bias)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received regarding allegations of racial bias in the investigation of performance of doctors; and if he will make a statement. [155922]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* I am only aware of the independent report by the Policy Studies Institute, commissioned by the General Medical Council (GMC) and published in July 2000. This concluded that there was no evidence of overt or covert racial discrimination or bias in the actions of individual members of staff. However there were some criticisms on some aspects of GMC processes, particularly on consistency and transparency.

The GMC are currently considering this, as part of their proposals to reform its procedures.

Mobility Products

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce a statutory code of practice governing the sale of mobility products for elderly people; and if he will make a statement. [155880]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans to introduce a statutory code of practice. However, the British Healthcare Trades Association, which represents most organisations involved in manufacturing or selling disability equipment, recently launched a voluntary registration scheme for those working in this field. We have given our strong endorsement to this scheme.

Health Services (Romsey)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nursing homes there were in the Romsey constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155859]

Mr. Hutton: The table shows the number of private nursing homes for the Southampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority at 31 March in each of the years 1992, 1997 and 2000.

Information is not available for the Romsey constituency and is not yet available for 2001.

Private nursing homes in Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority, 1992, 1997 and 2000—as at 31 March

Year	Number
1992	40
1997	50
2000	47

Source:
RH(N) Form A 2000, K036 form 1992 and 1997

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS dentists there were in the Romsey constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155853]

Ms Stuart: Information on the number of dentists is available by health authority rather than by constituency.

Romsey constituency was located in Hampshire Family Health Service Authority (FHSA) at September 1992. From April 1996 Hampshire FHSA split into three health authorities, and Romsey is now included in Southampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority.

The number of dentists in the General Dental Services and Personal Dental Services at 30 September is shown in the table for Hampshire FHSA for 1992 and for the three successor HAs for 1997 and 2000.

General and Personal Dental Service: Number of dentists by health authority at 30 September each year

Health authority	General Dental Service[1]	Personal Dental Service[2]	Total
1992			
Hampshire FHSA	512	—	512
1997			
North and Mid Hampshire HA	181	—	181
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire HA	166	—	166
Southampton and South West Hampshire HA	185	—	185
Total	532	—	532
2000			
North and Mid Hampshire HA	201	—	201
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire HA	187	—	187
Southampton and South West Hampshire HA	202	20	222
Total	590	20	610

[1] The General Dental Service (GDS) includes principals on a HA list, assistants and vocational dental practitioners.
[2] The Personal Dental Service (PDS) covers dentists working in the PDS who are not working in the GDS.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients there were per GP in the Romsey constituency in *(a)* 1987, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 2001. [155854]

Ms Stuart: Data at a constituency level are not available. Data have been provided for Southampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority.

Unrestricted principals and equivalents (UPEs)[1] in Southampton and South West Hampshire HA[2]—average list size

	UPEs	*Patients*	*Average list size*
1987	293	563,799	1,924
1992	309	557,011	1,803
1997	316	563,446	1,783
2000[3]	329	571,286	1,736

[1] UPEs includes unrestricted principals, personal medical service contracted general practitioners and PMS salaried GPs.
[2] Data relate to Hampshire FPC for 1987, Hampshire FHSA for 1992 and Southampton and South West Hampshire HA for 1997 and 2000. The HA boundaries between 1987 and 1992 may not be coterminous.
[3] Latest available data. Data for 2000 relate to 30 September; earlier years relate to 1 October.

Social Services (Hampshire)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the standard spending assessment allocation for social services and the expenditure per head of population in Hampshire was for each year from 1996–97 to date. [155857]

Mr. Hutton: Hampshire's social services standard spending assessment allocations for 1996–97 to 2001–02 are:

	£ million
1996–97	189.430
1997–98	137.052
1998–99	140.713
1999–2000	145.063
2000–01	153.051
2001–02	160.724

The gross expenditure on social services by Hampshire per head of population from 1996–97 to 1999–2000 is:

	£
1996–97	145.61
1997–98	138.87
1998–99	147.47
1999–2000[1]	160.25

[1] Provisional

Portsmouth and Southampton became unitary authorities in April 1997 and while the 1996–97 figures in the tables include their allocations and expenditure the figures for subsequent years exclude them.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that sheep within the exclusion zones can be moved for lambing purposes. [153187]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Sheep in infected areas can be moved under the various schemes we have introduced over the last two weeks, provided that such moves are justified on welfare grounds and not assessed to be a disease risk. If moves are not possible, then farmers can make use of the Animal Welfare Disposal Scheme.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from the tourist industry on the losses due to the restrictions imposed as a result of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [154181]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

Members of the tourist industry have made representations about the severe losses their industry is facing as a result of foot and mouth disease. We estimate that the current loss of revenue to the tourist industry in England is of the order of £100 million a week but it could rise to as much as £250 million a week.

Sand Eels

Dr. Godman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 21 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 259W, concerning industrial fishing for sand eels, how many industrial fishing vessels are allowed to fish for sand eels in the spawning cod closed areas; how frequently such vessels are inspected while fishing these grounds; and if he will make a statement. [155881]

Mr. Morley: As with pelagic fishing in the closed areas, there is no limit on the number of vessels which may fish for sand eels. However, observers must be on board for at least 50 vessel trips per member state. Their responsibilities are set out in Article 3 of Commission Regulation 259/2001.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Information

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* consultation documents, *(b)* regulations, *(c)* revised or corrected regulations, *(d)* guidance notes, *(e)* requests for statistical information in addition to form 618G and form 7 and *(f)* letters from Ministers, have been sent to local education authorities by his Department since May 1997. [153489]

Jacqui Smith: Since May 1997 this Department has sent local education authorities communications on the following topics. Very few of these items were sent to schools.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Consultation documents					
Topic					
Early Years	1	6	3	0	0
Further and Higher Education	17	16	20	2	1
Literacy and Numeracy	1	1	3	0	0
Primary schools	2	3	3	1	0
Secondary Schools	6	6	5	5	0
School Curriculum	5	1	5	1	0
School Discipline	4	6	3	1	0
School Finance	9	14	17	7	0
School Governance	2	5	4	3	1
School Health and Safety	1	3	2	5	0
School—Miscellaneous	4	10	18	5	1
School Organisation	1	3	5	2	0
School Premises	0	1	7	2	1

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
School Standards	6	3	4	0	0
Special Education	5	1	5	—	1
Teaching Profession	9	11	7	13	1
Regulations	35	132	191	57	6
Guidance					
Topic					
Early Years	1	4	11	19	5
Further and Higher Education	13	12	22	9	5
Literacy and Numeracy	0	4	19	17	1
Primary schools	2	8	11	7	0
Secondary Schools	9	9	17	8	1
School Curriculum	0	2	3	13	5
School Discipline	0	2	4	4	0
School Finance	5	15	33	18	5
School Governance	1	4	11	4	2
School Health and Safety	0	2	6	6	4
School—Miscellaneous	3	3	9	32	0
School Organisation	0	7	12	3	0
School Premises	5	4	8	5	3
School Standards	3	9	26	1	1
Special Education	6	3	7	9	2
Teaching Profession	7	17	11	23	7
Data collection					
Topic					
Early Years	0	3	3	6	1
Further and Higher Education	4	4	28	8	0
Literacy and Numeracy	0	0	0	0	0
Primary schools	1	1	2	0	0
Secondary Schools	2	4	1	4	0
School Curriculum	0	0	0	0	0
School Discipline	0	0	2	6	0
School Finance	1	0	3	8	3
School—General	4	8	15	10	1
School Premises	0	0	0	2	0
School Standards	0	0	0	1	0
Special Education	1	1	1	1	0
Teaching Profession	1	4	5	8	0
Letters from Ministers	1	2	4	6	2

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to encourage headteachers and careers and guidance staff to become more involved in placing suitable young people in modern apprenticeships. [154401]

Mr. Wicks: The Government are determined to ensure that all young people receive high quality, impartial advice about all the learning opportunities available to them. To deliver this we are setting up the new Connexions Service starting in 12 areas in England from April this year, which will ensure that young people who could benefit are actively encouraged to consider vocational options, including Modern Apprenticeships. Connexions Personal Advisers will provide careers advice to all young people about their learning options. Those Personal Advisers based in schools will work as part of a team under the management of headteachers.

Further Education Students (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in each London borough were in further and higher education *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [155003]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Information on the numbers of students from London who were enrolled in Higher Education institutions is not available in the form requested. In the 1999–2000 academic year, there were 267,200 full and part-time students from the Greater London area who were registered at Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom. This compares with a figure of 206,500 for the 1995–96 academic year.

Information on the numbers of students from London who were registered at Further Education institutions in the United Kingdom during the 1996–97 and 1999–2000 academic years is shown in the following table.

Student numbers[1] in further education institutions by London local education authorities (LEAs) 1996–97 and 1999–2000 academic years

LEA	1996–97 all students	1999–2000 all students
City of London	487	478
Camden	12,265	15,478
Greenwich	12,256	18,195
Hackney	16,266	17,790
Hammersmith and Fulham	8,420	10,774
Islington	12,721	15,531
Kensington and Chelsea	8,006	12,169
Lambeth	20,437	25,696
Lewisham	17,491	20,042
Southwark	17,562	22,196
Tower Hamlets	15,613	12,327
Wandsworth	14,544	15,833
Westminster	11,488	14,390
Barking and Dagenham	7,647	8,521
Barnet	20,058	22,122
Bexley	11,896	12,323
Brent	20,390	23,674
Bromley	14,516	13,654
Croydon	21,511	22,037
Ealing	18,367	20,521
Enfield	15,920	18,176
Haringey	14,707	19,487
Harrow	15,024	15,886
Havering	13,637	14,326
Hillingdon	11,552	12,367
Hounslow	14,593	14,630
Kingston-upon-Thames	6,823	6,893
Merton	10,191	10,292
Newham	17,626	23,127
Redbridge	13,874	14,053
Richmond-upon-Thames	9,907	11,609
Sutton	10,108	10,545
Waltham Forest	17,498	19,260
Total London LEAs	453,401	514,402

[1] Includes data for FEFC funded and non-funded FEFC funded students in FE sector colleges and FEFC funded students in external Institutions (EIs) and in Specially Designated Institutions (SDIs).

Note:

FEFC funded students in higher education institutions (HEIs) are not included.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of households have children in further and higher education in each London borough who do not have to pay full fees. [155004]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The information requested is not available.

In England and Wales, students on undergraduate courses and their families are expected to make a contribution towards their tuition fees only if they can afford to do so.

In academic year 1998–99, the latest year for which data are available, for Inner London as a whole, the proportion of higher education students who are dependent on their parents and are liable for fees under the Education (Student Support) Regulations and who do not have to pay full fees is estimated to be 81 per cent. Of these, an estimated 66 per cent. were assessed to make no contribution towards fees and an estimated 15 per cent. made a partial contribution towards fees.

These students were also eligible for maintenance support, around 25 per cent. of which was subject to income assessment.

In further education, 16 to 18-year-olds are not required to pay fees. For those aged 19 and over, colleges charge or waive fees according to their own policies. However, there is full fee remission for disadvantaged groups including those on means-tested state benefits.

Education Statistics (Northern Region)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* registered nursery and *(b)* playgroup places there were in the Northern Region in (i) 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [155011]

Ms Hodge: The available information is contained in the following table. This includes information on day nurseries and playgroups for March 1996 and March 2000.

Since September 1998 there has been a free part-time early education place for all four-year-olds, whose parents want one, and a steadily increasing number of free places for three-year-olds. From September 2004 all three-year-olds will be entitled to a free early education place.

	1996				2000			
	Day nurseries		Playgroups		Day nurseries		Playgroups	
	Providers	Places	Providers	Places	Providers	Places	Providers	Places
North East	136	4,554	380	9,275	189	8,027	482	12,399
Darlington[1]	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	10	439	24	580
Durham	29	1,059	145	3,197	32	1,406	81	1,777
Cleveland	23	677	88	2,761	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—
Gateshead	15	562	39	988	21	845	32	794
Hartlepool[2]	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	8	358	4	103
Middlesbrough[2]	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	14	585	21	532
Newcastle upon Tyne	22	914	65	1,372	25	1,152	57	1,264
North Tyneside	6	189	[4]—	[4]—	19	770	29	593
Northumberland	14	376	[4]—	[4]—	1	78	128	2,909
Redcar and Cleveland[2]	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	11	506	15	2,052
South Tyneside	5	117	13	255	7	240	32	568
Stockton-on-Tees[2]	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	19	853	28	671
Sunderland	22	660	30	702	22	795	31	556

[1] From 1 April 1997
[2] From 1 April 1996
[3] Not applicable
[4] Not available

Postal Status (Unemployed Claimants)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people were awarded postal status due to hardship incurred by travel expenses to sign on at the nearest job centre in the last five years, broken down by region. [155094]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Clare Dodgson to Ms Roseanna Cunningham, dated 28 March 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question about the number of people awarded postal status due to hardship incurred in attending Jobcentres. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying as Chief Operating Officer for the Employment Service.

I am afraid it is not possible to provide a count of the number of people being awarded postal status due to hardship incurred by travel expenses to sign on at the nearest Jobcentre. People are required to attend the Jobcentre each fortnight as part of maintaining their claim for Jobseeker's Allowance. However, depending on circumstances, some people are allowed to maintain their claim by post—those who would have to spend an unreasonable amount of time travelling to the Jobcentre, and those who have a mental or physical disability which restricts their mobility.

Postal status is not usually awarded on the basis of costs incurred for attending the Jobcentre. However, Jobcentre Managers do have some discretion in offering this facility if someone's journey would involve the use of a form of transport which they could not be expected to use on a regular basis, for example, a ferry.

I hope this is helpful.

Higher Education Funding

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what response he has made to the final report from the Funding Options Review

Group of Universities UK, with particular reference to their calculation of the funding requirements for higher education. [155164]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 23 March 2001]*: The Government have welcomed the report from the Funding Options Review Group of Universities UK as a helpful contribution to the debate about the funding of higher education. The Government are increasing funding to universities and higher education colleges in England by £1.7 billion over the six years to 2003–04; funding per full-time equivalent student will increase in real terms in 2001–02 for the first time in over a decade. The funding shortfall identified in the Universities UK report is for 2003–04. The Government will address the funding needs of the sector from 2003–04 in the next Spending Review.

Computers

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Computers Within Reach programme will be introduced throughout the United Kingdom. [155249]

Mr. Wills: Computers Within Reach is a Capital Modernisation Fund (CMF) scheme. Such schemes are intended to provide funding for piloting new policy approaches and are not designed to fund full national schemes. It was therefore never intended that the existing CMF funds allocated, £15 million, would be rolled out as a national scheme. We are currently in phase 1 of the scheme working in certain areas of England. The scheme is an England-only rather than a UK pilot.

We will be evaluating the impact of this, and other pilot CMF schemes such as "Wired Up Communities", alongside our existing policies on "digital divide" issues before we make decisions on our next steps.

Veterinary and Medical Students

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his policy is on the number of choices of course made available to veterinary and medical students applying to higher education. [155354]

Mr. Wicks: The admissions procedures for higher education courses are determined by the higher education institutions themselves and applied by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Ministers are precluded by legislation from involvement in admissions although the number of medical places is set by the Government.

Sure Start

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for what reasons Warrington was not included in the most recent round of Sure Start projects; and what assessment was made of the levels of deprivation in Warrington, North prior to the decision being taken. [155458]

Yvette Cooper: Sure Start districts are identified on the basis of levels of need and deprivation. Once a district has been selected by the Government, it is for a partnership of local stakeholders within the district to choose the precise catchment area. To date 260 Sure Start areas over four waves have now been identified and invited to develop programmes. Warrington was invited to develop a Sure Start programme as part of the third wave.

In selecting districts for the fourth wave, an assessment of levels of deprivation and the number of existing Sure Start programmes in Warrington was made alongside assessments for other districts in England. Taking into account these factors, Warrington was not invited to develop a second programme at this stage.

As a result of the 2000 Spending Review, the number of Sure Start programmes will be increased to 500 by 2003–04 and will reach at least a third of poor children under four in England. The next 240 areas, although not yet decided, will be identified using similar criteria to those used previously, namely levels of deprivation and poverty. There is a possibility that Warrington may be selected for a further programme at some time in the future.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much Sure Start money has been allocated to the Romsey constituency. [155861]

Yvette Cooper: None. Sure Start targets children under four living in disadvantaged areas as part of the Government's drive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Local authority districts are identified by the Government on the basis of their levels of need and deprivation and then invited to develop programmes. The Romsey constituency includes parts of the Test Valley, Eastleigh and Southampton districts. Test Valley and Eastleigh have not been selected for Sure Start. Southampton has been invited twice to develop Sure Start programmes, first in the Trailblazer wave and then, most recently, in the fourth wave. Following invitation, it is for local stakeholders within the district to choose the precise catchment area, and for both Southampton programmes the areas chosen are outside the Romsey constituency.

As a result of the 2000 Spending Review, the number of Sure Start programmes will be increased to 500 by 2003–04 and will reach at least a third of poor children under four in England. The next 240 areas, although not yet decided, will be identified using similar criteria to those used previously ie. levels of deprivation and poverty. In addition, small pockets of deprivation in otherwise generally affluent areas may be targeted.

School Funding

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the cash resources paid directly to Blackpool, North and Fleetwood schools, by sector, in each financial year since 2 May 1997, indicating the schools that benefited and the sum involved in each case. [155459]

Ms Estelle Morris: Most funding provided by the Department is distributed via local education authorities. Allocations for schools in the Blackpool, North and Fleetwood constituency between the years 1997–98 and 2000–01 under the New Deal for Schools scheme are set out in the table. The Department does not hold information on other support provided to Blackpool, North and Fleetwood schools since 2 May 1997. The Secretary of State wrote to my hon. Friend on 16 February setting out the total funding for her local education authorities (Blackpool and Lancashire) for the years 1996–97 to 2001–02.

New Deal for Schools (NDS): Allocation for schools in the Blackpool, North and Fleetwood Constituency

Year/School	*Project*	*Grant awarded (£)*
1997–98		[1] —
1998–99		
May have been included in LEA wide project of 189 schools	Installation of safety glazing	[2]400,000
May have been included in LEA wide project of 17 schools	Replacement of deteriorating boiler systems	[2]637,000
May have been included in LEA wide project of 10 schools	Repair or deteriorating roofs	[2]622,000
Anchorsholme Primary	Treatment of flat felt roof surfaces with liquid plastics Decothane Gamma 15 system	58,200
Claremont Primary	Re-roofing of ground floor teaching area	21,500
Moor Park Junior	Completion of the over roofing	21,500
Norbreck Primary	Upgrade outside toilets	8,600
Montgomery High	Development of hard-standing on site	50,410
1999–2000		
Included within a 10 school package: Montgomery High	Re-roofing project	[2]367,500
Included within a 14 school package: Great Arley, Thornton-Cleveleys Burn Naze Primary, Fleetwood Chaucer Community Primary	Window repairs and replacement	[3]516,000
Included within a 13 school package: Thornton-Cleveleys Burn Naze Primary	Roof works	[3]549,700
Included within a 25 school package: Thornton Cleveleys Sacred Heart Catholic Primary	Playground repairs	[3]300,000
2000–01		
Included within a six school package: Cardinal Allen Catholic High	Refurbishment of CDT	[3]1,502,992
Included within a three school package: Montgomery High	Replacement of temporary classrooms	[3]570,688
Included within a four school package: Montgomery High	Replacement windows	[3]220,000
Included within a 13 school package: Great Arley	Replacement windows	[3]566,350

[1] Nil allocation for schools within this constituency
[2] Local education authorities (LEAs) were not required to specify individual schools included within projects for phase 2 of the NDS programme, so the amount shown is the total project allocation to the LEA. Lancashire or Blackpool local education authorities hold project level information.
[3] Denotes total allocation made to package projects covering more than one school. Lancashire or Blackpool local education authorities will be able to advise the value of projects at schools which have benefited from these allocations.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent studies he has conducted into the impact of in-year changes in pupil numbers in the per capita funding of individual schools. [155875]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations give local education authorities wide discretion as to the timing and extent of funding changes for in-year pupil number changes. The Regulations are kept under regular review in order to ensure that they enable schools' needs to be met; and furthermore my right hon. Friend has power to approve alternative arrangements if these are needed in particular circumstances. The Department has not conducted any specific studies of the working of in-year pupil number funding changes.

Buildings (Climate Change)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consideration he gives to the effects of climatic change on building new *(a)* school and *(b)* university buildings. [155617]

Jacqui Smith: The Department gives guidance on the environmental performance of new school buildings in Building Bulletin 87, "Guidelines for Environmental Design in Schools". This recommends a number of measures for conserving energy. It also contains targets for limiting the amount of carbon dioxide produced by new buildings for both primary and secondary schools, thereby limiting their environmental impact.

The building or adaptation of university buildings is a matter for each university. Universities are independent autonomous institutions who will take investment decisions based on longer term strategic objectives approved by the governing body of that institution. Where this may involve public funding, investment appraisal and business case review will be undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to ensure that the project is in line with established investment criteria. Each university has an estates strategy which fully considers environmental issues.

Class Sizes

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class sizes for Key Stages *(a)* 1, *(b)* 2 and *(c)* 3 were in (i) 1992, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 2001 in the St. Ives constituency. [155744]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information is shown in the table. Information on class sizes by parliamentary constituency is not available prior to 1997. The January class size data for the academic year 2000–01 are currently being analysed and provisional national estimates are expected to be published in April.

Average class size—St. Ives parliamentary constituency

	January 1997	January 2000	September 2000
Key Stage 1	25.8	24.3	21.8
Number of pupils in Key Stage 1 classes of size 31 or more	978	701	34
Key Stage 2	27.9	29.4	n/a
Pupils aged mainly under 14 in maintained secondary schools	24.8	26.4	n/a

Note:
Classes taught by one teacher

January 2000 saw a fall in the size of the average junior class in England; and a continuing fall in the size of the average primary class, after rising for a decade. The size of the average secondary class nationally, at 22.0, is still five below the average primary class. In 2001–02 secondary headteachers will receive an average of £70,000 and primary headteachers £24,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose, including on reducing class sizes if that is their priority.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class size was for Key Stage *(a)* 1, *(b)* 2 and *(c)* 3 in (i) 1992, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 2001 in the Romsey constituency. [155852]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information is shown in the table. Information on class sizes by parliamentary constituency is not available prior to 1997. The January class size data for the academic year 2000–01 are currently being analysed and provisional national estimates are expected to be published in April.

Average class size—Romsey parliamentary constituency

	January 1997	January 2000	September 2000
Key Stage 1	27.7	27.0	24.5
Number of pupils in Key Stage 1 classes of size 31 or more	1,080	487	129
Key Stage 2	27.6	29.2	n/a
Pupils aged mainly under 14 in maintained secondary schools	22.7	23.7	n/a

Note:
Classes taught by one teacher

January 2000 saw a fall in the size of the average junior class in England; and a continuing fall in the size of the average primary class, after rising for a decade. The size of the average secondary class nationally, at 22.0, is still five below the average primary class. In 2001–02 secondary headteachers will receive an average of £70,000 and primary headteachers £24,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose, including on reducing class sizes if that is their priority.

Prisons (Education and Training)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to extend provision of resources to HM prisons for the purposes of education and training. [155769]

Mr. Wicks: The Prison Service's budget for education and libraries is planned to increase from £50 million to at least £63 million by 2003–04, an increase of over 17 per cent. in real terms. This is on top of the resources being invested in vocational training by the Prison Service. From April 2001 the new Prisoners' Learning and Skills Unit will support DfEE and Home Office Ministers in the development of education and training for prisoners. The Unit will at an early stage review the delivery, funding and procurement of education and training in prisons as a basis for further development through the partnership.

Music and Ballet Fees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the proposed scale revisions for contributions to fees under the music and ballet scheme will lead to greater proportional changes in contributions from parents with children at day schools than at boarding schools; and what representations he has received on this. [155863]

Ms Estelle Morris: The revised parental contribution scale for day pupils under the music and ballet scheme will require greater contributions than at present from families whose annual income exceeds £25,000 in order to bring it into line with the scale for boarding pupils in terms of affordability and equity. Greater contributions will be required from the parents of boarding pupils where family income exceeds £45,000. However, the income threshold below which the parents of day pupils receive a free place will be higher, at £12,148 per annum, than that for boarding pupils, at £9,798 per annum, in recognition of the costs of keeping day pupils at home. Overall, about 85 per cent. of families using the music and ballet scheme will gain from the package of changes.

We have received representatives from 15 families affected by the proposed changes, seven of which are families of pupils holding day places under the scheme.

Careers Guidance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of current recruitment to courses training careers guidance professionals. [155866]

Mr. Wicks: We are working with the Institute of Career Guidance to develop a new qualification, the Qualification in Careers Guidance for people moving into the careers guidance profession. This is currently being piloted and will be available nationally from autumn 2001.

Information provided to us by the Institute of Career Guidance, the awarding body for the Diploma in Careers Guidance and the pilot Qualification in Careers Guidance shows that 303 students were registered for careers adviser initial training in 1999–2000 and currently 311 students are registered in 2000–01.

In addition, we have made available funding in 2000–01 to support 46 students on the NVQ level 4 in Guidance.

To support people moving into the guidance profession in 2000–01, we made available £745,000.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to ensure that careers guidance under his Connexions Strategy is given by advisers who have undergone full training in careers work. [155867]

Mr. Wicks: The Connexions Service will offer at least the same level of impartial careers information, advice and guidance for 13 to 19 year-olds as is currently provided by careers services. However, in order to remove the significant barriers to learning that many young people face, the range of information, advice and guidance provided by the Connexions Service will be extended to cover matters relating to, for example, housing and health.

Personal Advisers will operate as multi-disciplinary teams and will include a range of people offering specialist support to young people. Personal Advisers providing careers guidance will have appropriate professional qualifications.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what amounts were made available in the last three years to education and business partnerships, under each of the six programmes of the Single Regeneration Budget; and what arrangements are being made to replace this funding. [155868]

Mr. Wills: On the first point, this information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. On the second, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 370W.

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if proposals for write-offs of student loans initiated by his Department *(a)* require extension to European students and *(b)* require approval by the European Union. [155871]

Ms Estelle Morris: Detailed proposals for the write-off of student loans are still being developed by my Department. We do not believe that they require European Union approval, but we will naturally take full account of relevant EU legislation.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if comparable incentives to the proposed write-offs of student loans for trainee teachers are planned for trainees without loan debt. [155869]

Ms Estelle Morris: No directly comparable incentives are planned for trainees without loan debt. Other measures to encourage more people into teaching, especially in shortage subjects, include improved pay and training, Golden Hellos, and our recently-announced Back To Work bonus for returners to teaching. The number of teachers in England and Wales has increased by 7,400 since 1998, and we hope that this rise will continue.

Further and Higher Education Act

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in implementing changes in funding for external qualifications consequent on the coming repeal of Schedule 2 to the Further and Higher Education Act 1999. [155876]

Mr. Wicks: Until 31 August 2001 the Learning and Skills Council will continue to consider as eligible for funding, qualifications currently funded by the Further Education Funding Council. On 29 December 2000, the Department published the first list, under section 96 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000, of external qualifications that will be approved for use from 1 September 2001 by those under 19. The LSC will draw on this list for those aged 19 or over until 2002–03 when a list under section 97 of the Act will be published.

Departmental Policies (North Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Devon constituency, the effects on North Devon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155903]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the North Devon constituency and Devon LEA.

Beacon Schools

The Park Community School—awarded Beacon status from 1 September 1998 for working with the home to foster a positive approach to school—home school contracts, personal student development, mentoring and academic tutoring, special educational needs, initial teacher training, and continuous professional development.

School Achievement Awards

Eighteen schools in the constituency were among 108 in Devon to be allocated a total of £728,400 in March 2001. Staff at 16 of the 18 schools in the constituency received Improvement Awards because pupil performance in 2000 was substantially better than in 1997, or because schools had come out of special measures. The remaining two schools received Excellence Awards, because pupil performance in 2000 was better than most schools in similar circumstances. Awards were worth around £5,000 for a typical primary school and £25,000 for a typical secondary school.

Classroom of the Future

Devon LEA was awarded £900,000 as part of the above initiative in February 2001. The stated aim is, in the context of recent educational research, to provide life long learning opportunities that broaden experiences for pupils and the whole community. It will be an inclusive project that provides greater educational opportunities for those living in rural communities, so that social exclusion in isolated rural areas no longer exists. The proposal is to set up units in two primary schools and a community college within an existing cluster of schools, and to work with three technology colleges. The potential of information and communications technology is fully explored, in combination with sustainable design. Partners include Exeter and Plymouth Universities and the Timber Research and Development Association.

Infant Class Sizes

£000

	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	Total
Revenue Funding	1,000	1,831	2,596	5,427
Capital Funding	523	732	719	1,974

The September 2000 figures show that in Devon there are now 62 (0.3 per cent.) pupils remaining in infant classes of 31 or more. The figure in January 1998 was 5,639 (26 per cent.).

Performance Indicators

England averages include independent schools.

Key Stage 2, percentage of pupils achieving level 4

	1997[1]	1998	1999	2000
English				
LEA	62	66	72	75
England	63	65	71	75
Maths				
LEA	62	60	70	72
England	62	59	69	72
Science				
LEA	67	72	80	86
England	69	69	78	85

GCSE—percentage of pupils achieving:

5+A-C grades*				
LEA average	44	47	48	49
England average	45	46	48	49

Key Stage 2, percentage of pupils achieving level 4

	1997[1]	1998	1999	2000
5+A-G grades*				
LEA average	90	91	91	91
England average	86	88	89	89
No passes				
LEA average	5	4	4	4
England average	8	7	6	6
Average point score				
LEA average	N/A	38.4	38.7	39.2
England average	N/A	37.0	38.1	38.9

[1] Results prior to 1998 include Plymouth and Torbay

A/AS level and Advanced GNVQ

Average points for 2 or more A/AS levels	1998	1999	2000
LEA average	16.3	17.3	17.9
England average	17.8	18.2	18.5
A/AS average per entry			
LEA average	5.2	5.5	5.3
England average	5.4	5.5	5.5
Average point score GNVQs			
LEA average	10.5	10.7	10.6
England average	9.6	9.9	10.1

Funding per pupil

In Devon LEA, funding per pupil has increased by £240 in real terms between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Devon LEA Capital funding

£000

Credit approvals	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	Total
ACG	10,890	6,788	6,727	9,467	10,072	43,944
SCA	2,771	857	1,200	328	1,400	6,556
Grants						
New Deal for Schools	1,018	2,397	4,763	7,536	—	15,714
NDS Condition Funding	—	—	—	—	1,520	1,520
National Grid for Learning	—	979	1,213	2,342	3,620	8,154
Voluntary Aided Grant	1,002	187	251	387	1,768	3,595
Devolved Formula Capital	—	—	—	5,013	4,101	9,114
Science Labs	—	—	—	327	327	654
Energy	—	175	—	—	—	175
AMP Support	—	—	108	—	—	108
SEED Challenge	—	—	—	341	395	736
Class Size Initiative	—	247	1,001	664	—	1912
Outside toilet removal	—	972	—	—	—	972
Schools Security at 75 per cent.	262	219	231	233	165	1,110
SSLU's	—	—	—	114	99	213
Schools Access Initiative at 85 per cent.	—	—	—	22	581	603
Total	15,943	12,821	15,494	26,774	24,048	95,080

Further Education

Student numbers at all FEFC funded institutions where home postcode is in the Local Authority District of North Devon.

1996–97 to 1999–2000

	16–18		Adult	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
FEFC funded				
1996–97	1,273	268	268	5,378
1997–98	1,250	298	278	5,520
1998–99	1,272	295	214	4,985
1999–2000	1,318	261	225	5,288

1996–97 to 1999–2000

	16–18		Adult	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Non-FEFC funded				
1996–97	50	172	43	929
1997–98	58	154	65	955
1998–99	59	207	127	1,370
1999–2000	57	175	111	987

Modern Apprenticeships

Information on Modern Apprenticeships for all English constituencies will be placed in the Library by the end of March 2001.

New Deal for Young People

In the North Devon constituency, 786 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 450 have found jobs, 349 of which are sustained.

Labour Market Statistics

The working age employment rate in Devon in Autumn 2000 was 77.8 per cent., above the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in Autumn 1997 was 77.3 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 5.8 per cent. in February 1997 to 4.0 per cent. in February 2001 in the North Devon constituency.

Learning and Skills Council

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Learning and Skills Council will be operational; and if he will make a statement. [156061]

Mr. Blunkett: On 26 March, the LSC assumed the responsibilities it is taking over from the Training and Enterprise Councils, and from 1 April it will assume the full range of its initial responsibilities, including those which it is taking over from the Further Education Funding Council.

I am today announcing a significant real terms increase in the Learning and Skills Council's budget for its third year of operation. The Council will have an additional £434 million in 2003–04 compared with 2002–03, an increase in real terms of 5 per cent., bringing planned resources available for 2003–04 to £6.4 billion (excluding funding for school sixth forms, which will from April 2002 flow through the Learning and Skills Council to local education authorities). The total including this money will come to over £7.4 billion.

These increased resources, which are in addition to those already announced, will for 2003–04 include, compared with 2002–03:

an additional £102 million to support further increases in participation by young people in Further Education;

an additional £67 million to widen participation in learning and drive up basic skills levels among adults;

a further step change in investment in Further Education infrastructure, with an increase of £52 million in FE capital spending.

The 47 local arms of the Learning and Skills Council are today announcing the expenditure the Council will be investing in their local areas in 2001–02 to meet local learning and skills needs. I am writing to hon. Members with further details of these announcements.

Further Education (Funding)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding he will make available to further education and sixth form colleges for pay; and if he will make a statement. [156060]

Mr. Blunkett: Last year I announced that £50 million would be available in 2001–02 and £100 million in 2002–03 for further education and sixth form colleges' pay, subject to satisfactory proposals coming forward from the sector. As testimony to the strength of the proposals that have now come forward, we have earmarked an additional £15 million for further education and sixth form college pay within the resources available in 2001–02. £100 million will be available in 2002–03. In 2003–04, there will be a further increase to £135 million. Further education and sixth form colleges will be able to implement their proposals from 1 April 2001.

By 2003–04, the proposals will allow the majority of teachers in further education and sixth form colleges to qualify for increases in salary of up to £2,000, or the pro rata equivalent for part-time staff. Staff in all colleges will also have new opportunities for further salary progression for good teaching. Further education colleges will have additional resources to improve the quality of work delivered by part-time staff, particularly for basic skills.

I will also ensure that teachers of shortage subjects in further education and sixth form colleges will benefit from golden hellos comparable to those already available in schools, and from the arrangements we are piloting to help new entrants to the profession to pay off their student loans over a set period of time. Funding for these new recruitment and retention measures will be additional to the sums I have announced for further education pay.

We are publishing today "Raising Standards: Teaching in Further Education", copies of which have been placed in the Library and are available from the Vote Office.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Zimbabwe

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sanctions have been considered by *(a)* the UK Government and *(b)* the Commonwealth in respect of Zimbabwe; and if he will list those which have been adopted. [155022]

Mr. Wilson: In light of the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe, we imposed a national arms embargo last May. And we are withdrawing the British Military Advisory and Training Team at the end of this month. The Commonwealth acts by consensus. It is not for us to speak on behalf of the Commonwealth.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. [155023]

Mr. Wilson: Zimbabwe is clearly in breach of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, particularly in terms of respect for the rule of law and independence of the judiciary. But a country may be suspended from the Commonwealth only under certain narrowly-defined circumstances, namely the overthrow of an elected government. Such a decision is taken by consensus by all members. The UK is seeking as a member of the High Level Review Group on reform of the Commonwealth, to expand the remit of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) so that it can intervene before the breakdown of democracy, to promote adherence to Commonwealth core values.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action his Department has taken in respect of the murder of farmers and other civilians in Zimbabwe. [155024]

Mr. Wilson: We have regularly urged the Government of Zimbabwe to take urgent action to restore the rule of law. We have also raised our concerns at the decline in law and order in Zimbabwe in international forums.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Zimbabwe on behalf of UK citizens whose Zimbabwean pensions have been frozen. [155882]

Mr. Wilson: We regularly remind the Zimbabwean authorities of their commitment to pay pensions to eligible British nationals living outside Zimbabwe. A lack of foreign exchange is making it difficult for Zimbabwe to meet that commitment.

Sudan

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current resolution adopted on Sudan by the UN Commission on Human Rights with special reference to slavery. [154908]

Mr. Wilson: At last year's UN Commission on Human Rights, the EU sponsored a resolution on Sudan which set out its concerns about violations of human rights. In particular, the resolution addressed the distressing problem of abduction of women and children, an issue which remains high on our agenda. It called on the Government of Sudan to continue to co-operate with the Committee for the Eradication of Abduction of Women and Children (CEAWC), and to help facilitate the return of affected individuals.

The CEAWC is working in close co-operation with UNICEF and Save the Children Fund (UK) and has so far facilitated the return of over 550 abductees.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent military activity around the oil concession areas of Sudan and the rate of civilian displacement and deaths in the last 12 months. [155146]

Mr. Wilson: There has been a great deal of forced displacement from the oil concession areas in south Sudan in the last year. We do not know how many civilian deaths there have been, but there have undoubtedly been many.

All parties to the conflict are to blame in some measure for this. The continued fighting does not help matters. That is why achieving a lasting ceasefire and finding a solution to the conflict remains a priority for this Government.

Africa (Franco-British Policy)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on joint Franco-British policy on Africa, as set out at St. Malo and Cahors, with special reference to *(a)* the visit of Robert Mugabe to Paris and *(b)* French policy on Zimbabwe. [155555]

Mr. Wilson: We exchange information on African countries regularly with the French Government. They share our concerns on the situation in Zimbabwe, and took the opportunity of President Mugabe's visit to raise internal issues.

Lebanon

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the number of Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon. [155453]

Mr. Wilson: We believe that under the terms of the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Co-ordination signed by the Lebanese and Syrian Governments in May 1991, there are between 21,000 and 22,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts regarding the presence of Hezbullah in Southern Lebanon. [155759]

Mr. Wilson: We work closely with our EU partners on Middle East issues. We and the EU are in constant dialogue with the Lebanese Government calling on it to

> "assert its effective authority and maintain law and order throughout its territory up to the line identified by the United Nations"

As stated in the UN Secretary General's report on the United Nations Interim force in Lebanon of 22 January 2001.

Diplomatic Service

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the average salary of a United Kingdom national employed in the Diplomatic Service and based in an overseas post is. [155085]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* Salaries of Diplomatic Service staff are based on a common set of pay ranges whether they are serving at home or overseas. The median average basic salary of all Diplomatic Service staff is £23,181. Diplomatic Service staff serving overseas are additionally paid varying rates of allowances to compensate for the additional costs of having to live and work abroad.

"Spaces in Between" Project

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the *(a)* cost and *(b)* purpose of the "Spaces in Between" project of the British Council was; for what reason an asylum centre was targeted in this project; what UK asylum centres have been targeted; and if he will make a statement. [155556]

Mr. Wilson: This programme was the British Council's contribution to "Brussels 2000 European City of Culture", the focus of which was projects with long-term social benefits. One project targeted the children of displaced persons at an asylum centre in Brussels and took the form of three short residencies by British artists who worked in photography, garden-design and painting. The purpose was to demonstrate how such activities can alleviate the effects of displacement and post-conflict trauma among children.

No UK asylum centres were involved: all activity took place in Belgium. The total budget was approximately £10,700.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 247W, what further expenditure has been incurred on, and how many extra copies have been distributed of, the "Your Britain, Your Europe" publication. [154827]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has distributed 17,000 copies of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" leaflet since November 1999. A number of the copies dispatched to Middlesbrough before my visit to the north-east on 1 February were, in the event, not deployed. We subsequently distributed these with several hundred copies of the winter edition of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" newsletter in early March. The total design and printing costs for the leaflet therefore remains at £3,862.51.

General Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 19 and 20 March; what the Government's voting record was at the Council; and if he will make a statement. [155101]

Mr. Vaz: The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 19–20 March adopted the 23 "A" points listed in document no. 7061/01. It also noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its sessions of 12–15 February in Strasbourg and of 28 February and 1 March 2001 in Brussels listed in document nos. 5793/01 and 5796/01 respectively. Copies of these documents have been placed in the House Libraries.

1. Preparations for the Stockholm European Council: Internal

The GAC reviewed the Commission's and Council's work on the Lisbon agenda since the Nice European Council. The Lisbon agenda aims to transform the Union into the most competitive and knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. The Presidency confirmed the agenda and ran through its aims for Stockholm

2. Preparations for the Stockholm European Council: External

The GAC agreed that discussions with Putin over lunch on 23 March would focus on economic issues, in particular the progress of Russia's reforms, World Trade Organisation accession and bilateral trade relations. Foreign Ministers would cover international issues in a separate meeting with FM Ivanov. The European Council would also discuss the Western Balkans, middle east and Korea that evening.

3. European Security and Defence Policy

The GAC took note of progress made so far to develop civilian crisis management capabilities, and looked forward to the 10 May police conference to assess progress towards achievement of the concrete target for international civilian policing capabilities set at the Feira European Council.

4. Western Balkans

The GAC expressed deep concern over the escalating violence in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and called on ethnic Albanian extremists to cease their attacks immediately. The Council reiterated its strong attachment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of FYROM as a single, multi-ethnic state. It also invited the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (Javier Solana) and Commission to take forward urgently assistance aimed at promoting inter-ethnic relations and improving border security.

The GAC welcomed the signature of the ceasefire by Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY)/Serbian and ethnic-Albanian representatives. It also welcomed NATO's decision to authorise FRY forces to go back into the Ground Safety Zone (GSZ). The GAC also welcomed the decision of the High Representative for CFSP to substantially increase the number of monitors from the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in south-east Serbia following assurances from NATO on the security arrangements for EUMM personnel.

The GAC strongly supported the efforts of Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), to ensure implementation of the Dayton/Paris Accords. It also stressed the urgent need for Bosnia to implement the steps set out in the EU Road Map which would permit a feasibility study to take place on a possible Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The GAC condemned the unilateral actions of the Croat National Congress (HDZ) of BiH which would disrupt the Dayton/Paris Accords.

5. Human Rights: General

The GAC unanimously agreed the Council Conclusions on Human Rights of 10 December 1998, endorsed by the Vienna European Council, which highlighted the importance of human rights as a corner stone of EU foreign policy. The GAC took stock of ongoing initiatives, notably the preparation of EU Guidelines against Torture, which will enhance EU actions aimed at the eradication of this abhorrent violation of human rights. The GAC also noted that the European Commission had prepared a Communication on electoral assistance and observation, on which the GAC will adopt conclusions shortly. Finally, the GAC highlighted the opening of the 57th session of the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva on 19 March. It noted the EU resolve to play an active role at the Commission on Human Rights, and to closely co-ordinate and co-operate with other participants with a view to contributing to its success.

6. Human Rights: Dialogue with China

The GAC agreed conclusions assessing the human rights situation in China and progress made in the EU/China human rights dialogue. The GAC also agreed, and made public, the following common approach towards China at the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR):

> EU member states of UNCHR will vote in favour of the US tabled resolution if it is put to a vote; but the EU will not co-sponsor it.
>
> EU member states of UNCHR will vote against a no-action motion, should one be presented, and the EU will actively encourage other CHR member states to do likewise.

7. MEPP

Over lunch, the Presidency reported on the EU Troika visit to the middle east. Ministers agreed that the parties must break the spiral of violence and start new talks on security, as initial steps towards a renewed peace process. Ministers also discussed the humanitarian situation in the

Palestinian areas and renewed their call on Israel to end the closure policy and immediately transfer to the Palestinian Authority the tax revenues withheld.

8. Kidnapping in Cabinda Province, Angola

The GAC, over lunch, heard a report from the Portuguese Foreign Minister on the kidnapping of eight Portuguese citizens in the Angolan province of Cabinda. The Council expressed concern over the humanitarian situation of the Portuguese hostages, strongly condemned their abduction and called on those responsible to release all hostages immediately. The GAC recalled its condemnation of such practices and stressed the importance of the strict observance of the principles of humanitarian law.

9. UK Voting Record

No formal or informal votes were taken on any of the issues under discussion at the GAC. The only issues requiring unanimous agreement, being subject to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, were the Council's conclusions on human rights and its human rights dialogue with China (as indicated).

Iran

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he *(a)* has made and *(b)* plans to make regarding the imprisonment of members of the Jewish community and others from Shiraz; what plans he has to visit Iran; and if he will make a statement. [155474]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* We and our European partners have taken every opportunity to raise with Iran our concerns about the unsatisfactory nature of the case, and will continue to do so. My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe most recently did so with the Iranian ambassador on 22 January. While noting the reductions in sentence on appeal, we continue to hope that the Iranian judiciary will show clemency. We understand that one of the accused is now due to be released following completion of his two-year sentence. The EU sponsored the 4 December General Assembly Resolution expressing concern about discrimination against people who belong to religious minorities and Iranian failure to comply with international standards on the administration of justice.

When he last met his Iranian counterpart Dr. Kharrazi in New York in September, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary welcomed Dr. Kharrazi's invitation that he visit Iran in 2001. No date has yet been set.

Pakistan

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations have been made to the Pakistani Government concerning the recent kidnap and gang rape of Naira Nadia; [155330]

(2) what representations have been made to the Pakistani Government concerning the increase in violent attacks perpetrated upon Christian women by Muslim extremists in Pakistan. [155329]

Mr. Wilson: We raised our concerns about the reports of the recent kidnap and rape of Naira Nadia with the Pakistani authorities on 22 March. We called for a full investigation into the reports. If they are substantiated, we look to the appropriate authorities in Pakistan to ensure that the perpetrators are swiftly brought to justice.

We continue to monitor closely the position of religious minorities in Pakistan as well as the increasing infringements of women's human rights, and will continue to raise our concerns with the Pakistani authorities.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent changes have been made to the rules affecting claims to Disability Living Allowance from people with mental health problems. [155415]

Mr. Bayley: There have been no recent changes to the rules for Disability Living Allowance specifically in respect of people with mental health problems.

Chemical Warfare Experiments

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will send a team from the War Pensions Agency to the United States of America to evaluate the system under which the US Government provide pensions to former military personnel who have experienced illnesses as a result of taking part in chemical warfare experiments. [154764]

Mr. Bayley: There are no plans to send a team from the War Pensions Agency to the USA.

Work/Pensions Ratio

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the ratio was between the number of people in work and the number of recipients of State Retirement Pension in *(a)* 1971, *(b)* 1981, *(c)* 1991 and *(d)* 2001; and what the projected ratio is for 2011. [155122]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Number of people in work compared with number of recipients of State Retirement Pension: Great Britain

	People of working age in employment[1,2]	*People in receipt of State Retirement Pension (RP)*[3,4,5]	*Ratio between number of people in work and number receiving RP*
1971	—	7,647	n/a
1981[6]	22,767	9,080	2.5
1991[6,7]	25,030	9,991	2.5
2001	—	11,000	n/a
2011	—	12,370	n/a

[1] Source: ONS Labour Force Survey figures, taken in the spring of each year, not seasonally adjusted. 1971, 2001 and 2011 figures are not available.

[2] Men aged 16–64 and women aged 16–59.

[3] People aged 16 or over who did some paid work in the reference week (whether as an employee or self-employed); and those who had a job they were temporarily away from (eg on holiday); those on Government-supported training and employment programmes (from spring 1983); and those doing unpaid family work (from spring 1992).

[4] Includes those whose status was not stated.
[5] Includes those on Government-supported training and employment programmes.
[6] Source: 1971, 1981 and 1991 RP figures from DSS ASD, and are December, June and March respectively, based on a 10 per cent. sample taken from the Pension Strategy Computer System 2001 and 2011 figures are GAD mix-tax year projections, and are consistent with December 2000/Budget 2001 PES estimates.
[7] Historic RP figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand, projections (2001 and 2011) to the nearest ten thousand.
[8] Includes Overseas RP Cases.
[9] RP figures exclude Additional Pension only and Graduated Pension only cases—about 150,000 cases in 1981—except for 1971 figure, which includes such cases.

Pensions

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the annual cost of *(a)* administering weekly payments in cash for State Pensions, including payments to the Post Office and *(b)* making payments of pensions to pensioners by, Automated Credit Transfer. [153753]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested.

From available information we are able to estimate that the total annual cost for 1999–2000 of the respective methods of payment for Retirement Pension and Widows Benefit customers (the relevant data are not collated separately) was as follows:

	£ million
Automated Credit Transfer	[1]
Order Book	167
Giro	2

[1] In the region of

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the total annual cost to public funds if, on the death of a spouse, the surviving widow or widower were to receive their deceased spouse's full State Pension for a period of 90 days following bereavement. [155878]

Mr. Rooker: In 2001–02, widows and widowers of pensionable age will continue to be able to inherit both basic State Pension and gross additional pension (SERPS) at up to 100 per cent. of their deceased spouse's entitlement. The additional annual cost of paying inherited graduated Retirement Pension at 100 per cent. instead of 50 per cent. for 90 days following bereavement is estimated to be £3 million.

Note:
Estimates provided by the Government Actuary's Department and rounded to nearest £1 million.

Grants (London Boroughs)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* each category of grant and *(b)* the amount of each grant paid by his Department to each London borough in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000 and (iv) 2000–01; and what the projected figure is for 2001–02. [155432]

Mr. Rooker: The Department pays a number of subsidies to local authorities. Information has been placed in the Library.

Pension Credits

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what legal advice his Department has received on the payment of pension credits to men and women at different ages; and if he will place that advice in the Library; [154818]

(2) at what age the pension credit will be payable for *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [154775]

Mr. Rooker: In developing the detailed design of the Pension Credit consideration will be given to the treatment of men and women, with a view to ensuring that the rules taken comply with our obligations under the European Convention of Human Rights and community law.

NIRS2

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 167–68W, on NIRS2, how many cases received by Benefit Agency offices from NIRS2 were awaiting review on 31 January. [153168]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* As at 31 January 2001, the Department had processed over 2.9 million of the total referrals (3 million) from NIRS2 since 19 April 1999. Our latest figures show that, as at 28 February, 74,739 cases remain under review.

Carers (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many carers in Shrewsbury and Atcham will gain from the carer premium; and if he will make a statement. [154651]

Mr. Bayley: It is estimated that in around 2001–02 around 200 people will benefit from the increase in the carer premium in the income-related benefits in the Shrewsbury and Atcham constituency.

Notes:

1. The figures are based on data taken from the November 2000 5 per cent. scans of the Income Support computer systems, and from 1999 1 per cent. samples of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims.

2. Due to the small sample sizes involved these figures are subject to a high degree of sampling error and should be used only as a guide.

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work his Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155659]

Angela Eagle: Details of all social research commissioned by the Department, including costs, contractor and nature of the work commissioned are listed in the DSS Social Security Research Yearbook published annually. Copies are available in the Library.

DSS Corporate Communications have commissioned the following research from NOP since 1 May 1997 at a total cost of around £100,000:

Project Access: Targeting Benefits to the Public;

Project Access: Phase 2 Product Research;

Project Access: Strategy Phase 2 Letters;

Project Access: Consultation with customer representatives;

New Deal 50plus: Advertising research.

NOP were also commissioned to conduct the DSS Internal Communications Qualitative Research during 1999–2000 at a cost of £62,240.

GGC is not an organisation with which the Department has had contact.

Larynx Cancer

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to classify cancer of the larynx as an industrial disease; and if he will make a statement. [155443]

Mr. Bayley: We have no plans to prescribe cancer of the larynx as an industrial disease.

Diseases are prescribed in relation to the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit scheme in respect of particular occupations where a causal link is established between the occupation and an increased risk of contracting the disease. The Secretary of State is advised on such matters by the independent Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. If my hon. Friend has evidence which would suggest that the Council should consider this matter he may care to write with that evidence or details of his concerns to the Chairman of the Council, Professor Anthony Newman Taylor, Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, Room 605, The Adelphi, 1–11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.

Lone Parents

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures he is taking to help and encourage lone parents on Income Support into work. [156368]

Angela Eagle: From 30 April 2001 we are introducing Personal Adviser meetings for lone parents making claims to, or already receiving, Income Support. Personal Adviser meetings are an opportunity for lone parents to talk about their own circumstances, and find out about the help available to start or prepare for work through the New Deal for Lone Parents.

Full information is contained in "Personal Adviser Meetings and the New Deal for Lone Parents: A Guide to Policy and Practice". Copies have been placed in the Library and are available on the internet at www.dss.gov.uk.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Border Controls

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will respond to the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on border controls. [156063]

Mrs. Roche: The Government have submitted their response to the report to the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee and a copy has been placed in the Library. I understand that the Home Affairs Committee has decided to publish this today as its fourth special report HC 375 and this will be available on the Home Affairs Committee website at www.parliament.uk/commons/selcom/hmafhome.htm.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons personal possessions are removed from young asylum seekers when they arrive in the United Kingdom. [155929]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* An immigration officer may remove and detain a passport or other document establishing a person's nationality and identity until leave to enter is granted or leave is refused and the person removed. An immigration officer may also examine any documents relevant to a person's request for leave to enter.

The possessions of young asylum seekers are not regarded differently to any other passenger. Where a young asylum seeker is subject to further examination it is possible that if, following a baggage examination, articles which could be used to harm them or others are found, these may be detained by immigration service contractors while the person remains at the port of entry.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish his Department's review into the voucher system for asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [155595]

Mrs. Roche: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 413W.

Press Officers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many vacancies exist for press officers in his Department on *(a)* the newsdesk and *(b)* the proactive press team; what the budgeted size of his Department's press office is; and if he will make a statement. [155818]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The current number of vacancies is:

(a) One—newsdesk

(b) Two—proactive press teams

The budget for the Home Office press office for the financial year 2000–01 is approximately £1.6 million based on staffing levels of: five Senior Information Officers, 20 Information Officers, three Assistant Information Officer trainees, one Chief Immigration Officer, one Higher Executive Officer, seven administrative grades and three senior managers.

Asylum Seekers (Scotland)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will open a dedicated facility for asylum seekers in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [155877]

Mrs. Roche: A new immigration detention centre at Dungavel, South Lanarkshire, will open in two phases. The first 90 places will be available in August 2001 and up to a further 60 places will be available from November 2001.

Departmental Policies (Romsey)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Romsey constituency, the effects on Romsey of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155856]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published: "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Romsey constituency or the immediate locality:

Youth Offending

Romsey is part of the area covered by the South West Hampshire Youth Offending Team (YOT), which is one of seven teams that make up the Wessex YOT. Due to the rural nature of Romsey and the distance from the YOT office, work with young people who live in Romsey usually occurs in the home. Romsey is not a high crime area in terms of youth offending. Over the past year five young people have been worked with for offences of arson/criminal damage, theft/handling and a road traffic offence.

The South West Hampshire YOT is a multi-agency team comprising staff from the probation service, social services, health authority, an education officer and a parent support co-ordinator. All young people who come to the attention of the YOT are assessed using the ASSET assessment tool and work is allocated on the basis of criminogenic need. This enables the team to identify specific needs for young people and concentrate on the particular area of concern for the individual, for example education. There are two specialist drug workers within

the South West Hampshire YOT, which has been made possible due to close partnership working with the Drugs Advisory Service. An accredited Cognitive Behavioural Programme is run at the YOT office, and transport can be arranged for the young person to attend if required.

In addition, a Motor Offending Programme is being run, which is specific to the South West Hampshire YOT. This has been achieved through links with the Crime and Disorder Partnership and identifying car crime as an area that needs targeting. One of the YOT officers has developed a 16 session programme which young offenders involved in car crime are required to attend.

The YOT aims to give victims a consistently good service and places victim issues at the top of their working agenda. The team aims to make all young offenders responsible for the consequences of their actions and reparation takes place wherever possible. The YOT has formed a cohesive multi-agency approach which is making progress on tackling youth offending.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Romsey to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many females under 21 years of age were received on remand; and what percentage *(a)* did not subsequently receive a custodial sentence and *(b)* were subsequently acquitted in 2000; [154640]

(2) how many *(a)* adult females *(b)* adult males and *(c)* under 21 year old males were received on remand; and what percentage of each category (i) did not subsequently receive a custodial sentence and (ii) were subsequently acquitted in 2000. [154652]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information is published in "Prison Statistics, England and Wales 1999" (Table 2.6 and Table 2.9 refer). A copy is in the Library.

Information for 2000 is not yet available.

Youth Offending Teams

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the ethnic origin breakdown of each youth offending team in England and Wales. [155154]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is set out in the table. It is based on Youth Offending Teams' annual plans for 1999–2000, as submitted to the Youth Justice Board.

Percentage

Ethnicity	*White*	*Mixed*	*Asian or Asian British*	*Black or Black British*	*Chinese or Other ethnic group*	*Not known*
London boroughs						
Barking and Dagenham	76.00	0.00	0.00	20.00	0.00	4.00
Barnet	90.91	9.09	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Bexley	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Brent	63.64	0.00	9.09	27.27	0.00	0.00
Bromley	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Camden	52.38	4.76	0.00	38.10	4.76	0.00
Croydon	60.00	0.00	5.00	30.00	5.00	0.00
Ealing	65.52	0.00	0.00	34.48	0.00	0.00
Enfield	75.00	5.00	0.00	15.00	5.00	0.00
Greenwich and Eltham	65.0	0.00	0.00	35.00	0.00	0.00
Hackney	42.86	0.00	0.00	51.79	0.00	5.36
Hammersmith and Fulham	70.37	7.41	0.00	22.22	0.00	0.00
Haringey	60.00	0.00	0.00	40.00	0.00	0.00
Harrow	62.50	0.00	12.50	18.75	0.00	6.25
Havering	85.71	0.00	0.00	14.29	0.00	0.00
Hillingdon	70.59	0.00	17.65	5.88	0.00	5.88
Hounslow	80.00	0.00	6.67	13.33	0.00	0.00
Islington	73.33	0.00	0.00	26.67	0.00	0.00
Kensington and Chelsea	50.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	0.00	0.00
Kingston upon Thames	68.42	0.00	0.00	10.53	0.00	21.05
Lambeth	41.67	0.00	0.00	58.33	0.00	0.00
Lewisham	53.49	13.95	0.00	18.18	0.00	0.00
Merton	66.67	0.00	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.00
Newham	52.94	0.00	11.76	35.29	0.00	0.00
Redbridge	66.67	0.00	16.67	16.67	0.00	0.00
Richmond upon Thames	66.67	0.00	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.00
Southwark	66.67	0.00	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.00
Sutton	80.00	0.00	0.00	20.00	0.00	0.00
Tower Hamlets and City of London	67.74	0.00	6.45	25.81	0.00	0.00
Waltham Forest	64.86	0.00	0.00	27.03	0.00	8.11

Percentage

Ethnicity	White	Mixed	Asian or Asian British	Black or Black British	Chinese or Other ethnic group	Not known
Wandsworth	68.35	0.00	6.33	25.32	0.00	0.00
Westminster	78.26	0.00	0.00	21.74	0.00	0.00
Regional total	68.32	1.26	2.88	25.05	0.46	1.58
South East						
Bracknell Forest	80.00	0.00	10.00	10.00	0.00	0.00
Brighton and Hove	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Buckinghamshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kent	93.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.67
Maidenhead and Windsor	90.91	0.00	0.00	9.09	0.00	0.00
Medway	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Milton Keynes	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
West Berkshire/Newbury	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Oxfordshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Reading and Wokingham	90.00	0.00	0.00	10.00	0.00	0.00
Slough	60.00	0.00	4.00	36.00	0.00	0.00
Surrey	90.91	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	9.09
East Sussex	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
West Sussex	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Wessex	97.71	0.00	0.00	2.29	0.00	0.00
Regional total	93.52	0.00	0.93	4.49	0.00	1.05
Eastern region						
Bedfordshire	77.78	0.00	7.41	11.11	0.00	3.70
Cambridgeshire	90.32	0.00	0.00	9.68	0.00	0.00
Essex	69.05	2.38	0.00	4.76	0.00	23.81
Hertfordshire	93.94	0.00	0.00	6.06	0.00	0.00
Luton	85.19	0.00	3.70	11.11	0.00	0.00
Norfolk	57.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	42.86
Peterborough	80.00	0.00	5.00	15.00	0.00	0.00
Southend	41.67	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	50.00
Suffolk	94.29	0.00	0.00	5.71	0.00	0.00
Thurrock	90.00	0.00	0.00	10.00	0.00	0.00
Regional total	77.94	1.07	1.61	7.34	0.00	12.04
South West						
Bath and North East Somerset	90.91	9.09	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Bristol	85.56	3.61	0.00	10.83	0.00	0.00
Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Devon	79.43	0.00	0.00	7.71	12.85	0.00
Dorset	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Gloucestershire	80.95	4.76	0.00	7.14	0.00	0.00
North Somerset	83.33	0.00	0.00	16.67	0.00	0.00
Plymouth	96.43	3.57	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Poole and Bournemouth	91.89	0.00	5.40	0.00	0.00	0.00
Somerset	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Swindon	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
South Gloucestershire	97.47	0.00	2.53	0.00	0.00	0.00
Torbay	91.67	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Wiltshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Regional total	92.69	2.10	0.57	3.02	0.92	0.00
West Midlands						
Birmingham	52.54	5.51	8.05	33.90	0.00	0.00
Coventry	81.82	3.64	3.64	10.91	0.00	0.00
Dudley	72.73	0.00	0.00	13.64	0.00	13.64
Sandwell	73.68	10.53	5.26	10.53	0.00	0.00
Solihull	87.50	0.00	6.25	6.25	0.00	0.00
Staffordshire	95.35	0.00	0.00	4.65	0.00	0.00
Stoke on Trent	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Wrekin and Shropshire	90.63	0.00	0.00	6.25	0.00	3.13
Walsall	96.67	0.00	0.00	3.33	0.00	0.00
Warwickshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Wolverhampton	70.00	0.00	20.00	10.00	0.00	0.00
Worcestershire and Herefordshire	97.06	0.00	0.00	2.94	0.00	0.00
Regional total	84.83	1.64	3.60	8.53	0.00	1.40

Percentage

Ethnicity	White	Mixed	Asian or Asian British	Black or Black British	Chinese or Other ethnic group	Not known
East Midlands						
Derby City	56.00	0.00	4.00	12.00	0.00	28.00
Derbyshire	87.50	12.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Leicestershire (+ Rutland 106510)	61.54	0.00	23.08	15.38	0.00	0.00
Leicester City	65.00	2.50	25.00	7.50	0.00	0.00
Lincolnshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Northamptonshire	94.34	1.89	0.00	3.77	0.00	0.00
Nottinghamshire	68.63	0.00	1.96	0.00	3.92	25.49
Nottingham City	96.40	1.63	1.63	4.90	0.00	0.00
Regional total	78.68	2.31	6.96	5.44	0.49	6.69
Yorkshire and Humberside						
Barnsley	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Bradford	79.25	0.00	7.55	0.00	0.00	13.21
Calderdale	89.29	0.00	3.57	7.14	0.00	0.00
Doncaster	96.15	0.00	3.85	0.00	0.00	0.00
East Riding of Yorkshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kingston upon Hull	95.24	0.00	0.00	4.76	0.00	0.00
Kirklees	91.67	0.00	5.56	2.78	0.00	0.00
Leeds	91.38	0.00	1.72	6.90	0.00	0.00
North Lincolnshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
North East Lincolnshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
North Yorkshire	92.86	0.00	7.14	0.00	0.00	0.00
Rotherham	91.30	4.35	0.00	4.35	0.00	0.00
Sheffield	89.20	0.00	0.00	10.80	0.00	0.00
Wakefield	96.67	0.00	0.00	3.33	0.00	0.00
York	90.00	0.00	10.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Regional total	93.53	0.29	2.63	2.67	0.00	0.88
North West						
Blackburn	96.43	0.00	3.57	0.00	0.00	0.00
Blackpool	96.15	3.85	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Bolton	90.00	0.00	5.00	5.00	0.00	0.00
Bury	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Cheshire	96.30	0.00	0.00	3.70	0.00	0.00
Cumbria	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Halton/Warrington	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Knowsley	94.44	0.00	0.00	5.56	0.00	0.00
Lancashire	91.55	0.00	0.00	2.82	5.63	0.00
Liverpool	88.24	0.00	0.00	9.80	1.96	0.00
Manchester City Council	65.96	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	34.04
Oldham	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Rochdale	83.61	0.00	0.00	16.39	0.00	0.00
Salford	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sefton	97.40	0.00	2.60	0.00	0.00	0.00
Stockport	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
St. Helens	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Tameside	93.75	6.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Trafford	86.67	0.00	6.67	6.67	0.00	0.00
Wigan	87.07	0.00	0.00	4.31	0.00	8.62
Wirral	94.59	0.00	0.00	5.41	0.00	0.00
Regional total	93.44	0.48	0.85	2.84	0.36	2.03
North East						
Darlington	88.24	5.88	0.00	5.88	0.00	0.00
Durham	98.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.83	0.00
Gateshead	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Hartlepool	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland/South Tees	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—
Newcastle upon Tyne	16.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	84.00
North Tyneside	55.26	5.26	0.00	0.00	0.00	39.47
Northumberland	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
South Tyneside	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Stockton	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sunderland	97.83	2.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Regional total	77.77	1.21	0.00	0.53	0.17	11.22

Percentage

Ethnicity	White	Mixed	Asian or Asian British	Black or Black British	Chinese or Other ethnic group	Not known
Wales						
Bridgend	91.67	0.00	0.00	8.33	0.00	0.00
Caerphilly and Blaunau Gwent	96.00	0.00	0.00	4.00	0.00	0.00
Cardiff	93.62	2.13	0.00	4.26	0.00	0.00
Carmarthen	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Ceredigion/Dyfed and Powys/Mid Wales	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Conwy and Denbighshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Flintshire and Wrexham	96.15	0.00	10.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Gwynedd and Ynys Môn	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Merthyr	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Monmouthshire and Torfaen	94.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	5.88
Neath Port Talbot	92.31	0.00	7.69	0.00	0.00	0.00
Newport	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Pembrokeshire	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Rhondda Cynon Taff	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Swansea	73.33	3.33	3.33	0.00	0.00	20.00
Vale of Glamorgan	91.67	0.00	0.00	8.33	0.00	0.00
Total for Wales	95.55	0.34	1.31	1.56	0.00	1.62

' No information

Private Security Industry

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations have been received regarding the consultation paper on the Government's proposals for regulation of the private security industry in England and Wales opposing the *(a)* regulation of in-house employees, *(b)* regulation of security system installers and *(c)* security companies; and if he will list the organisations making representations in each category. [155466]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Around 180 responses were received to the White Paper "The Government's proposals for Regulation of the Private Security Industry in England and Wales" (CM 4254) published in March 1999. Those respondents opposed to the regulation of in-house employees were:

Theatrical Management Association and Society of London Theatre

Museums and Galleries Commission

The National Trust

Association of Leading Visitor Attractions

A member of the public.

The Theatrical Management Association and Society of London Theatre was also opposed to the regulation of security system installers. No respondents indicated that they were opposed to the regulation of security companies.

HM Inspectors

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who will appoint the next HM Inspector of Prisons and HM Inspector of Probation. [155104]

Mr. Boateng: Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen, who is advised on the appointment by the Home Secretary. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Probation is appointed by the Home Secretary. We are following the guidelines of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in recruiting for the two posts.

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has revised the terms of reference of HM Inspector of Prisons to include the inspection of the Prison Service. [155105]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The remit of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons is fixed by statute. In summary it is to inspect prisons in England and Wales, reporting on the treatment of prisoners and conditions in prisons, and to report to the Home Secretary on related matters as the Home Secretary directs. The inspection of the Prison Service as a whole, including Prison Service Headquarters, falls outside the Chief Inspector's statutory remit. The proposed terms of reference for Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, which have been sent to the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee and other Members of this House, do however make clear that the Chief Inspector's responsibilities include reporting on the impact of management decisions within the Prison Service on prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners and, as the Home Secretary directs, on matters concerning Prison Service Headquarters which could impact on prison conditions.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled by Ministers since 1 January. [155240]

Mr. Straw: Ministerial meetings with hon. Members that I and Ministers in my Department have had to cancel since 1 January 2001 are as follows:

Date	Meeting
9 January 2001	Home Secretary meeting with John McDonnell MP, Alan Keen MP and Peter Bottomley MP
1 February 2001	Lord Bassam meeting with Gwyn Prosser MP
26 February 2001	Charles Clarke meeting with Dr. Julian Lewis MP
27 February 2001	Charles Clarke meeting with Sir Richard Body MP
20 March 2001	Mike O'Brien meeting with Gerry Steinberg MP

Other meetings with hon. Members have had to be rescheduled from their original date but have subsequently taken place.

Police Funding

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list funding allocations from his Department to *(a)* the Metropolitan police and *(b)* the Borough of Camden for each year since May 1997. [150960]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Home Department has made, or for 2001–02 will make, the following funding to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in each year since April 1997:

Home Office specific grant

Financial year	£
1997–98	900,344,546
1998–99	931,229,096
1999–2000	949,070,118
2000–01	956,094,652
2000–02	1,007,548,948

In addition, Revenue Support Grant is paid by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR).

Loan charge grant

Financial year	£
1997–98	6,049,591
1998–99	5,916,813
1999–2000	4,783,118
2000–01	4,331,583
2001–02	4,387,349

Capital grant

Financial year	£
1997–98	24,774,000
1998–99	21,892,000
1999–2000	21,892,000
2000–01	22,554,000
2001–02	22,803,000

Crime Fighting Fund

Financial year	£
2000–01	12,004,571
2001–02	37,365,685

An allowance for training costs of £7,000 per new Metropolitan Police Service recruit is included in the figure for each year.

Payments due in 2001–02 will change to reflect the actual pattern of recruitment, if it is different from the even distribution assumed for the purposes of the table. The Metropolitan Police Service is deferring 108 Crime Fighting Fund recruits from its 2000–01 allocation into 2001–02.

Other Grants

Date		£
24 August 1999	Beacon scheme	94,000
3 October 2000	Robbery grant	9,100,000
4 December 2000	Execution of warrants[1]	924,557

[1] Responsibility for the execution of warrants was to transfer to the Lord Chancellor's Department in October 2000. The transfer was deferred until April 2001 and appropriate grant was distributed to all police authorities.

Firearms Grant

Date	£
1997–98	133,128
1998–99	44,772

Grants were paid to each force to help meet costs incurred in collection and destruction of handguns.

Crime Reduction Programme

Date	£
1999–2000 to 2001–02	8,395,460

This is the total allocation to the Metropolitan Police Service under the Reducing Burglary Initiative (£6.84 million) and the Targeted Policing Initiative (£1.55 million) rounds 1 and 2.

Allocation of funds within the Metropolitan police area is a matter for the Commissioner. The Commissioner has informed me that the budget provided to the local commander for the borough of Camden is to help meet the priorities identified in the Metropolitan Police Service policing and performance plan such as the reduction of crime and disorder and diversity objectives.

Camden borough Budgets

Date	£
1997–98	34,160,000
1998–99	34,140,000
1999–2000	35,342,000
2000–01	36,482,000

The devolved budget for the borough of Camden in 2001–02 is not yet available.

In addition, policing in Camden, and in all other boroughs, draws on a large number of specialist services and support controlled centrally such as scientific support, murder review, inspection and review, territorial policing support, public order, specialist search dogs and criminal justice.

From the Crime Reduction Programme provision, several schemes are associated with the borough of Camden—the Camden Safety Net violence against women project (£275,000); Camden Town centre extension and centralised control room (£598,000); a further three reductions in burglary schemes (£1517,000). Camden will also benefit from a portion of £598,000 allocated to a multi-borough project covering Camden, Islington and Southwark under the Targeted Policing Initiative and from £287,000 allocated to a scheme of the Targeted Policing Initiative that will benefit all boroughs.

S. P. Hinduja

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have benefited from the change in naturalisation policy announced in paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper, 'Fairer, Faster, Firmer: a Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum'. [155820]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* As I indicated in answer to questions from the hon. Member on 5 February 2001, *Official Report,* column 434W, the change of policy foreshadowed in paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper has yet to be introduced. No statistics are kept which would enable identification of any cases which might have benefited from anticipation of this change.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will conduct an investigation into how Mr. S. P. Hinduja knew of the announcement on naturalisation policy in paragraph 10.7 of the White Paper, 'Fairer, Faster, Firmer: A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum' prior to the White Paper's publication, as set out in paragraph 5.21 of the Hammond report (HC 287); if a Minister or official in his Department informed Mr. Hinduja of the announcement prior to publication; and if he will make a statement. [155816]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* Sir Anthony Hammond has already carried out a thorough review of the issues surrounding the application for naturalisation of Mr. S. P. Hinduja. I do not think any further inquiry would be fruitful.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 29 March 2001

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies (North Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Devon constituency, the effects on North Devon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155906]

The Solicitor-General: The North Devon constituency falls within the geographical area covered by the Devon and Cornwall Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). In November 1999, in line with national policy, CPS Devon and Cornwall, in liaison with the police and the North Devon magistrates court, introduced procedures based on the Narey proposals. All adult defendants charged with a criminal offence in North Devon should make their first appearance before Barnstaple magistrates court within eight days.

A CPS Crown court Unit based in Exeter deals with serious crime at Exeter and Barnstaple Crown courts. The CPS has set as a goal the better handling of serious cases in the interests of justice and the victims. From 15 January 2001, a fast-track procedure was adopted which will ensure that offences, which must be heard in the Crown court, normally come before a judge within eight clear days of their first hearing in the magistrates court.

The CPS together with other agencies has been working to speed up youth justice, particularly Persistent Youth Offenders. The time taken for Persistent Youth Cases has fallen in the CPS Devon and Cornwall Area from 141 days in 1997 to 60 days in 2000. This places Devon and Cornwall at the top of the national league.

All these changes illustrate the government's successful policy of speeding up the criminal justice system.

On 30 November 2000, the Exeter office of CPS Devon and Cornwall altered its structure so as to fall in line with proposals in the Glidewell Review. This represents a policy of more effective working between the police and prosecutors and will enable the CPS to place greater emphasis on the more serious criminal cases.

Action and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office do not directly affect the hon. Member's constituency.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to release for *(a)* parliamentary and *(b)* public scrutiny the papers held by the New Millennium Experience Company. [155472]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* As a non-departmental public body, the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) will release to the Public Records Office papers across the spectrum of the Millennium Experience project that are potentially of historic interest or significance. Other papers will be passed to my Department for archiving. NMEC's arrangements regarding the PRO and the Department have been informed by discussions between NMEC and my Department to ensure that public sector archiving guidelines and requirements are followed, and that they have due regard to NMEC's status as a Companies Acts company.

The Department and NMEC fall within the scope of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, and will respond to specific requests for information in accordance with that Code.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Conference on Research Infrastructure

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by whom the UK Government were represented at the conference on Research Infrastructure held in Strasbourg in September 2000. [153673]

Ms Hewitt: The UK was represented by a senior official of the Office of Science and Technology who in turn was representing my noble Friend the Minister for Science.

Insolvent Companies

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions directors of insolvent companies have been disqualified under section 6 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986; and what this is as a percentage of the total number of directors. [156006]

Dr. Howells: As at 28 February 2001 there had been a total of 9,734 directors disqualified since 1986 when the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 commenced. A further 1,721 cases are awaiting a court hearing of which 90 per cent. are expected to result in disqualification orders. The exact total numbers of directors returned as serving in office at any given time is not available (because, for example, some individuals hold more than one directorship) but an approximate number is 3.6 million.

Small Building Contractors (Regulations)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has to improve regulations for small building contractors. [153509]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has no plans to increase regulation specifically for small building contractors.

Universal Banking Services

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress in establishing the universal bank. [155914]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Good progress is being made with the development of Universal Banking Services. Discussions with the banks are at an advanced stage and I hope they will be resolved shortly.

Windfarm (Northumberland)

Mr. Lammy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on AMEC Border Wind's proposal to build a windfarm at Humble Hill, Kielder, Northumberland. [156637]

Mr. Byers: I have today, reluctantly, decided that consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to AMEC Border Wind's application to build a 80 MW windfarm at Humber Hill, Kielder, Northumberland cannot be given. However keen the Government are to see new wind projects, we are not in the business of taking risks with aircrew lives.

My decision was taken only after extensive discussions over a period of years to try to resolve the difficulties.

Despite these protracted discussions and the willingness of everyone to try to reach agreement and enable the windfarm to proceed, the underlying concern of the Ministry of Defence could not be removed. That concern rested on the effect the proposed windfarm would have on the operation at the Spadeadam Electronic Warfare Tactics Range (EWTR).

The EWTR lies to the south of the site of the proposed windfarm and aircraft approaching it would have had to fly over the windfarm. There is no other route and the proposed windfarm would interfere with radar and with low flying, particularly at times of poor visibility.

The MOD informed me that facilities at the EWTR are unique, as there is no other site like this in Europe, so it is imperative for the front line training of RAF crews and therefore the tactical training value of the range must be safeguarded. Safety is of paramount importance. DTI and MOD are working closely together to find solutions to the problem of developing commercial windfarms, both onshore and offshore, while preserving the UK's defence interests.

This decision was due to the unique local circumstances and is not a general precedent. Our policy remains that each application will be considered on its merits, but in doing so it is quite right that we should look carefully at concerns over a particular siting. It also remains our intention that 10 per cent. of our electricity supply should be generated by renewable resources by 2010.

Copies of the Press Notice and the decision letter are being places in the Library of the House.

Electricity Security and Stability

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress the steering group on electricity security and stability issues has made in following up the recommendations made by the consultants Merz and McLellan in the White Paper "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation" and the Government response to the fourth and fifth reports of the Trade and Industry Committee, Cm 4071. [156550]

Mr. Hain: The steering group, chaired by my Department, published its final report today. The conclusions take into account the responses to a consultation paper issued by the group in April 2000, which set out their initial conclusions. The group concluded that the further work recommended by Merz and McLellan or raised in the responses to the consultation exercise has been undertaken or is in hand. In the responses to the consultation document, there was general agreement with the steering group's recommendation that following the introduction of New Electricity Trading Arrangements (NETA), the Regulator—the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem)—should keep under review system security to ensure that the electricity and gas systems remain robust, that roles and operational responsibilities are clearly identified, and that adequate emergency procedures are in place. Further work will therefore be taken forward by Ofgem in consultation with interested parties. The group's report also addresses the detailed points raised during the consultation exercise.

Copies of the report are being circulated, in the first instance, to all those who responded to the consultation document. I am placing copies in the Libraries of the House. The document, and the earlier consultation paper, are available on the DTI website at http://www.dti.gov.uk/energy/ and on request from Natalia Davie, NEP, DTI, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET (Phone: 0207 215 6488).

Overseas Investment (Human Rights)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how his Department ensures that investments made by UK companies overseas are in projects that comply with the international human rights commitments to which the Government are a signatory. [155138]

Mr. Caborn: Advice on the prevailing market conditions is made available to UK companies on request. This reflects the Government's position on human rights elements, for example on the desirability of trade with certain countries. It is however for UK companies to judge whether to bid for projects or invest in particular markets.

More generally, the Government have sought to raise the profile of human rights considerations in the operations of companies overseas, for example in promoting the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

Export Control and Non-Proliferation Bill

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the draft Export Control and Non-Proliferation Bill. [156094]

Mr. Byers: I am today publishing for consultation the draft Export Control and Non-Proliferation Bill. Copies of the "Consultation on Draft Legislation: the Export Control and Non-Proliferation Bill" (CM5091) will be laid before the House and will be available at the Vote Office. Copies will also be available from the Stationery Office and on my Department's website.

The draft Bill replaces in full the export control powers in the Import, Export and Customs (Powers) Defence Act 1939. Export controls currently imposed under the 1939 Act include both strategic export controls which are the responsibility of my Department and export controls on cultural objects which are the responsibility of the

Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Bill is intended both to provide for improved accountability for and transparency in export controls and to provide a more up-to-date and comprehensive legislative framework for export controls.

The draft Bill establishes the purposes for which export controls can be imposed and will provide for parliamentary scrutiny of secondary legislation made under it. These measures will meet recommendations made by Sir Richard Scott in his report of the Inquiry into the Export of Defence Equipment and Dual-Use Goods to Iraq and Related Prosecutions. The Bill also provides for annual reports to be laid before Parliament.

The draft Bill provides Government with new powers to impose controls on the transfer of military and dual-use technology by intangible means and the provisions of related technical assistance, and on activities connected with international trade (usually referred to as trafficking and brokering) between overseas countries in military or dual-use equipment.

The Introduction to the Bill in Part I of the "Consultation on draft legislation" sets out the controls which the Government propose to introduce in secondary legislation to be made under these new powers. These are as follows:

Controls on the electronic transfer of military technology in line with similar controls already used for dual-use technology in the new European Dual-Use Items Regulation which came into force in September 2000.

Controls on the transfer of technology by any intangible means and the provision of technical services intended for weapons of mass destruction and related missile programmes. These controls will meet the requirements of a European Union Joint Action agreed in June 2000.

Controls on the trafficking and brokering of weapons and related equipment to any destination. In addition controls will be introduced which will be used to prohibit trafficking and brokering to embargoed destinations and trafficking and brokering in types of equipment whose export we have already banned because of evidence of their use in torture.

The Bill will also allow for the imposition of export licensing procedures and includes a power to require the provision of certain information which is intended primarily to ensure that the Government can meet their reporting obligations to international bodies, such as the UN Conventional Arms Register. The Bill allows for the maximum penalty for offences in respect of matters controlled under the powers in the Bill to be raised from the current maximum level of seven years' imprisonment to a maximum of 10 years.

Views are invited from all those with an interest in either strategic export controls or export controls on cultural objects by Thursday 24 May.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response the Government are making to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan; and if she will make a statement. [156479]

Clare Short: Afghanistan is currently suffering from its worst drought in 30 years. This, combined with continuing conflict and the absence of significant economic recovery, has led to dramatic deterioration in the humanitarian situation. The UN indicates that about 12 million people (over half the country's population) have been affected by the drought; 3 to 4 million of them seriously. One million people are thought to be at risk of famine. Neighbouring countries are becoming increasingly unreceptive to population flows from Afghanistan and there have been reports of border closures over recent months.

We have continued to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan where this can be done effectively. This financial year, we have provided some £10.5 million through UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs. As well as drought relief assistance, this includes a longer-term programme of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan population, both in Afghanistan itself and to Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. We intend to continue with this programme in the coming year, and stand ready to respond to additional needs as required.

We have also reviewed our policy of not financing NGO activities that involved UK nationals, because of the personal security risks. There have been no serious security incidents involving expatriates for some time. With this in mind, we have decided to consider funding on a case by case basis for NGOs that send UK nationals into the country. As before, the appraisal proposals will continue to include an assessment of the agency's personnel security arrangements. Only if these arrangements are judged to be appropriate would the agency be eligible for funding.

Mine Clearance

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the organisations to which the Government have given money for the purpose of mine clearance in each year since 1996, and, in each case, the amount received by each organisation. [155997]

Clare Short: The table gives the figures requested:

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
The HALO Trust	1,417,600	1,092,000	1,751,468	4,166,000
UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan (UNOCHA)	500,000	2,000,000	—	1,700,000
Mines Advisory Group (MAG)	1,033,307	951,908	2,204,000	2,999,000
Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) (via UNDP)	—	—	—	187,500
Government of Egypt	500,000	87,308	—	—
UN Mine Action Centre (UNMAC) (Sarajevo)	220,000	—	—	—
Government of Yemen (via UN Development Programme) (UNDP)	47,772	—	—	—
International Trust Fund for De-mining	—	—	—	500,000
Croatian Mine Advisory Centre	—	—	—	100,000
Government of Jordan	—	—	—	581,000
Organisation of American States (Nicaragua de-mining)	—	—	—	283,000

£

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
United Nations Mine Action Service (Sierra Leone)	—	—	—	4,500
United Nations Mine Action Service (Kosovo)	—	—	—	489,600
BACTEC (Kosovo)	—	—	—	691,000
DSL (Kosovo)	—	—	—	1,290,000
ELS (Kosovo)	—	—	—	833,000
UNMAS (Global)	—	—	—	29,000
UNICEF	—	—	—	1,000,000
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian De-mining (GICHD)	—	—	—	275,138
Cranfield Mine Action	—	—	—	74,000
Warwick University	—	—	—	165,000
AIGIS	—	—	—	3,600
Landmine Monitor	—	—	—	185,000

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much was spent by Government on *(a)* humanitarian mine clearance, *(b)* commercial mine clearance, *(c)* military initiative mine clearance, *(d)* mine awareness, *(e)* victim assistance and *(f)* research and development for mine clearance in each year since 1996. [155893]

Clare Short: Disbursements are as follows:

£

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
(a) Humanitarian mine clearance[1]	[4]4,288,860	[4]4,149,642	[4]3,990,468	12,300,000
	[5]65,082	[5]200,000	[5]250,000	[5]35,000
(b) Military initiative mine[2]	—	—	205,000	—
	—	—	[5]125,000	—
(c) Mine awareness	70,000	[5]250,000	—	1,292,339
(d) Research and development	—	376,673	548,343	500,000

[1] Includes clearance of anti-personnel landmines and other unexploded ordnance as well as mines awareness. As programmes are often integrated separate costs of awareness are not available.
[2] Military mine clearance have taken place in the Balkans since 1992. Military advisers have been attached to UN Mine Action Centres assisting in the development of mine action programmes. They have also supervised the mine clearance carried out by the Entity Armed Forces and provided mine awareness to local populations. The Mine Information Training Centre (MITC) at Minley has provided mine awareness training to over 30,000 people. The MOD has also continued to monitor minefields in the Falkland Islands. This work is part of the wider responsibilities of those involved and is impossible to cost accurately.
[3] Includes integrated mine awareness activities.
[4] Payment made from Foreign and Commonwealth Office funds.
[5] Value of surplus equipment re-deployed to mine clearance projects.

Notes:
1. Figures for 2000–01 will be available June 2001.
2. Expenditure by Department of International Development (DFID) unless otherwise indicated. DFID has not funded commercial mine clearance. There are no records of UK commercial demining activities currently available in Department of Trade and Industry.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what Government expenditure was on humanitarian mine clearance for each year since 1996, broken down by country. [155897]

Clare Short: Government expenditure on mine action programmes is indicated in the table:

£

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Afghanistan	1,050,000	2,106,500	920,000	1,900,000
Albania	—	—	—	50,070
Angola	—	—	—	—
Bosnia	—	—	—	—
Cambodia	1,058,700	689,686	693,000	2,274,000
Chad	—	—	—	—
Croatia	—	—	—	100,000
Egypt	500,000	87,308	—	—
Eritrea/Ethiopia	—	—	—	—
Georgia	—	—	220,781	—
Guinea Bissau	—	—	—	138,860
Iraq	785,000	658,972	740,000	451,764
Jordan	—	—	—	587,156
Laos	148,307	101,250	500,000	833,351
Lebanon	—	—	—	—

£

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Mozambique	408,900	487,500	362,500	—
Nicaragua	—	—	—	283,000
Thailand	—	—	—	—
Yemen	47,772	—	—	—
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Kosovo)	275,000	—	—	5,664,339
Global/Regional	—	[1]200,000	[2]375,000	90,000

[1] Foreign and Commonwealth Office funded activities.
[2] Value of surplus equipment re-deployed by DFID and MOD to mine clearance projects.
Notes:
1. Figures for 2000–01 will be available June 2001.
2. Expenditure by Department for International Development unless otherwise stated.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of funds made available through the UN Mine Action Service to support the work of the Croatian Mine Action Centre in 1999 to 2001 was expended on UNMAS administrative costs. [155896]

Clare Short: Of the £250,000 made available towards the United Nations Mines Assistance Programme in Croatia, UNMAS administrative costs were 3 per cent.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of grants to commercial organisations for humanitarian mine clearance in Kosovo has been taken as profit. [155996]

Clare Short: Under the terms of the contracts between DFID and the commercial organisations engaged for mine clearance work in Kosovo, profit details are commercially confidential. DFID operates well established procurement and contractual procedures designed to ensure value for money.

Palestinian National Authority

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much funding is provided by the European Union to the Palestine National Authority for education. [155788]

Clare Short: The European Commission advise that since 1991 they have committed a total of 172.5 million euro to support education development initiatives with the Palestinian National Authority.

Recipient Countries

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries which received UK overseas aid in each year since 1990, indicating the amount of aid given in each case. [155785]

Clare Short: Since 1990 a total of 156 countries received official development assistance (oda) or official aid (oa) from the UK.

A copy of the full list of countries and amounts given in each year will be placed in the Library of the House. More information on international development is held in "Statistics on International Development 1995/96–1999/2000", a copy of which is also available in the Library of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Numbers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions since 2 May 1997 his Department has issued a correction to police numbers statistics. [155843]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The statistical bulletin for the September 2000 figures was reissued on 16 January 2001 as a result of receiving revised police strength figures from the Metropolitan police. There have been three other publications where corrections to the figures for earlier periods have been made in the light of revised figures submitted by the police: figures for March 1998 were corrected in the statistical bulletin number 14/99, published on 26 August 1999, entitled "Police Service Personnel England and Wales, as at 31 March 1999", after Sussex corrected their data for that year. Revised figures for March 2000 were included in both the original and revised bulletins for September 2000, after the number of secondments to central services were corrected when double counting was discovered. This originated from the National Criminal Intelligence Service return being completed incorrectly. The revised bulletin for September 2000 was entitled "Police Service Strength England and Wales", published on 16 January 2001, and was statistical bulletin number 2/01. Figures for September 2000 had to be adjusted when the Metropolitan police reported that officers on loan to adjacent forces had been deducted from their figures twice. They also provided revised figures for ethnic minority officers. A revised bulletin for September 2000 was issued, with details as given in (2).

The forthcoming bulletin to be published in June will contain revised Northumbria strength figures for 30 September 2000 that became apparent during the preparation of the 30 January 2001 figures. It should be noted that it is a standard practice to include corrections in statistical publications when improved data are provided by data sources. Indeed, this practice is quite commonplace, although the corrections are minor in the vast majority of cases.

Voluntary Organisations (Government Funding)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total amount of Government funding for voluntary and not-for-profit organisations in each of the last 10 years. [153939]

Mr. Boateng: I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Probation Officers (Middlesex)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many probation officers are serving in Middlesex; what his Department's target complement is; and how many served in Middlesex in each of the past five years. [155935]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* The available information is as follows:

Middlesex probation officers in post

31 December	*Number of persons*[1]
1995	278
1996	263
1997	260
1998	260
1999	262
2000	254

[1] Whole-time equivalent

Middlesex will become part of the area of the new London Local Probation Board on 1 April, and that body will determine its staffing needs. Across England and Wales it is planned to recruit over 1,000 trainee probation officers in the next 12 months.

Prisoners

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were *(a)* aged over 65 years, *(b)* required major surgery and *(c)* had significant impairments or disabilities in each of the past five years; and what plans he has to make special arrangements for prisoners in these categories. [155674]

Mr. Boateng: The number of prisoners aged over 65 in each of the past five years is as follows:

Year	*Number*
1996	281
1997	317
1998	354
1999	427
2000	472

The number of prisoners who require major surgery or have significant impairments or disabilities is not collected centrally. Prisons, and their local health authorities, are currently assessing the health needs of prisoners, identifying appropriate services to meet those needs and effective ways of delivery. The aim of the needs assessment process is to provide prisoners with access to the same range and quality of services that the general public receive.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to speed the assessment of discretionary life prisoners and to ensure greater consistency in approach, with particular reference to *(a)* sentence length and *(b)* treatment programmes for sex offenders. [155675]

Mr. Boateng: Discretionary lifers, particularly those set a short tariff by the trial judge, are transferred from a local prison to a first stage lifer prison as soon as possible after sentencing (tariff being the minimum period the lifer is required to serve to meet the requirements of retribution and deterrence). In order to enhance the working of the current system, the Government are investing an extra £500,000 in the next financial year to fund work in local prisons with new and potential lifers. This will enable speedier assessment and identification of the risk factors which lifers need to address.

In addition, the Government are providing funding for nearly 800 extra lifer places, together with additional resources to increase the number of places available on the sex offender treatment programme. The Prison Service is also to introduce a simpler and more streamlined planning system for all life sentence prisoners which should ensure greater consistency of approach and improve the management of risk assessment and risk reduction as a lifer progresses through the system.

The Prison Service fully recognises the need to give particular priority to the needs of short tariff lifers. The aim is to manage the system so that the Parole Board can release such lifers on or near tariff expiry where it is satisfied that their risk factors have been addressed and release is consistent with the overriding need to protect the public.

S. P. Hinduja

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Mr. S. P. Hinduja was physically present in the United Kingdom on 22 October 1993; and if he will make a statement. [156007]

Mrs. Roche: The full circumstances of Mr. S. P. Hinduja's naturalisation application are detailed in Sir Anthony Hammond's Review which was published on 9 March 2001.

The question of whether Mr. Hinduja was physically present in the United Kingdom on the date in question is covered in paragraphs 5.153 to 5.155 of the review.

Probation Directorate

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of staff in the probation directorate have operational experience. [155155]

Mr. Boateng: 23 per cent. of staff in the National Probation Directorate have operational experience. These include the national director, who is a former chief probation officer, two of the six strategic heads, and one chief probation officer, one deputy chief probation officer, thirteen assistant chief probation officers, seven senior probation officers, two principal psychologists, and a seconded chief inspector of police.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of asylum refusals from applicants from *(a)* Somalia, *(b)* Sudan, *(c)* Iraq, *(d)* Sri Lanka, *(e)* Congo and *(f)* Iran have been refused because of non-compliance in each of the last six months; and if he will make a statement. [155596]

Mrs. Roche: A non-compliance refusal is generated when the applicant fails without reasonable explanation to make a prompt and full disclosure of material facts either orally, or in writing or otherwise to assist the Secretary of State to the full in establishing the facts of the asylum case, for example not attending an interview, and any information provided does not establish that the applicant is not a refugee. In these circumstances the application falls to be refused under paragraphs 340 and 336 of HC 395 (as amended).

A nationality breakdown of non-compliance refusals is not available prior to October 2000.

The available information is given in the table.

	Refusals		
Nationality	*'''Total*	*''''Non-compliance*	*Percentage of total*
October 2000			
Somalia	300	250	85
Sudan	25	15	65
Iraq	430	300	70
Sri Lanka	500	215	43
Congo	35	20	60
Iran	320	170	53
November 2000			
Somalia	350	235	67
Sudan	35	20	50
Iraq	495	295	60
Sri Lanka	715	310	43
Congo	85	30	33
Iran	450	210	47
December 2000			
Somalia	275	215	78
Sudan	35	15	43
Iraq	470	220	47
Sri Lanka	665	185	28
Congo	75	7	9
Iran	395	145	36
January 2001			
Somalia	295	200	68
Sudan	70	10	13
Iraq	1,030	450	44
Sri Lanka	1,065	220	21
Congo	65	20	30
Iran	775	250	32
February 2001			
Somalia	300	205	68
Sudan	70	15	2
Iraq	690	225	33
Sri Lanka	1,245	155	13
Congo	75	22	30
Iran	645	175	27

[1] Figures (other than percentages) rounded to the nearest 5.

[2] Non-compliance refusals (under paragraph 340 of the immigration rules and paragraph 180F prior to October 1994) are for failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim within a reasonable period.

[3] Outcome of initial decisions only.

[4] Provisional figures.

Discharged Prisoners

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what range of payments in cash and in kind is available to discharged prisoners by way of *(a)* grants, *(b)* loans and *(c)* specific access to social security payments. [155553]

Mr. Boateng: A discharge grant is payable to most prisoners in order to ensure that the prisoner has sufficient money to meet immediate needs on release. It is not a substitute for social security payments. The current rates are:

	Standard
	£
25 and older	46.75
18–24	37.00
Higher	94.40

The higher rate is paid only if there is a need to seek, obtain and pay for accommodation. It is only paid to prisoners with no accommodation arranged in advance, if this arises through no fault of the prisoner. Except those being deported or removed under Immigration Act 1988 powers, discharged prisoners receive payment or a travel warrant for their journey home. If they have not received a discharge grant, they may be given an appropriate subsistence allowance for their journey. Prisoners who do not have their own clothing may receive appropriate clothing on release.

Discharged prisoners are generally treated in the same way as any other claimants for social security payments and must satisfy the eligibility criteria for each benefit claimed. The available benefits include Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Income Support, Housing Benefit and crisis loans and community care grants from the Social Fund. Exceptionally, the JSA regulations contain specific provisions for those released from detention. They may be treated as available for work for a period of seven days commencing with the date of their release. They may also be treated as actively seeking employment for the first full week of their JSA claim if they have been treated as available for work for part of that week.

Fire Services

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from fire services that have installed virtual reality training systems in the last two years on the effectiveness of the training; and what evaluation his Department has made of its effectiveness. [155778]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am told no such representations have been received. Fire brigades are encouraged by the Home Office to improve fire-fighting techniques by undertaking virtual reality training, the effectiveness of which is assessed by individual brigades and reviewed by Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate during brigade inspections.

Emergency Response

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what occupational standard of competence is required of senior members of the fire and police services in respect of directing response to major emergencies. [155781]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Fire Brigade command course sets out the requirements for brigade commanders, including planning and directing responses to major emergencies. Underpinning competences which are developed are the qualities of leadership, interpersonal skill, analytical processing and dynamism. The competences trained for include: decision making involving longer term contingency planning; decision making after call-out and before arrival at a major incident; decision making on arrival, taking over command and the handing over process; and post-incident longer term decisions.

Current Fire Service training on major emergencies is based on guidance prepared by the Government's Civil Emergencies Adviser and is comparable with that of the other emergency services. National occupational standards for operational command, which will include response to major emergencies, are in an advanced state of development.

Occupational standards for the police service will be set by the Police National Training Organisation (NTO) once that is established. The Police NTO received recognition from the Department for Education and Employment earlier this month and is due to be incorporated in May 2001. In the meantime work is being done on the development of competences for various roles, including the management of major incidents. Police National Training provide training in the management of disasters and civil emergencies which can be taken either separately or as part of the strategic command course, which must be undertaken by officers who wish to seek appointment to the rank of assistant chief constable or commander.

British Citizenship

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the procedures for dealing with applications for British citizenship. [156549]

Mrs. Roche: During April 2001, the Integrated Casework Directorate (ICD) of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) will devote some of its resources to starting applications for British citizenship on receipt. All cases, at both ends of the queue for consideration, will be considered using new procedures and working practices. New applicants will be asked to supply supporting documentation at the time of application and to respond more quickly to requests for further information than has previously been the case. The aim of these changes is to eliminate the current backlog of nationality applications by attacking it from both ends. This approach has been successfully used elsewhere in IND, for example in the production of travel documents.

ICD will have achieved its target of 91,000 decisions by the end of March 2001, which is more than twice the total for 1997. By the end of February 2001, the average waiting time for all types of citizenship applications had fallen to exactly 12 months, as compared with nearly 20 months at the same time last year. These improvements flow from significantly increased investment in the system and the new service delivery culture now becoming established in the ICD.

Because of these improvements ICD is now in a position to deal with the remaining backlog of work from both ends, cutting out unnecessary handling. This approach has proven very successful in other parts of IND's work. More resources will continue to be devoted to those applications that have been waiting longest, but the ICD's intention is to reduce the waiting time for all applications to an average of six months by April 2002 and to three months by April 2004.

DEFENCE

Warship Support Agency

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the formation of the Warship Support Agency; and what key targets have been set for 2001–02. [156486]

Mr. Spellar: On 2 April 2001 the Warship Support Agency (WSA) will be established as a Defence Agency through the merger of the Ships Support Agency (SSA) and the majority of the Naval Bases and Supply Agency (NBSA). The WSA will be responsible for providing responsive and cost-effective warship support to the Royal Navy and other customers. The WSA's first Chief Executive (CE) will be Mr. John Coles, currently CE SSA, who will initially be located at Foxhill, Bath together with the WSA Corporate Directors. The WSA Agency will employ some 9,000 civilian and 3,500 military staff at various other locations throughout the United Kingdom, including Bath and Bristol, HM Naval Bases Clyde, Devonport and Portsmouth, and HM Mooring and Marine Salvage Depot, Pembroke Dock.

The formation of the Agency will remove internal business boundaries between the SSA and the NBSA, creating a new organisation that will be more able to manage warship support coherently and be more responsive to customer requirements. The WSA corporate aim is to provide "World Class Support to a World Class Navy".

The Chief Executive has been sent the following Key Targets for the first year of operation:

Key Target 1: Quantity

To achieve 95 per cent. of Available Vessel days.

To increase the provision of Single Living Accommodation (SLA) at Grades 1 and 2 standard to 25 per cent. of bed nights provided, recognising the long-term nature of capital works necessary to upgrade accommodation.

Key Target 2: Timeliness

To achieve the deep maintenance (Upkeep) programme with less than 7 per cent. overrun, and to achieve 95 per cent. of Capability Upgrades within target date and to an acceptance standard.

Key Target 3: Quality

To provide a quality of service that meets the ISO 9000 standard, and to achieve 95 per cent. or better customer satisfaction rating of service delivery against agreed requirements.

Key Target 4: Cost/Efficiency

To make the necessary Agency contribution to the Defence Logistics Organisation's 20 per cent. target reduction of output costs by 2005, while continuing to deliver and, where appropriate, improve the quality of outputs.

I am placing a copy of the Agency's Framework Document in the Library of the House.

Sonar Systems

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department will select prime contractors to provide the new sonar systems for the Type 23 frigates and Hunt class mine counter-measures vessels. [156485]

Dr. Moonie: I am pleased to be able to announce that the competitions for these two important new sonar systems have now been completed and that Thomson Marconi Sonar Ltd. (TMSL) has been selected as prime contractor for both. We intend to be in a position to place contracts for the sonars in April.

Sonar 2087 will provide our Type 23 anti-submarine warfare frigates with the ability to detect, classify and track submarines beyond the submarine's ability to engage forces under protection. This advanced system will assure our detection advantage against modern nuclear and conventionally powered submarines. Following trials of the initial ship system, it will enter service in 2006.

Sonar 2193 has been designed to replace the existing Sonar 193M mine-hunting sonar in our Hunt class mine counter-measures vessels. This new system will maintain the effectiveness of our forces in this increasingly important area. The first equipment will be installed in a trials vessel next year and the system will enter service in early 2004.

At the same time, we are taking the opportunity to replace the Command System in the Hunt Class. The new system will be developed from the NAUTIS system which is already fitted in our Sandown class ships.

These orders will safeguard jobs at Thomson Marconi's sites at Cheadle Heath in Cheshire and at Templecombe in Somerset, as well as at a number of sub-contractor sites around the UK. The work will maintain UK industry's capabilities in this important technological area and, for the mine-hunting sonar, could lead to considerable export opportunities.

Service Personnel (Communications)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for how long *(a)* 20 minutes of free telephone calls each week, *(b)* free e-blueys and *(c)* free e-mail facilities have been available to service personnel on (i) operations and (ii) exercises lasting more than two months; and what the annual cost of each service is. [155326]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* Previously, operational welfare support has been provided only to personnel who are deployed overseas on operations under the command of PJHQ. As of 1 April 2001, welfare provision will be extended to include those personnel on maritime deployments that are expected to be away from the UK for two months or more and, also, other exercise deployments that are expected to last for two months or more outside the country in which the personnel are based.

All personnel deployed on overseas operations under the command of PJHQ have been entitled to 20 minutes of free telephone calls since September 1999. Access to free e-bluey facilities is gradually being made available as equipment is delivered and personnel trained in its use. E-bluey equipment was deployed to the Balkans and the Falkland Islands for trials in December 1999. It was subsequently deployed to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Cyprus and Sierra Leone during 2000 and is to be deployed to Turkey in May 2001. UK service personnel who are deployed to the Gulf have for some time been given free access to the US forces' own e-mail system, as a goodwill gesture. There is no information available to indicate when the US system was first deployed. Limited e-mail facilities were introduced in the Balkans in February 1999, and extended theatre-wide in November 2000, on completion of a programme of communication network infrastructure improvements. An e-mail facility was introduced in February 2001 for personnel deployed to Freetown, Sierra Leone. The system will be extended to all personnel in theatre in April 2001, with the deployment of an additional satellite terminal.

The annual cost of giving personnel a free 20-minute telephone call each week is currently in the region of £6 million and forecast to rise by £6.3 million from April. The annual cost of the e-bluey facility is £1.39 million and forecast to rise to £2.19 million from April. Information on the annual running costs of the e-mail facilities could be provided only at disproportionate cost, because call charges for this are contained in the telephone bills for each of the operational theatres.

The figures given assume that the current level of operational commitment remains unchanged and do not include the provision of welfare communications for personnel deploying to Oman on Exercise SAIF SAREEA later in the year, the costs for which are expected to be in the region of £6 million to £8 million.

Deployed Forces Facilities

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list operational deployments where British forces do not have access to hot shower facilities and laundry; [155322]

(2) on which exercises lasting for two months or more British forces have not had access to hot shower and laundry facilities; [155323]

(3) which units and agencies will be responsible for the provision of hot shower facilities and laundry facilities for deployed forces. [155324]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* Previously, operational welfare support has been provided only to personnel who are deployed overseas on operations under the command of PJHQ. As of 1 April, however, such welfare provision will be extended to include personnel on maritime deployments that are expected to be away from the UK for two months or more and, also, other exercise deployments that are expected to last for two months or more outside the country in which the personnel are based. This will result in improvements to, among other things, the provision of shower and laundry facilities.

Currently, not all personnel deployed on operations have access to hot shower facilities. At Ali Al Salam, in Kuwait, the reliability and quality of the facilities is poor and the Ministry of Defence is currently addressing this problem. Also, Short-Term Training Team personnel in Sierra Leone do not have hot water shower facilities; they do, however, have access to cold water showers, which is regarded as satisfactory in view of the climate. All current operational deployments have access to laundry facilities.

Information on the availability of hot shower and laundry facilities during exercises is not held centrally, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. We are, however, conscious of the fact that there have been significant shortfalls in this area and have therefore provided additional funding within the new Operational Welfare Package, amounting to more than £6 million over the next four years, specifically to redress the problem. We expect future shower and laundry facilities to be incorporated in the Expeditionary Campaign Infrastructure Procurement programme, due in Service in 2004. It is expected that they will be cabin-based, similar to those procured under the Improved Tented Camp urgent operational requirement for Kosovo.

The senior deployed logistics officer is responsible for ensuring that hot shower and laundry facilities are provided. The one exception to this is that UK Service personnel deployed on UN operations are administered under UN arrangements.

International Criminal Court

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 756W, if he will place in the Library copies of reports and representations made to him by the armed forces during the consultation period and drafting of the International Criminal Court Bill, with particular reference to those that set out concerns expressed by the armed forces. [155921]

Mr. Hoon: No report or representations were made to me by the armed forces during the drafting of the International Criminal Court Bill or during the formal consultation period on the Bill starting in August 2000. Advice provided to Ministers during the development of policy on the International Criminal Court is withheld in accordance with Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information and cannot therefore be placed in the Library of the House.

Holy Loch

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost of the clean-up operation on Holy Loch has been, broken down by component. [155315]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The total cost of the UK clearance activity in Holy Loch to date is £10.5 million. This covered an initial survey and pilot phase, clearance and disposal, a further survey and environmental management. A further £0.2 million will be spent in financial year 2001–02 as the project winds down.

Ministry of Defence Police

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 22 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 298W on Ministry of Defence police, in what way the proposals in clause 32 of the Armed Forces Bill are designed to restore parity between his Department's police and Home Department forces in respect of disciplinary procedures. [156103]

Mr. Spellar: The proposals contained in clause 32 give effect to schedule 5 to the Bill. Schedule 5 introduces amendments to the Ministry of Defence Police Act 1987, in particular the introduction of section 3A(2)(a)(i) and 3A(2)(b), thereby restoring parity between the Ministry of Defence Police discipline regulations and the discipline regulations of the Home Department forces which were introduced in August 1999.

In particular they allow persons other than the Secretary of State—for example, Appeals Tribunals—to make decisions, whereas under the present regulations decisions are confined to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the report by chief inspector Reid into the complaint against the Ministry of Defence police by Mr. E. McHugh was forwarded to the Police Complaints Authority. [156002]

Dr. Moonie: The Deputy Chief Constable Ministry of Defence police is currently examining the report and will forward it, together with his recommendations, to the Police Complaints Authority in due course.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on how the costs of members of the armed services assisting in dealing with the Foot and Mouth outbreak will be apportioned between Government Departments. [155558]

Mr. Spellar: Any additional costs that the armed forces incur as a result of providing military assistance in dealing with Foot and Mouth will be recovered from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Policies (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Walthamstow constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154179]

Ms Armstrong: The principal funding that this Department has provided to Waltham Forest in the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 is shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent in the Walthamstow constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

Waltham Forest

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Revenue Support Grant[2]	119.632	127.547	131.501	131.124	139.903
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[2]	48.277	50.137	54.129	61.461	59.480
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding	0	0	0	0	.638
Transport Supplementary Grant	.150	.150	.270	n/a	n/a
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	.075	.075	.135	n/a	n/a
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	.996	.789	1.247	1.439	n/a
Capital Challenge (Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	1.800	3.564	2.430	0	0
ERDF funding	0	1.520	1.379	0	0
Housing Investment Programme	6.247[3]	6.605	7.922	22.418[4]	24.435[5]
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	27.028	25.146	24.141	24.478	n/a
Capital receipts Initiative	1.289	4.221	4.967	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	1.028	.731	.044	0	0
SRB funding	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.793	n/a

[1] Where known
[2] The amounts of Revenue Support Grant and Income from National Non-Domestic Rates shown for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are the revised amounts allocated under "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98 Amending Report 1999" and "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998–99 Amending Report 2000" respectively.
[3] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from the previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98.
[4] Single Housing Pot introduced from 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP.
[5] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02, with the introduction of a new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in a sound condition. Waltham Forest's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £9.937 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation above.
n/a = not available

Crash Barriers

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the annual cost to British industry of delays caused by repairs to corrugated steel barriers for the most recent year for which figures are available. [154474]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is not held centrally.

Resources Redistribution

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to divert resources from London and the South East to other parts of the country; [154298]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the memorandum written by the Prime Minister's principal private secretary in February concerning movement of resources from London and the South East to other parts of the country. [154296]

Ms Armstrong: There are no plans to divert resources from London and the South East to other parts of the country.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many ministerial meetings with hon. Members have been cancelled by Ministers since 1 January. [155237]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The information requested is not held centrally.

Pollution

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to encourage the use of less-polluting vehicles in major cities. [155461]

Mr. Hill: My Department sponsors the Energy Saving Trust's "Powershift" programme, providing financial support and other measures to encourage the purchase of new gas and electric vehicles. Powershift has been running since 1996, and my Department is today launching a consultation on proposals for the future direction of the programme, aimed at getting the greatest environmental and health benefits and encouraging the wider uptake of cleaner fuel vehicles in the cities and towns which have the biggest air quality challenges. The consultation document describes new initiatives designed to promote more use of natural gas for heavy public service and delivery lorries, which are cleaner and much quieter than diesel engines; and to encourage more use of electric vehicles, which have zero tailpipe emissions.

Powershift, dealing with new vehicles, is complemented by the Clean Up programme, which provides grants towards existing vehicles being fitted with pollution control measures. Both programmes help local authorities to give their residents a cleaner and healthier environment, using the new powers to set up priority Air Quality Management Areas.

Rail Saver Tickets

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many reduced price saver-type tickets were purchased *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a proportion of all rail tickets sold in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [155734]

Mr. Hill: The information required is not held centrally. Individual train operators would be free to provide this information at their commercial discretion.

Highways Agency

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the expenditure of the Highways Agency was in Hull in each

of the past five years, indicating the schemes on which it has been spent and the proposals for the next five years; and what the expenditure was for estuarial *(a)* ports and *(b)* cities, of a similar size and location to Hull. [155386]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The question relates to operational matters on the Trunk Road in Hull. I have accordingly asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Kevin McNamara, dated 29 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question on expenditure by the Highways Agency in Hull.

In broad terms the Agency has spent £7.631m over the past five years on routine maintenance and small-scale improvements on the A63 and A1033 in Kingston upon Hull including preparation work for the A1033 Hedon Road Improvement. This expenditure is split over the last 5 years as follows:

Financial year	*£ million*
1996–97	0.177
1997–98	1.134
1998–99	1.551
1999–2000	1.943
2000–01	2.826
Total	7.631

The Agency allocates its resources on the basis of need and in accordance with the objectives laid down in our Business Plan as agreed with Ministers. I regret that since information is not held by the Agency in a format that allows comparison with other estuarial ports and cities of similar size to Hull, I am not able to supply this.

As to the future, the Agency's recently produced Business Plan for 2001/02 places a continuing emphasis on maintenance with an increase in resources over the next 3 years. Also, construction will shortly begin on the Hedon Road Improvement at an estimated cost of £53m. Construction will take place over a 2½ year period.

In addition to this, work is underway on the Hull East-West Corridor Multi-Modal Study. Led by the Government Office Yorkshire and Humberside the study will develop a sustainable and integrated plan to address the problems on the A63/A1033 through Kingston upon Hull and its surrounding area. Amongst the matters being considered are measures that will:

Reduce congestion on the A63/A1033

Improve the economic viability of the Port of Hull and the use of the route as part of the E20 Trans European Corridor

Facilitate, where possible, economic growth and regeneration in Kingston upon Hull and East Riding

Reduce the environmental problems along the route (in particular noise and air quality).

The study is due to report in Autumn 2001 and its findings will be taken forward to the Regional Planning Body for their consideration in the first instance. Any proposals may subsequently go forward as candidates for programme entry.

Should you require any further information, please contact the Area Manager for this part of the Network, John Bagley at our Leeds office, on 0113 283 6495.

Road Signs

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent survey his Department has undertaken on the standards, upkeep and adequacy of road signs in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [155964]

Mr. Hill: My Department is not responsible for roads other than those in England. We have not surveyed English roads for which the Secretary of State is not the highway authority, as these are the responsibility of local government. The Highways Agency carries out regular inspections of the condition of traffic signs on trunk roads and trunk road motorways, in accordance with the departmental standard for sign maintenance, which has recently been updated. The new standard is based more on the actual visual performance and effectiveness of the signs than the previous version, and is less reliant on subjective judgments.

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work his Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155660]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Central) has commissioned the following research projects from NOP Market Research Group Ltd. and NOP Solutions since 1 May 1997:

Year	*Nature of work*
1997–98 (from 1 May)	Survey on home composting[1]
	Research on effectiveness of proposed publicity for London Government Referendum[2]
1998–99	None
1999–2000	Research on awareness of abolition of leaded petrol[1]
2000–01 (to date)	Bus passenger satisfaction survey[1]
	DETR (Central) staff attitudes survey[1,2]

[1] Quantitative
[2] Qualitative

Total planned expenditure on all these projects will reach £282,974 (excluding VAT) by the end of April 2001. Several projects involve both qualitative and quantitative research and it is not always possible to separate out the costs of these two elements. However, £252,624 of the total was spent on mostly quantitative research and £30,350 on mostly qualitative.

DETR contracts like these are let through competitive tendering, in compliance with Treasury rules.In order to protect DETR's ability to purchase services at best value through the competitive tendering process we do not usually publish costs of individual contracts.

Vacant Dwellings

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many vacant domestic dwellings there are in the UK. [155990]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The latest available information, based on data supplied by local authorities in their annual Housing Investment Programme returns, indicates that 763,900 residential properties were vacant in England on 1 April 2000. A level of vacancy is a usual feature of the housing market, reflecting turnover and movement within the stock.

I refer the hon. Member to the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for equivalent information in those countries.

Roadside Emissions Equipment

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he is making for the testing of roadside emissions equipment and for the training of its operators. [155673]

Mr. Hill: Roadside exhaust emissions testing is already carried out by personnel from the Department's Vehicle Inspectorate. They are fully trained to carry out this work and use the same specification equipment for testing as that which is used in MOT testing stations.

We plan to extend the power to carry out roadside exhaust emissions checks to local authorities which have declared Air Quality Management Areas designated under section 83 of the Environment Act 1995. We hope that this will be possible from April 2002, and we plan to consult further with interested parties on detailed issues such as training of personnel over the next few months.

Lead Shot

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Lead Shot Legislation (England) Review Group will report; and what plans the Government have to take forward the group's recommendations. [156402]

Mr. Meacher: I have just received the report from the Lead Shot Legislation (England) Review Group. The report is the unanimous view of the organisations represented on the Group. The recommendations include proposals for some changes to the Schedules to the Lead Shot Legislation and my Department will shortly be carrying out a consultation exercise on the recommendations.

Civil Aviation Authority

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will issue directions to the Civil Aviation Authority under section 66 of the Transport Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [156438]

Mr. Prescott: Following consultation with the Secretary of State for Defence, I have today given directions to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) in respect of their conduct of their air navigation functions under Chapter III of Part I of the Transport Act 2000. The directions set out how the CAA is to:

organise the Directorate of Airspace Policy

consult and liaise with military and civil providers of air traffic services and with airspace users, and

mitigate the environmental impact of air operations, and

charge the CAA, inter alia, with procuring the provision of a Lower Airspace Radar Service (LARS) in UK airspace and with ensuring the provision of an aeronautical information service.

I have placed copies of the directions in the Library of the House.

The Secretary of State for Defence and I regard airspace policy as a crucial component of the joint and integrated provision of air traffic services, to which the Government attach considerable importance. We intend, therefore, to agree together on:

the appointment of the Director of Airspace Policy, who will be the member of the CAA nominated under section 66(3) of the Act;

the content of any future direction to the CAA under section 66(1) or 68(3) of the Act.

The member of the CAA with national security responsibility under section 67 of the Act is nominated by the Secretary of State for Defence and appointed by me.

Smoking (Taxis)

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has reached a decision following his consultation paper on smoking in taxis issued in October 1999. [156640]

Mr. Hill: I have given careful thought to all the responses received and, while recognising the merits of the arguments put forward for all the options proposed, I have decided that on balance the case is not sufficiently strong to make a commitment for legislation to prohibit smoking in taxis in some way when parliamentary time permits. I am satisfied that the present voluntary approach whereby taxi drivers have the choice of asking passengers not to smoke for the most part works satisfactorily and accordingly should continue.

Train Protection Systems

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the joint inquiry report into train protection systems chaired by Lord Cullen and Professor Uff is expected to report. [156641]

Mr. Hill: The report is being published today by the Health and Safety Commission. Copies are being placed in the Libraries of the House.

Local Government

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish proposals for the use of the powers contained in section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999; and if he will make a statement. [156699]

Ms Armstrong: I have today published "Working with Others to Achieve Best Value: A Consultation Paper on Changes to the Legal Framework to Facilitate Partnership Working". This sets out proposals to provide new partnership powers to local councils under section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

The proposals are designed to encourage innovative partnerships with the private, voluntary and public sectors under Best Value and ultimately the delivery of better local services for all. They will give councils a toolkit of partnership powers to use in the pursuit of Best Value service delivery.

To encourage joint working, the new powers will allow councils to provide grants, loans and guarantees, and to second or loan staff to and from anyone in the public, private and voluntary sectors in the pursuit of Best Value public services. The proposed new powers will allow councils to pool budgets and take the lead role in commissioning goods and service.

The proposals will also provide council with a general power to form and participate in corporate bodies and to allow delegation of their functions to council-controlled companies. The proposals published today will extend the circumstances in which councils can supply the full range of goods and services to partners, whether in the public or private sectors.

In the case of waste management, these new powers will remove the current requirements which force councils to either divest to the private sector or transfer to "arms' length" the agency that provides this service. Councils will be allowed to determine whatever method of service delivery provides Best Value, including keeping those services in-house.

The closing date for comments on the consultation exercise is 25 May 2001. It is intended that Draft Orders will be laid before Parliament following the conclusion of the consultation exercise.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153421]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 278–79W. This sets out expenditure incurred by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The FCO's only Executive Agency is Wilton Park, which organises conferences on international themes. It has conducted no promotional advertising or other promotional campaigns in the past five years.

The FCO has responsibility for a total of six Executive non-departmental public bodies: the British Council, British Association for Central and Eastern Europe, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Britain-Russia Centre, Great Britain-China Centre and the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission. Aside from routine advertising in the domestic press for recruitment purposes, none of these organisations has undertaken promotional campaigns in the United Kingdom in the past five years.

Palestinian Authority

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial assistance he has provided to Chairman Arafat in seeking to control the violence in the Palestinian Authority. [155756]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

We do not provide any assistance to Chairman Arafat in order to control the violence in the Palestinian Authority.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to Chairman Arafat regarding action by the Palestinian Authority against Force 17. [155620]

Mr. Wilson: The British Government continue to urge both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to take immediate parallel steps to address the current crisis. We expect both parties to insist on restraint and disciplined behaviour by their military and security personnel and to restrain activities by extremists.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the percentage of Palestinians in the *(a)* West bank and *(b)* Gaza strip living under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority. [155757]

Mr. Wilson: Areas of the Occupied Territories for which the Palestinian Authority has civil powers and responsibilities (c. 40 per cent. of the West bank and c. 70 per cent. of the Gaza strip) encompass approximately 95 per cent. of Palestinians in the West bank and all Palestinians in the Gaza strip. These figures do not take account of the Palestinian population of East Jerusalem which also remains under Israeli military occupation (c.210,000—according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 1997 census).

Macedonia

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British soldiers will be involved in NATO peacekeeping duties in Macedonia. [155016]

Mr. Vaz: NATO has no mandate for peacekeeping operations in Macedonia. Some 31 British troops are based in Macedonia as a National Support element in KFOR (Rear).

Parliamentary Questions

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the average response time for answering parliamentary written questions in his Department is; and how many responses have taken more than 24 working days in the last 12 months. [155135]

Mr. Robin Cook: My Department aims to answer all ordinary written parliamentary questions within five working days and as many named day written parliamentary questions as possible on the day named. The information required to provide the average response time for all written questions could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. In the last 12 months, the FCO took more than 24 days to respond to only three questions out of a total of more than 1,300 written questions answered.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next plans to meet representatives of the Israeli Government and Palestinian Authority to discuss the United Kingdom's role in assisting the peace process. [155448]

Mr. Wilson: The Government are in frequent contact with Israeli and Palestinian representatives to discuss the situation in the middle east, as well as bilateral issues. I met Nabil Sha'ath, Palestinian Minister for Planning and International Co-operation, in London on 20 March. The Foreign Secretary spoke to Shimon Peres, Israeli Foreign Minister on 21 March. We continue to urge both parties to take steps to resume contacts, rebuild confidence and restart negotiations. We will remain in frequent contact at all levels, acting on our commitment to do all we can to bring about a just comprehensive and lasting peace in the middle east.

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Palestinian Authority regarding the threat posed to the peace process by Hamas. [155450]

Mr. Wilson: The Government condemn all acts of violence in the middle east and call on both parties to take immediate parallel steps to address the current crisis. We are in regular contact with the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel, and urge them to resume security co-operation and to do all in their power to end violence, restrain extremism and minimise incitement and provocations.

Morocco

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to alter his policy on arms exports to Morocco; and if he will make a statement. [155732]

Mr. Wilson: All applications to export, to Morocco, goods on the Military List, which forms Part III of Schedule 1 of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 (as amended) are assessed against the consolidated European Union and national arms export licensing criteria, as are such applications for any country. All such applications are considered on a case-by-case basis, taking account of all available information at the time.

Iran

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Iran regarding the eligibility of members of the Christian, Bahai and Jewish faiths holding senior national positions in that country. [155760]

Mr. Wilson: We and our EU partners regularly raise concerns over human rights issues in Iran, particularly those affecting religious minorities. The Iranian authorities are fully aware that we and our EU partners consider discrimination on religious grounds to be intolerable. Christians and Jews (but not Bahais) have their own representatives in the Majles.

European Councils

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for April and the major European Union events for the period between 30 April and September. [156543]

Mr. Vaz: To date we have received the detailed agendas for the following Council meetings in April:

4–5: Transport and Telecommunications Council—Luxembourg

1. Adoption of the provisional agenda.
2. Approbation of the list of "A" items.

Telecommunications

3. Proposal for a Directive on a common regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services—political agreement.
4. Proposal for a Directive on access to, and interconnection of, electronic communications networks and associated facilities—political agreement.
5. Proposal for a Directive on the authorisation of electronic communications networks and services—political agreement.
6. Proposal for a Directive on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services—progress report.
7. Proposal for a Regulation on the implementation of Internet Top Level Domain ".EU"—common orientation.
8. Proposal for a Directive amending Directive 97/67/EC with regard to further opening to competition of Community postal services—information from the Presidency.
9. Commission Communication on the introduction of third generation mobile communication (3G) in the European Union: state of play and the way forward—presentation by the Commission.
10. eEurope Action Plan 2002.
    (a) Report—information from the Commission.
    (b) Network security—information from the Presidency/ Commission.

Horizontal transport issues

11. (poss.) Commission communication on a revised strategy for the common transport policy ("White Paper")—presentation by the Commission.
12. (poss.) Proposal for amending the decision 1692/96/EC on guidelines for Trans-European Networks for transport (general revision)—presentation by the Commission.
13. Strategy for integrating environment and sustainable mobility into the transport policy (Cardiff/Helsinki follow-up)—Council resolution.
14. Galileo—Council resolution.

Air transport

15. Aviation and environment: ICAO regulations for gaseous and noise emissions—common approach for the ICAO Assembly.
16. Aviation safety: Proposal for a Regulation establishing common rules in the field of civil aviation safety and setting up of a European Aviation Safety Authority (EASA)—progress report and policy debate.

17. Montreal Convention on Air carrier liability:

—decision for conclusion of this Convention by the Community.

—Council conclusions on the ratification process of the Convention.

—progress report on the draft regulation (amendment of Reg. 2027/97).

Land transport

18. Proposal for a Regulation on action by member states concerning public service requirements and the award of public service contracts in passenger transport by rail, road and inland waterway—progress report and policy debate.

19. Proposal for a Regulation on certain rules concerning the control of drivers engaged by road transport operators established in the EU when carrying out with Community vehicles intra-Community transport operations (third country drivers)—common orientation.

20. Proposal for a Directive on a transport system of harmonised rules for driving restriction on heavy goods vehicles involved on international transport on designated roads (weekend bans)—common orientation.

21. Proposal for amending Directive 91/671/EEC on compulsory use of safety belts, including compulsory use of type-approved child restraint systems—common orientation.

22. Commission Recommendation on the maximum permitted blood alcohol level for vehicle drivers—Council conclusions.

23. Proposal for amending directive 96/53/EC on weights and dimensions of heavy vehicles—15 meter buses—common position.

Shipping

24. Maritime safety—second package:

—Directive on the establishment of a Community system for the monitoring and control of and information on maritime traffic.

—Regulation concerning the creation of a fund for compensation in the case of oil pollution in European waters and the adoption of related measures.

Regulation setting up a European agency for maritime safety.

—Policy debate.

Other business

8–10: Brussels—General Affairs Council

8–10: Ostersund—Agriculture Council (Informal)

20–22: Malmo—ECOFIN

24–25: Brussels—Agriculture Council

25–26: Brussels—Fisheries Council

26–28: Lund—Internal Market, Consumers and Tourism Council (Informal).

No agendas for the above are available at present.

The following are the principal events in the EU between 1 May and September 2001 (certain relevant events are also included: the table is based on the information available at the date of issue).

Date	*Location*	*Principal events*
May		
5–6	Brussels	Gymnich
7	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
7	Brussels	Employment and Social Council (possible)
14–15	Brussels	General Affairs Council
14–15	Brussels	Industry and Energy Council
22–23	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28–29	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
28	Brussels	Education and Youth Council
30	Brussels	Development Council
31	Brussels	Health Council
June		
5	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
5	Brussels	Internal market/Consumer Council
7–8	Brussels	Environment Council
11–12	Brussels	General Affairs Council
11	Brussels	Employment/Social Affairs Council
15–16	Gothenberg	European Council
18	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Brussels	ECOFIN Council (possible)
21	Brussels	Culture Council
25–26	Brussels	General Affairs Council
26	Brussels	Research Council
27–28	Brussels	Transport/Telecommunications Council
July		
6–7	Brussels	Informal Employment and Social Affairs Council
10	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
13–14	Brussels	Regional Territories Council (Informal)?
16–17	Brussels	General Affairs Council
16–17	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20	Brussels	Budget Council
23–24	Brussels	Agriculture Council
August	[1]	[1]
September		
8–9	Brussels	Gymnich
14–16	Brussels	Environment and Transport Council (Informal)
16–18	Brussels	Agriculture (Ministerial Informal)
22–23	Brussels	ECOFIN (Informal)
24–25	Brussels	Agriculture Council
27–28	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council

[1] There are no Councils scheduled for August

Belize

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice the High Commission in Belize has given to British businesses there as to the legality of their use of call-back services when telephoning the UK; and if he will make a statement. [155056]

Mr. Battle: The High Commission has not been asked by British business to advise on the legality of using call-back services when telephoning the UK.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the UK authorities have made to the Chairman of Belize Telecoms about his threat to withdraw telephone services from the British High Commission and others in Belize; what has been his response; and if he will make a statement. [155059]

Mr. Battle: The High Commissioner in Belmopan has been in correspondence with the Chairman of Belize Telecommunications Ltd. and has pointed out that it would constitute an unlawful act if BTL were to cease to provide telephone services to the High Commission because of the disagreement about the legality of the High Commission's use of call-back services. The Belizean Government would be obliged under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to ensure that normal service is resumed if the High Commission's telephone services were cut off in these circumstances.

The Chairman of BTL has responded reiterating BTL's claim that the use of call-back services is illegal.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contact there has been between Interoute (UK) Ltd. and the UK authorities about its right to offer its commercial services to clients and potential clients in Belize; and if he will make a statement. [155058]

Mr. Battle: None directly. In October 2000, Interoute sent a promotional leaflet to the High Commission in Belmopan. The High Commission circulated it as part of its normal activities in support of UK business, and informed Interoute of this action.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the dispute between Belize Telecom and the British High Commission in Belize has been resolved; and if he will make a statement. [155055]

Mr. Battle: It has not yet been resolved. The British High Commission (BHC) in Belmopan has been in correspondence with the Chairman of Belize Telecommunications Ltd. (BTL). The latest position is that BTL stands by its claim that the use of call-back services by the BHC is illegal. They are insisting that the BHC stop using call-back services and have raised the question of compensation. BTL have claimed that they are not obliged to maintain telephone services to subscribers who use call-back services.

The BHC believed the call-back services represented good value for money. The BHC is clear that the use of call-back services is lawful, and that any action by BTL to terminate its telephone services in these circumstances would itself be unlawful.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the saving to the British High Commission in Belize from its use of call-back services; what has been the cost of its dispute with Belize Telecoms; if this cost is recoverable from the company; and if he will make a statement. [155060]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to his question on 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 662W, on the savings issue. We do not hold details of the number of man-hours used to deal with this matter. To date no other costs have been incurred.

We estimate that the cost of the loss of call-back services to the High Commission would be in the region of £10,000 per year.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to the British High Commission in Belize by companies and others seeking to use call-back services when telephoning the UK; and if he will make a statement. [155057]

Mr. Battle: A very small number of representations have been received by the High Commission. The High Commission has described its understanding of the situation and has recommended that companies and others take their own legal advice.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legal proceedings have arisen from the dispute between Belize Telecom and the British High Commission in Belize; and if he will make a statement. [155054]

Mr. Battle: No legal proceedings have been instigated by the High Commission in Belmopan. Neither are we aware of any being taken by Belize Telecommunications Ltd.

PRIME MINISTER

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Austin: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received from the World Archaeological Congress regarding Hasankeyf and the Ilisu Dam; and if he will make a statement. [146852]

The Prime Minister *[pursuant to my answer, 2 February 2001, c. 331W]:* I have received a letter from the President of the World Archaeological Congress. My right hon. Friend, the Minister for Trade, replied to the President's letter.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Holding Centre Report

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the eighth annual report of the Independent Commissioner for the Holding Centre. [156482]

Dr. Reid: I have today arranged for copies of Dr. Bill Norris' Annual Report for 2000 to be placed in the Library of both Houses.

I welcome Dr. Norris' Report and I will consider it carefully. I will respond as soon as possible.

Crime Reduction

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to reduce crime in Northern Ireland. [156481]

Mr. Ingram: A number of significant steps have recently been taken to reduce crime in Northern Ireland, including my announcements last week of a strategy to tackle organised crime, a small business security grant scheme available from early April, and the introduction of Banknote Watch, an initiative aimed at providing enhanced security for the cash-in-transit industry.

In addition, I have now decided to introduce specific crime reduction targets to address volume crime in Northern Ireland. After careful consideration I have set the following three targets to be achieved over a five year period: a 15 per cent. reduction in domestic burglary; a 10 per cent. reduction in vehicle thefts; and a 10 per cent. reduction in theft from vehicles.

Baselines will be set during 2001–02 and the reductions sought over the following five years. The Government are committed over the same period to achieving a reduction in the rate of increase of overall crime.

These targets are tailored to the specific circumstances of Northern Ireland. Research has indicated that these crimes, which between them account for over 20 per cent. of all recorded crime, are the crimes of greatest concern to the general public.

These targets will not be for the police alone to deliver. Experience has shown that the most effective way to tackle crime is for agencies to come together in a partnership-based approach. We shall be discussing with the First and Deputy First Ministers how the necessary partnerships might best be delivered.

While Northern Ireland has experienced a relatively low rate of crime compared to other jurisdictions, this initiative demonstrates that the Government are not complacent and that we continue to take the steps necessary to tackle this issue. Crime and the fear of crime affect everyone's quality of life and must be addressed in a robust and effective way.

Remembrance Memorial

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the Government's provision of a national memorial in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the service of the Crown during the course of the Northern Ireland troubles. [156480]

Dr. Reid: A memorial, to be known as the Ash Grove Memorial, has been sited within the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas in Staffordshire. The memorial takes the form of a grove of ash trees, at the centre of which is a circle of six large boulders, quarried from each of the six counties in Northern Ireland. These boulders encase a granite monolith which will bear the inscription:

IN MEMORIAM

In grateful memory of the men and women of the
Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve,
the Armed Forces and other
organisations in the service of the Crown
who have laid down their lives in the cause of peace in Northern Ireland
1969–2001

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Advocate-General for Scotland when she will reply to question 147384 tabled on 23 January in relation to the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Bill. [155129]

The Advocate-General: I replied to the hon. Member on 21 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 270W.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Food Safety

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the current work undertaken by the Ministerial Group on Food Safety. [141642]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

The Ministerial Group on Food Safety was dissolved on 9 November 1999. The Food Standards Agency advises the Government on food safety and standards matters. The agency is a non-ministerial department accountable to Parliament through Health Ministers.

The agency has as its main objective in discharging its functions the protection of public health and the interests of consumers in relation to food.

HEALTH

Drugs Dispensing

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the pharmaceutical industry concerning the cost of drugs to *(a)* consumers and *(b)* the NHS following the requirement to dispense drugs in blister packs. [144761]

Ms Stuart: No medicines are legally required only to be dispensed or sold in blister packs. The type of packaging used for medicines is a commercial decision for the manufacturer concerned, provided the quality and safety of the product are maintained. The Department for Health has frequent discussions with representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and those discussions have on occasions included issues relating to the packaging of medicines.

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if value-added tax is chargeable on *(a)* supplies of recombinant factor VIII for the treatment of haemophiliacs and *(b)* supplies of conventionally produced factor VIII; what representations he has made to HM Treasury in respect of charging VAT on these substances; on what date he made those representations; and what response he has received. [146958]

Mr. Denham: Value Added Tax is a matter for Her Majesty's Treasury Ministers. The United Kingdom exempts from VAT whole human blood and components and derivatives of human blood such as human Factor VIII fraction, when used for therapeutic purposes. Synthetic 'blood' products such as those of animal origin or genetically engineered products are not exempt from VAT. In November 1996, this decision was upheld by a tribunal. Given that a judgment has been made, we have not asked HM Treasury to reconsider this matter.

Animal Feed

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice the Food Standards Agency has provided to the Government on the scientific justification for a ban in the United Kingdom on the use of fishmeal in animal feed. [146405]

Ms Stuart: The chairman of the Food Standards Agency advised my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that the agency did not see an immediate human health risk from the use in animal feed of fish meal and certain animal material. Nor was there a need on purely public health grounds to launch a major recall scheme for feeds containing fish meal and the other material, although their use should be phased out as soon as practicable.

Meat Imports

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assumptions about French BSE controls underlay the advice from the Food Standards Agency on French beef imports. [144316]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) that its advice on French imports was based on the assumptions given in Dr. Christl Donnelly's study published in "Nature" on 13 December 2000. These were that if the over-30-months (OTM) rule is fully enforced there is virtually no risk from French beef imported to Britain. If the OTM rule is only 75 per cent. enforced then risks posed by British and French meat sold in the United Kingdom would be comparable. The FSA estimates that enforcement levels in the UK are above 75 per cent. This allows for the fact that there may have been under-reporting of BSE cases in France and that the French feed ban may not have been fully effective until late 2000.

Inspection missions to member states are carried out by the European Commission's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO). An additional programme of urgent FVO missions is currently under way to all member states. France was visited in the week beginning 4 December 2000. The report of the mission will be published in due course in line with normal practice.

In advising on the safety of French beef imports, the FSA has made clear that it keeps the position under constant review, taking account of the latest available scientific and other information. This will include the outcome of the FVO inspection mission to France once it is available.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of imported cattle carcases are individually checked for specified risk material contamination. [147857]

Ms Stuart: Imported cattle carcases are generally checked for the presence of specified risk material (SRM) on a targeted basis. Imports from other parts of the European Union (EU) are checked by the Meat Hygiene Service at licensed meat plants in Great Britain, or by local authorities at other meat plants. Imports from non-EU countries are checked at border inspection posts, where checks in all cases are made of the accompanying veterinary certificate (declaring that SRM has been removed) and where a sample of consignments are in addition subject to physical checks. Only imports from Australia and New Zealand are exempt from these requirements under the Specified Risk Materials Order 1997.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has advised that the checks should be proportionate to the risk. Recently, and as a response to the identification of SRM in imported beef from Germany and the Netherlands, the MHS has been instructed by the FSA to check 100 per cent. of carcase beef imports from Germany at GB meat plants. The MHS has also been required to give special attention to imports from abattoirs in other countries from which previous consignments of beef with SRM attached were imported.

The FSA has also instructed the MHS to step up the level of checks on imported meat, in recognition of the likely increase in the volume of imports, due to the effects of the foot and mouth disease crisis on domestic supplies.

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he has taken following the discovery of spinal cord in imported beef from other EU countries. [149915]

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what investigations he has carried out into the presence of spinal cords in beef imported into the UK from Germany; what the findings were of those investigations; and if he will make a statement. [150222]

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to stop the import of meat that contains specified risk material; and if he will make a statement. [155296]

Ms Stuart: The Government are advised on matters of food safety by the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

Controls on specified risk materials (SRM), such as spinal cord, are a crucial part of the protection of United Kingdom consumers against BSE, and the UK has had rules requiring the removal and safe disposal of SRM for several years. New, harmonised European-wide SRM controls were introduced with effect from 1 October 2000. Responsibility for ensuring that SRM controls are being enforced by all member states lies with the European Commission, which is currently carrying out inspection missions to all member states to check on this.

Where consignments of beef imported into the UK have been found with SRM attached, the issue has been taken up vigorously with the European Commission, and with the authorities of the member states involved—Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy. The FSA policy is to press for plant closures if evidence suggests that there is a system failure. It is for the national authorities to review the inspection systems at the abattoirs concerned, and three abattoirs, two in Germany and one in the Netherlands, have had their operating licences suspended by their relevant authorities until they can guarantee that no more contaminated meat will come into circulation on the market. The FSA has also instructed the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) (and its counterpart in Northern Ireland) to inspect every consignment of carcase beef imported from Germany to licensed meat plants in the UK, and all consignments from the other overseas abattoirs concerned. Reports from the MHS show that the large majority of consignments of imported beef have had the SRM properly removed. In addition, local authorities have been advised to check all consignment of imported carcase beef from Germany at meat plants under their supervision.

Smoking

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent and is allocated to be spent in England on specialist advice and support in the NHS for smokers wanting to quit in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [153439]

Yvette Cooper: Details of allocation and expenditure are shown in the table.

£ million

	Health action zones	*Health authorities*	*Allocation Total*	*Total Expenditure*
1999–2000	10	0	10	5.0
2000–01	10	10	20	[1]6.1
2001–02	10	10	20	N/A

[1] April to September (Figures for October to March not available)

The table shows investment in National Health Service smoking cessation support services. In 2001–02 health authorities have been given additional resources to fund the new smoking cessation aid, Zyban, and Nicotine Replacement Therapy on NHS prescription.

Research has confirmed that complex services such as cessation services take time to establish. As a result the total allocation was not spent in the first year. The remainder was carried over for expenditure on the services during the following year.

NHS Trusts (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what savings in administration have been made by each NHS trust in Shropshire since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [154657]

Yvette Cooper: Individually and collectively the National Health Service trusts in Shropshire have achieved real terms savings in management costs. The three acute trusts are all in the upper quartile for achieving management costs efficiency for the West Midlands region.

A comparison of the 1997–98 baseline management cost position with the 1999–2000 accounts figure deflated to 1997–98 levels, shows real term savings of:

NHS Trust	*£000*
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital	103
Princess Royal Hospital	25
Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt	112
Shropshire's Community and Mental Health[1]	656
Total	896

[1] The high level of savings from Shropshire's Community and Mental Health NHS trust is due to the merger of two trusts.

Source:
West Midlands Regional Office

Overhead Power Lines

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the reported links between electricity pylons and childhood leukaemia. [153635]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The Department obtains advice on potential health risks associated with electromagnetic fields (EMF) from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). In a report published on 6 March the NRPB's advisory group on non-ionising radiation has provided an assessment of the potential risks of cancer from extremely low frequency EMFs, (documents of the NRPB Vol. 12, No 1, 2001) and copies have been placed in the Library.

The report states that

"there is some epidemiological evidence that prolonged exposure to higher levels of power frequency magnetic fields is associated with a small risk of leukaemia in children. In practice, such levels are seldom encountered by the general public in this country."

The NRPB have calculated that this relates to about 0.5 per cent. of the total population.

The board of the NRPB also published a response statement that can be found on the NRPB website www.nrpb.org.uk. The statement includes the following points. From the findings of the main study in this country (United Kingdom childhood cancer study) the higher levels of magnetic fields are not attributable solely to proximity to power lines. The conclusions of the report indicate that the question whether exposure to electromagnetic fields can influence the development of cancer cannot at present be completely resolved. The report made a number of specific research recommendations. The board also considers that the report provides no additional scientific evidence to require a change in exposure guidelines.

The Department will consider carefully the recommendations of the NRPB and commission appropriate research in the light of that which is already under way. Current research includes Government-funded studies in this country and support for the multinational EMFs project set up and co-ordinated by the World Health Organisation.

Drug Reviews

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) for how long the decision to prescribe beta interferons and copaxone for multiple sclerosis sufferers has been under review; [155613]

(2) when NICE is expected to issue guidance on beta interferons and glatiramer acetate (copaxone). [155611]

Mr. Denham: We asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to conduct an authoritative appraisal of beta interferon and glatiramer acetate in August 1999. We expect NICE to produce its authoritative guidance on these drugs in November 2001, provided there are no appeals.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the same criteria of cost effectiveness applied to beta interferons and copaxone were applied in the appraisal of Orlistat for the treatment of obesity. [155612]

Mr. Denham: Guidance on how the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) should carry out its appraisals is contained in Annexe C of its framework document. The detailed application of the approach is a matter for NICE.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria are to be used in the economic modelling to measure the cost effectiveness of disease modifying MS drugs being assessed by NICE. [155585]

Mr. Denham: Detailed issues of the appraisal process are a matter for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). I understand that NICE is currently discussing additional economic modelling with relevant interested parties.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received concerning the decision by NICE to delay issuing guidance on beta interferon and glatiramer acetate (copaxone). [155581]

Mr. Denham: On 22 December the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) announced that it was extending the time scale for its appraisal of beta interferon and glatiramer acetate to enable further modelling to be undertaken on their cost effectiveness. Since that date my Department's records indicate receipt of approximately 300 written representations from hon. Members, patient groups and the public about the current arrangements for

prescribing and funding of beta interferon. I have also met representatives of the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society, the MS Research Trust and the Association of British Neurologists.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to ensure that common standards are applied for appraising drugs and treatments for the NHS. [155583]

Mr. Denham: We are setting common standards through the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

Multiple Sclerosis Drugs

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in reducing local variations in prescription rates of disease modifying drugs for MS. [155582]

Mr. Denham: It is because there appeared to be genuine uncertainty over the appropriate use of beta interferon, which was reflected in different prescribing patterns across the country, that we asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to conduct an authoritative appraisal of the evidence on disease-modifying drugs for multiple sclerosis. We expect NICE to produce its authoritative guidance in November, provided there are no appeals.

Consultants

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many additional non-surgical cancer consultants are in post in the NHS in England; and how many were in post on the date of publication of the NHS Plan; [155408]

(2) what the growth rate was in numbers of NHS consultants in England between *(a)* 1994 and 1997 and *(b)* 1997 and 1999, expressed as an annualised percentage rate; [155403]

(3) if all cancer consultants appointed up to 2006 in the NHS, if trained in the United Kingdom, will have been in training before 1 May 1997; [155401]

(4) what the percentage increase is in NHS consultants in England, expressed as an annualised percentage rate *(a)* between 1994 and 1997 and *(b)* between 1997 and the projected figure according to the targets set out in the NHS Plan for 2006; [155402]

(5) what analysis his Department has made of trends in the rate of growth in consultant numbers in the period *(a)* 1997 to 2000 and *(b)* 1994 to 1997; [155404]

(6) which Minister took the decision to include the figure of nearly 1,000 as the target for growth in numbers of non-surgical cancer consultants by 2006; [155407]

(7) pursuant to his oral statement of 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 805, by what date the target of nearly 1,000 additional non-surgical cancer consultants by 2006 included in the NHS Plan will be met; and what advice he received from Professor Mike Richards on the prospects for meeting the target. [155396]

Mr. Denham: The NHS Cancer Plan was drawn up through extensive consultation with professionals and patients across the country, led by the National Cancer Director, Professor Mike Richards. It states that the increases of 971 in the number of non-surgical cancer consultants will be achieved by 2006.

The typical training period for these specialties is three to six years, so of those appointed through higher specialist training in the United Kingdom, virtually all will have entered higher specialist training after 1997.

Consultant numbers increased by 4.2 per cent. per year between 1997 and 1999, and will increase by 7.2 per cent. per year over the NHS Plan period. Direct comparison with the period 1994 to 1997 would be misleading, because the method of data collection changed in 1995 when data were collected directly from National Health Service trusts for the first time.

The number of non-surgical cancer consultants in posts in the NHS in England was 3,528 (at 30 September 2000) and the number in post on 30 September 1999 was 3,362[1]. This is an increase of 170.

The NHS Cancer Plan states that there will be an increase of nearly 1,000 in the number of non-surgical cancer consultants by 2006.

[1] *Source:* Medical and Dental Workforce Census

Primary Care Organisations

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the additional £100 million a year allocated to primary care organisations in England will be taken from the existing budget of his Department. [155628]

Mr. Denham: In the recent Budget, the National Health Service in England received on average an additional £275 million per year for the next three years.

£45 million of the £100 million announced to support general practitioners will come from this additional funding, with £55 million to be funded through existing provision for NHS expenditure.

Cycling

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to encourage more people to switch from using cars to using bicycles for health reasons. [155462]

Yvette Cooper: Moderate intensity physical activity, such as walking and cycling, can significantly reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke and other chronic diseases.

We are taking action across Government to support physical activity, including cycling, working closely with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The Department of Health is a member of the National Cycle Forum, convened by the DETR, which is working towards national targets for increasing rates of cycling, and the school travel advisory group, also set up by the DETR, which aims to increase cycling and walking to school.

The National Service Framework for coronary heart disease requires that all National Health Service bodies working closely with local authorities will have agreed and be contributing to the delivery of local programmes of effective policies on increasing physical activity by

April 2001. Guidance issued by the Health Development Agency identifies cycling as a recommended component of local programmes.

The third stage of the safe and sound challenge was launched in December 2000. The scheme encourages children to walk or cycle to school along safe routes with cash prizes awarded to schools with the most innovative plans. This year safe and sound is offering schools in socially deprived areas the opportunity to develop healthy active modes of travel to school. This complements work being carried out through the national healthy school programme, which advocates a whole-school approach to health promotion, including encouraging cycling to school.

Patient Forums

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what procedures will be put in place to ensure that patient forums will represent the diversity of the local population. [155908]

Ms Stuart: Subject to legislation, the members of a forum will be drawn equally from the trust's patients and local voluntary organisations. The independent National Health Service Appointments Commission will appoint the members of a forum according to selection criteria that will ensure membership reflects the nature of the local community which the forum serves.

Abattoirs

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to make abattoirs responsible for meat inspection; and if he will make a statement. [155633]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) that the rules on meat inspection are prescribed by European Union legislation and any proposals to change those rules would need to be made by the European Commission (EC).

No such proposal has yet been made by the EC, although an EC working document, made available by the FSA to interested organisations earlier this year, sets out some initial ideas on what might form the main elements of a future risk-based meat inspection system. Any legislative proposals that flow from this working document would be subject to formal public consultation in the United Kingdom, negotiations with and agreement by the member states, and both EU and UK Parliamentary scrutiny, before any changes could come into force.

Correspondence

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the hon. Member for Broxbourne will receive a reply to her letters of 10 November 2000, 6 December 2000, 3 January and 1 February, relating to her constituent Mr. J. A. Barham of Cuffley; [149104]

(2) when the hon. Member for Broxbourne will receive a substantive reply to her letters of 10 November 2000, 6 December 2000, 3 January and 1 February, and the written question replied to on 6 January relating to her constituent, Mr. J. A. Barham of Cuffley, Hertfordshire. [151679]

Mr. Denham: Replies to the hon. Member's letters were sent on 27 March 2001.

Orlistat

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment was made of the long-term offset in savings for primary care resources prior to the issuing of NICE guidance on orlistat for the treatment of obesity. [155653]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence recognised the link between obesity and other diseases, but concluded that the long-term savings from treating the obese with orlistat were impossible to estimate accurately.

Medical Devices Agency

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the key targets for 2001–02 for the Medical Devices Agency. [156548]

Yvette Cooper: We have agreed the Agency's key targets for 2001–02 and copies have been placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Teacher Shortages

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many child-days of education have been lost in *(a)* 2000 and *(b)* 2001 as a result of teacher shortages. [154154]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* This information is not held centrally.

The small number of schools, of which my Department is aware, that have had to send any classes home temporarily during the last year have done so for a range of reasons including teacher sickness, adverse weather conditions and the effects of the foot and mouth epidemic. It is impossible to be sure of the effect that any teacher shortages alone have had.

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train as teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Teacher Recruitment

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers were recruited to serve in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in each of the past 10 years. [154390]

Ms Estelle Morris: Teachers reported to DfEE as in service at the end of each financial year who were not in service at the end of the previous financial year for full,

part-time and occasional posts in the maintained schools sector in England are as follows:

Year	Nursery/ Primary	Secondary	FTE regular teachers in January each year Nursery/primary and Secondary sectors
1989–90[1]	19,000	18,300	385,700
1990–91[1]	17,300	17,300	383,300
1991–92[1]	17,000	17,200	383,200
1992–93[1]	15,400	16,900	384,700
1993–94[2]	15,600	17,800	378,900
1994–95	17,100	19,400	381,400
1995–96	16,600	18,000	381,500
1996–97	17,100	18,400	381,100
1997–98	17,300	19,400	379,700
1998–99	16,300	19,000	382,900

[1] Includes Sixth Form Colleges.
[2] Recruits for 1993–94 exclude teachers moving from a sixth form college to a maintained nursery, primary or secondary school.

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train as teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

Teacher Retention

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers left the profession in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [155646]

Ms Estelle Morris: Full-time and part-time teachers leaving the maintained schools sector in England for the last three years for which data are available.

Financial year	Leavers[1]	Rate[2]
1996–97	33,150	7.9
1997–98	34,250	8.2
1998–99[3,4]	27,570	6.6

[1] Teachers leaving the maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRU sector including those moving to the FE, HE or the independent schools sector. Teachers retiring but then rejoining the maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRU sector have not been included in the figures. Teachers retiring and then joining the FE, HE or the independent schools sector are included. Teachers barred from service and dying in service are included
[2] Leavers expressed as a percentage of teachers in post at the start of the year shown
[3] The number of teachers leaving on premature or ill-health retirement has now stabilised at a lower level, following the reform of the Teachers Pensions Scheme in 1997
[4] Provisional

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in Inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

Teacher Training

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of those who started a teacher training course completed that course within the original timetable in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [155650]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information about the number of people who complete a teacher training course within the original timetable is not collected centrally.

Special Schools

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which local education authorities are currently reviewing their provision of special schools. [155677]

Jacqui Smith: A number of LEAs are currently reviewing their special needs provision. The prime aim of these reorganisations is to enhance and improve existing provision for all pupils with special educational needs. Many of these reviews will cover provision for children in mainstream schools, special units attached to mainstream schools and special schools. The overall population of pupils in special schools fell from 1.3 per cent. in 1991 to 1.2 per cent. in 1995 but has remained constant in the past six years with roughly 97,000 pupils. We do not envisage that this will change dramatically. The Department is aware that the following LEAs are currently reviewing their special school provision:

Essex, Hertfordshire, Sandwell, Warwickshire, Peterborough, Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Devon, Blackburn, Cheshire, Knowsley, Lancashire, Manchester, Oldham, Sefton, Trafford, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets, Haringey, Harrow, Wokingham, Buckinghamshire, Reading, Greenwich, Oxfordshire, Richmond, Slough, Lewisham, Surrey, Middlesbrough, Stockton-on-Tees, North Yorkshire, City of York, Sheffield, Doncaster, Darlington, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Kirklees and the East Riding of Yorkshire.

New Deal (Romsey)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much New Deal money has been received by Romsey constituents. [155860]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* It is not possible to provide resource information for New Deals by constituency, as the Employment Service systems are not set up to allocate or monitor resources at constituency level. However, the total resource allocation for all New Deals in 2000–01 for the London and south-east region, which includes Romsey, was £134 million.

Training

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will define *(a)* the future role of the Employment Service in providing work-based training for adults and *(b)* its relationship with the Learning and Skills Council. [155864]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* From April work-based learning for adults, which is a programme designed to help unemployed people into work by equipping them with appropriate skills, becomes the responsibility of the Employment Service (ES). This transfer of responsibility will help achieve greater integration with the rest of the Welfare-to-Work agenda, and particularly the New Deal. The role of the ES will include contracting for, monitoring and evaluating the programme.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) will become fully operational from 2 April 2001. It will be responsible for planning, funding and improving the quality of all post-16 learning up to university level, focusing particularly on providing the skills needed in the labour market. The LSC and the Employment Service will work together at national and local levels to plan provision for unemployed people to get the skills and qualifications they need to find and stay in work. The ES and LSC will share a common approach on such issues as the quality framework and inspection which will help reduce the burdens on training providers.

More information is available in a number of publications issued to date about the role of the LSC, including the "Learning to Succeed" White Paper, the Learning and Skills Council Prospectus and the LSC Remit Letter. All of these are available via DfEE's website: www.dfee.gov.uk/post16.

Departmental Policies (Newbury)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Newbury constituency, the effects on Newbury and west Berkshire of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154571]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Newbury constituency and west Berkshire LEA.

Beacon Schools

There are three Beacon schools in west Berkshire:

	Type	*Start*
John Rankin	Infant	1 September 2000
Stockcross CE	Junior and Infant	1 September 2000
Downs School	Foundation Secondary	1 September 2000

Specialist Schools

There are six Specialist Schools in west Berkshire:

School	*Specialism*	*Start-September*
Trinity	Arts	2001
Denefield	Technology	1994
Kennet	Technology	2000
Park House	Sports	1998
Theale Green Community	Arts	1997
Willink	Language	1996

Infant class sizes—west Berkshire

£

	Revenue	*Capital*
1998–99	0	0
1999–2000	196,000	984,226
2000–01	513,215	165,376
2001–02	464,419	0

The September 2000 figure shows that there are now only 31 (0.8 per cent.) pupils remaining in infant class sizes of 31 or more. The figure in January 1997 was 672 (16.4 per cent.).

Performance Indicators

Key Stage 2 results—pupils achieving level 4 and above

Percentage

	2000	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*
English				
LEA	79	76	72	n/a
England	75	71	65	63
Maths				
LEA	76	74	63	n/a
England	72	69	59	62
Science				
LEA	87	85	77	n/a
England	85	78	69	69

GCSE/GNVQ results

Percentage

	2000	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*
5+A-C*				
LEA average	56.0	56.8	54.5	n/a
England average	49.2	47.9	46.3	45.1
5+A-G*				
LEA average	93.8	95.0	94.8	n/a
England average	88.9	88.5	87.5	86.4
No passes				
LEA average	3.8	3.4	3.0	n/a
England average	5.6	6.0	6.6	7.7

A/AS level, Advanced GNVQ

Percentage

	2000	*1999*	*1998*	*1997*
Average points for 2 or more A/AS levels:				
LEA average	17.8	17.6	16.3	n/a
England average	18.5	18.2	17.8	17.3
A/AS average per entry:				
LEA average	5.4	5.6	5.3	n/a
England average	5.5	5.5	5.4	5.3
Average points score GNVQ:				
LEA average	11.0	10.0	9.5	n/a
England average	10.1	9.9	9.6	n/a

Pre-1998, west Berkshire was not a separate LEA, it was part of Berkshire LEA along with Bracknell Forest, Windsor and Maidenhead, Reading, Slough and Wokingham.

Funding per pupil

In west Berkshire LEA, funding per pupil has increased by £340 in real terms between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Capital Funding

£000

	2001–02	2000–01	1999–2000	1998–99	1997–98
ACG	10	2,651	1,641	536	1,673
SCA	—	1,657	2,212	5	231
NDS	—	2,031	588	626	761
VA Grant	220	61	37	27	990
Seed	—	126	—	—	—
PPP	—	—	—	—	—
Formula Capital	—	1,199	—	—	—
NGFL	—	558	260	307	—
Science LABS	132	132	—	—	—
SSLU	23	26	—	—	—
Access at 85 per cent.	232	3	—	—	—
Security	39	56	55	47	181
Class size	—	766	189	—	—
Outside toilets	—	—	—	89	—
Energy efficiency	—	—	—	34	—
Assistance with AMP	—	—	25	—	—
Nursery provision	—	—	—	—	—

Further Education

Student numbers at all FEFC funded institutions where home postcode is in the local authority district of Newbury.

1996–97 to 1999–2000

	16–18		Adult	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
FEFC funded				
1996–97	872	351	414	4,940
1997–98	790	437	333	5,554
1998–99	727	364	345	5,140
1999–2000	752	382	330	6,259
Non-FEFC funded				
1996–97	48	210	93	506
1997–98	54	216	57	410
1998–99	40	166	65	415
1999–2000	48	295	125	3,943

Modern Apprenticeships

Since 2 May 1997, we know of 802 starts on Modern Apprenticeships in the Newbury and west Berkshire constituency (as at 31 December 2000). Broken down by financial year these are as follows:

Financial year	Foundation Modern Apprenticeships[1]	Advanced Modern Apprenticeships[2]	Total
1997–98	0	131	131
1998–99	27	104	131
1999–2000	156	115	271
2000–01[3]	148	121	269
Total	331	471	807

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995
[3] To date

Notes:
1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.)
2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.
3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.

Source:
WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Newbury constituency, 172 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 93 have found jobs, 74 of which are sustained.

Labour Market Statistics

The working age employment rate in west Berkshire in autumn 2000 was 83.8 per cent., above the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 79.9 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 1.8 per cent. in February 1997 to 0.7 per cent. in February 2001 in the Newbury constituency.

Schools Resources (Romsey)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cash resources to be paid directly to schools in the Romsey constituency, by sector, in 2001–02; and if he will list the sums to be allocated to each school. [155884]

Ms Estelle Morris: The estimated amounts of School Standards Grant and devolved formula capital grant to be paid to schools in the Romsey constituency for 2001–02 are, for each sector:

£

	School Standards Grant	Devolved formula capital
Nursery	7,000	6,876
Primary	580,000	306,992
Secondary	514,000	207,246
Special	88,000	37,902
Pupil Referral Units	7,000	6,092

Amounts for individual schools cannot yet be listed as data from the Annual Schools Census have not yet been finalised. However, a typical primary school is expected

to receive £24,000 in School Standards Grant and £9,750 in devolved formula capital grant; and a typical secondary school £70,000 and £28,500 respectively.

Computers for Teachers

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to continue the computers for teachers initiative. [156544]

Mr. Wills: We have now agreed further funding and secured a total of £50 million which will be available over the next three years. This unprecedented investment in personal access to ICT for teachers will enable many more teachers who want access to have it. It will enable around 70,000 more teachers to have subsidised computer purchases.

I want to see a wider debate on the future strategy related to this scheme and so I am seeking views on the best way forward via a consultation. Anyone who would like to take part in the consultation can get a copy of the questionnaire on the CFT website (www.cft.ngfl.gov.uk) or by phoning the CFT consultation line (0870 241 4938). The main teaching associations will also be consulted.

New Deal

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the extension of the New Deal for Partners of Unemployed People. [156638]

Ms Jowell: From 23 April 2001, partners of those receiving Income Support, Incapacity Benefit, Invalid Care Allowance and Severe Disablement Allowance will be eligible to participate in New Deal for Partners of Unemployed People. To reflect the wider group, from that date New Deal for Partners of Unemployed People will formally become New Deal for Partners.

About 450,000 partners of existing long-term claimants of those benefits will become eligible with a further 80,000 partners becoming eligible during the first year.

The aim of New Deal for Partners is to help reduce the number of workless households. Partners will have the opportunity to use the services of a personal adviser to help them directly into a job or, for those who are not job-ready, to training, education and other support.

TREASURY

Euro

15. **Mr. Cash:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take account of the performance of the euro since 1999 in addition to the five economic tests under his policy towards the single currency. [154611]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have said that the determining factor underpinning any Government decision on membership of the single currency is the national economic interest and whether the economic case for joining is clear and unambiguous.

20. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what account he will take of the performance of the eurozone since 1 January 1999 in reaching a decision on British membership of the euro. [154617]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have said we will recommend joining a successful single currency only if it is in our national economic interest to do so, and if the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous.

Family Allowances

16. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to ensure a high take-up by families with children of allowances to which they are entitled. [154613]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are actively encouraging families to take up the support to which they are entitled. Publicity campaigns have provided information to clarify entitlement. Reductions in the administrative burden for recipients have made it simpler and more straightforward to apply.

Taxation (Pensioners)

18. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on taxation of those over 65. [154615]

25. **Mr. Pickles:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his future taxation policy towards pensioners. [154624]

Dawn Primarolo: By April, as a result of the Government's personal tax and benefit changes, pensioner households will be £600 a year better off on average compared to 1997.

Climate Change Levy

19. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect on business activity of the climate change levy. [154616]

Mr. Timms: The climate change levy will raise an estimated £1 billion in its first year, all of which will be recycled back to business via a 0.3 percentage point cut in employers' National Insurance Contributions and substantial investments in energy efficiency.

The Government expect the levy to be broadly neutral between services and manufacturing. The effect on any specific business, sector or region will depend on a number of factors, including their future energy consumption, the level of employment, eligibility for discounts, use of renewable or combined heat and power energy, and take-up of enhanced capital allowances.

Debt Relief

21. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from charities and the churches on Government plans to write off debt owed by the poorest countries. [154620]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Campaigns by non-governmental organisations, faith groups and members of the public have helped to maintain the issue of debt relief at the top of the international agenda. Last year, around a third of all letters received by the Treasury related to debt relief.

Faith groups and charities were just two of the groups who participated in the recent "International Action Against Child Poverty" conference, which the Government hosted in London. This was also attended by representatives of developed and developing countries, businesses and civil society groups, the heads of the IMF, World bank, UNICEF and UNDP, and the conference was addressed by Kofi Annan and Nelson Mandela.

Faith groups and charities also attended three special seminars in Downing street last year, where they were able to put their concerns about debt relief directly to the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for International Development, and international figures such as the head of the IMF, Horst Kohler. A further seminar will shortly be arranged, to keep up the momentum from the child poverty conference.

Working Families Tax Credit

22. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent assessment he has made of the impact of the Working Families Tax Credit in reducing child poverty. [154621]

Dawn Primarolo: The introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, along with other changes to the tax and benefit system during this Parliament, will lift 1.2 million children out of relative poverty.

The personal tax and benefit measures introduced over this Parliament mean that by October 2001 families with children in the poorest fifth of the population will on average be £1,700 a year better off. These families include around 4 million children.

Largely as a result of the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, real living standards for a single-earner family on half average earnings and with two young children will rise by 28 per cent. over this Parliament.

Married Couples Allowance

23. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people have been affected by the abolition of the Married Couples Allowance. [154622]

Dawn Primarolo: We are replacing the Married Couples Allowance with the Children's Tax Credit as part of a package of measures to focus resources on families with children. The Children's Tax Credit is worth over twice as much as the Married Couples Allowance and will benefit about 5 million families.

24. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much the abolition of the married couples allowance will cost the average couple of working age in a full financial year. [154623]

Dawn Primarolo: By October 2001, as a result of personal tax and benefit measures, UK households will be on average £590 a year better off, and families with children will be on average £1,000 a year better off from measures introduced over this Parliament as a whole.

Employment (Scotland)

26. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his targets for employment in Scotland. [154625]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have no specific employment targets for Scotland alone, but across Great Britain as a whole they strive for employment opportunity for all, with the aim that by the end of the decade there will be a higher proportion of people in work than ever before, defined as high and stable levels of employment, taking account of the economic cycle, so that at least three quarters of the working age population are in work by 2010.

However, in Scotland, by December of last year employment had risen by 4.9 per cent. to 2.3 million, while ILO unemployment stood at 165,000, a reduction of 22.5 per cent. since May 1997. Furthermore, by January of this year claimant unemployment in Scotland stood at 109,200, a reduction of 32.8 per cent. since May 1997.

In order to help this trend to continue in Scotland as well as Great Britain as a whole, the Spending Review 2000 committed the Government to the following PSA targets for the period 2001–04:

> Increase employment over the economic cycle;
>
> A continued reduction in the number of unemployed people over the age of 18, over the three years to 2004, taking account of the economic cycle;
>
> Reduce the number of children in workless households with no-one in work over the three years to 2004; and
>
> Over the three years to 2004; increase the employment rates of disadvantaged areas and groups, taking account of the economic cycle—people with disabilities, lone parents, ethnic minorities and the over 50s, the 30 local authority districts with the poorest labour market position—and reduce the difference between their employment rates and the overall rates.

Building on these PSA targets, the Government have recently committed to increase the proportion of lone parents in work to 70 per cent. over the next 10 years.

Objective 1 Funding

27. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made in the delivery of EU Objective 1 funds to Objective 1 regions. [154626]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Good progress has been made, given that we are only seven months into the current Objective 1 programme. The picture in Cornwall is particularly encouraging, with over £40 million of the programme already committed.

Global Health Fund

29. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his recent announcement on the establishment of a purchase fund for global health. [154628]

Miss Melanie Johnson: At the recent International Action Against Child Poverty conference that the UK hosted in London, the Chancellor announced a package of measures aimed at combating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Every year, about six million people—mostly in the world's poorest countries—die from these diseases.

Alongside plans for a tax credit into vaccine and drug research, the Chancellor announced plans for a new global purchase fund to provide a credible commitment to create a market for current and future treatments for developing countries.

The Government will work closely with other governments, the G8 and international institutions to develop these proposals.

Savings

30. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the taxation of savings. [154629]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government receive many representations on tax, including tax on savings. The Government are encouraging more people to provide for their financial security throughout their lives, in line with their savings strategy is set out in "Helping People to Save", published alongside the November 2000 pre-Budget report.

The Government have introduced individual savings accounts (ISAs)—8.5 million people invested over £28.4 billion in the first year alone. In the first nine months of ISAs' second year, a further £20 billion was invested.

Unemployment

31. **Mr. Bailey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the measures in his Budget on unemployment rates in the UK. [154630]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As the Government recently announced, claimant count unemployment has fallen below one million and is now at its lowest level since December 1975.

Moreover, up to December last year we had placed almost 280,000 young people into work, further building on our manifesto of moving 250,000 young people from welfare into work.

Some of the measures outlined in Budget 2001 seek to increase employment opportunity for all, aiming to get a higher proportion of people into work than ever before by the end of the decade. The measures include:

Extending the new package of choices in the New Deal for Lone Parents to include help with [illegible] in self-employment, training, a new outreach [illegible] to attract more lone parents to the New Deal, and [illegible] childcare support;

Investing additional resources to tackle the problems facing claimants whose drug problems may be getting in the way of their finding a job, and provide more help for ex-users to move into work;

Enhancing the New Deal and other programmes over the coming three years to focus on employer needs, the hardest to help and the most disadvantaged areas;

Increasing the National Minimum Wage for workers over 22 from £3.70 an hour to £4.10 an hour from October 2001 to make work pay; and

Increasing the childcare tax credit limits in the Working Families' Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit from £100 to £135 a week for one child and from £150 to £200 a week for two or more children from June 2001 to help overcome barriers to work due to childcare costs.

Annuities

32. **Sir George Young:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policies on annuities. [154631]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the right hon. Member to Sections 5.66 to 5.69 of our Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report published on Budget Day, available in the House of Commons Library.

Small Businesses (Ceredigion)

33. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the measures in his Budget which will benefit small businesses in Ceredigion. [154632]

Mr. Timms: In the Budget the Government announced further assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises which will benefit small businesses in Ceredigion and across the UK:

reduction in the tax compliance costs for small companies: the Government are consulting on radical proposals to allow small companies to follow their own accounts for tax purposes;

consultation on further measures to help small firms manage their entry into the VAT system, reducing compliance costs and easing cash flow constraints;

an expansion of the Enterprise Management Incentive scheme to help small businesses recruit and retain key personnel through tax-advantaged option awards;

improved incentives for employee share ownership, by widening access to the more generous business assets Capital Gains Tax taper relief;

improvement of the Enterprise Investment Scheme and Venture Capital Trusts to boost the supply of equity finance;

consultation on proposals for a community investment tax credit;

action to help small firms improve their "investment readiness".

These build on the substantial tax and spending measures announced in previous Budgets that are aimed at making the UK one of the most competitive environments in the world for small firms to start and grow.

Fiscal Forecasts

34. [illegible] **Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what account he takes in making his fiscal forecasts of the cyclical nature of the economy. [154633]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government take full account of the economic cycle in making their public finance projections. In accordance with the Code for Fiscal Stability, the Government publish projections of both actual and cyclically adjusted fiscal aggregates in the pre-Budget report and Budget. The latest figures are set out in Table 2.5 of the March 2001 Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report.

Tax Changes (Liverpool)

35. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the tax changes announced in the Budget on the regeneration in Liverpool. [154634]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government announced in Budget 2001 a package of fiscal measures to help regenerate Britain's towns and cities. This package includes stamp duty exemption for property transactions in disadvantaged communities, 150 per cent. payable tax credit for cleaning up contaminated land, reduced rate of VAT for residential conversions, and 100 per cent. capital allowances for "creating flats over shops" for letting.

The measures will tackle physical regeneration of towns and cities—helping to bring derelict and under-utilised land and property back into productive use and reducing pressure for development on greenfield land.

The total value of these measures is estimated at over £1 billion over five years, across the UK.

It is not possible to quantify the impact of these tax changes on the regeneration of Liverpool.

New Deal

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money was received by St. Ives constituents under each of the New Deal schemes. [155748]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

It is not possible to provide resource information for New Deals by constituency, as the Employment Service systems are not set up to allocate or monitor resources at constituency level. However, the total resource allocation for all New Deals in 2000–2001 for the South West Region, which includes St. Ives, was £34 million.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 697–98W, if he will recalculate the first column, excluding those who are entitled to income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. [153375]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information is not available in the format requested.

Disability Premium

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many and what percentage of people in receipt of *(a)* incapacity benefit, *(b)* severe disablement allowance and *(c)* income support with a disability premium are undertaking therapeutic work as provided for in regulation 17(1)(a)(i) of the Social Security (Incapacity for Work)(General) Regulations 1995. [154555]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available. However, research by the Department has estimated that about 1 to 2 per cent. of people receiving incapacity benefits are engaged in therapeutic work.

We are keen to encourage incapacity benefits recipients to undertake some form of paid work which may ease their way back into full-time work. In my written answer to the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) on 22 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 340–41W, we announced that from April 2002 we are introducing new, fairer and more flexible work rules to help people receiving incapacity benefits to get back into work.

Lone Parents

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents on Income Support there were in the Northern Region *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [155015]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of Lone Parents on Income Support—North East Government Office Region

	Thousand
May 1996	56.5
November 2000	48.7

Notes:

1. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premiums.
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample, therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
4. Cases are allocated to each Government Office region by matching postcodes against the relevant version of the ONS Postcode Directory.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1996 and November 2000.

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children in lone families on Income Support there were in the northern region in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [155014]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of children in lone parent families on Income Support North East Government Office Region

	Thousand
May 1996	99.8
November 2000	84.9

Notes:

1. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premiums
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample, therefore subject to sampling error
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands
4. Children are defined as aged 0–15 years
5. Cases are allocated to each Government Office region by matching postcodes against the relevant version of the ONS Postcode Directory

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1996 and November 2000

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment the Government have made of the proportion of lone parents who have found work under the New Deal for Lone Parents who return to the Income Support case load within *(a)* one month, *(b)* six months and *(c)* one year. [155418]

Angela Eagle: By the end of December 2000, 81,311 lone parents had found work through the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). An assessment of the numbers of lone parents returning to Income Support will form part of the evaluation of NDLP which is currently under way.

Child Support

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measurement the Government will use to assess how well the new child support regulations are working and when to move existing cases to the new system. [155417]

Angela Eagle: Existing child support cases will be transferred to the new scheme only after it has been introduced for new cases and is seen to be operating properly.

We will carefully monitor the new scheme, evaluating Child Support Agency progress towards meeting the targets set out in the public service agreement, such as the speed and accuracy of child support assessments.

Departmental Policies (North Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Devon constituency, the effects on North Devon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155900]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of: eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10; promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and, combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in North Devon since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children nationally out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about seven million families receive Child Benefit, and in North Devon 10,387 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The new deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 960,600; in North Devon the number has reduced from 2,000 to 1,600. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in North Devon from 1,300 to 1,200.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 22,300 older people in North Devon have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 21,800 pensioners in North Devon will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State Pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 9,700 in North Devon. 2,900 pensioner families in North Devon are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new pension credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of stakeholder pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the state second pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many times the Benefits Agency has overruled decisions made by the appeals tribunal in the last three years. [155955]

Angela Eagle: The Benefits Agency cannot overrule decisions made by tribunals.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has for the phasing in of existing CSA cases when the new method of calculating maintenance liabilities is introduced; and what plans he has to cushion large rises and falls in maintenance liabilities in such cases. [156137]

Angela Eagle: The new child support scheme will be introduced for new cases by April 2002. Existing cases will be transferred across once it is seen to be working well and getting maintenance paid regularly and reliably.

For parents with existing child support assessments, new liabilities will be phased in stages of £2.50, £5 or £10, depending on the weekly income of the non-resident parent. These levels have been set to give parents whose liability under the new scheme will differ markedly from their current child support assessment time to adjust to the new arrangements.

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list his Department's responsibilities in respect of *(a)* the national insurance scheme and *(b)* other aspects of national insurance in (i) 1979 and (ii) at present. [156096]

Mr. Rooker: As in 1979 the Department remains responsible for matters relating to national insurance benefits and pensions. Responsibility for matters relating to national insurance contributions (apart from policy on the reduced rates and rebates payable in respect of contracted-out pensions) was transferred to the Inland Revenue by the Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions, Etc.) Act 1999.

Appeals Service

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what has been the average clearance time for appeals against benefit assessments in each of the last four years; [155885]

(2) how many appeals were made during the last 12 months against benefit assessments; and how many of these appeals are outstanding; [155886]

(3) if he will set out the strategy implemented by the Appeals Service in order to reduce waiting times for all appellants; and what assessment he has made of its success; [155887]

(4) how many appeals were heard by the Appeals Service in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to April 2000; and how many of the appeals in each of these years were successful; [155888]

(5) how many appeals were lodged with the Appeals Service following refusal of benefit in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to April 2000. [155889]

Angela Eagle: The administration of appeals is a matter for Neil Ward, Chief Executive of the Appeals Service. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Neil Ward to Mr. Patrick Nicholls, dated 29 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions. You asked:

1) What has been the average clearance time for appeals against benefit assessments in each of the last four years (PQ983).

2) How many appeals were made during the last 12 months against benefit assessments; and how many of these appeals are outstanding (PQ984).

3) What strategy was implemented by the Appeals Service in order to reduce waiting times for all appellants; and what assessment has been made of its success (PQ985).

4) How many appeals were heard by the Appeals Service in (a) May 1997 to April 1998, (b) May 1998 to April 1999 and (c) May 1999 to April 2000; and how many of the appeals in each of these years were successful (PQ986).

5) How many appeals were lodged with the Appeals Service following refusal of benefit in (a) May 1997 to April 1998, (b) May 1998 to April 1999 and (c) May 1999 to April 2000 (PQ987).

I am unable to provide all the information in the form you have requested it. However the information that is available is as follows:

	Appeals received	*Average clearance time for appeals from lodgement at first tier agency In weeks*	*Number of appeals heard and decided*	*Number of appeals found in appellant's favour*
1 May 1997 to 30 April 1998	300,389	25.2	158,838[1]	50,466[1]
1 May 1998 to 30 April 1999	316,395	30.3	282,535	98,516
1 May 1999 to 30 April 2000	247,294	31.4	207,724	75,810
1 May 2000 to 30 September 2000	108,879	28.8	70,564	28,668

[1] Figures include appeals not held on the GAPS system for the period 1 July 1997 to 31 December 1997.

Notes:

1. Information taken from 100 per cent. download of the Generic Appeals Processing System (GAPS).
2. The table covers appeals from all sources. It is not possible to distinguish appeals against benefit assessments.
3. Figures may change as later data becomes available.

Since taking up post as Chief Executive in 1999, initially of the Independent Tribunal Service and now of the Appeals Service, I have been fully committed to improving the services that we offer to appellants and others who use or rely upon our services. I have set about this systematically, in three ways:

(i) The backlog of oldest cases I inherited has been tackled and largely cleared. At the end of February 1999, over half—some 77,000 appeals—of our outstanding appeals load were over six months old and many of them considerably older. Priority was given to clearing these appeals on the basis that all appeals were—and still are—dealt with on the basis of "First In, First Out", with staff and tribunal members alike seeing wherever possible to clear the oldest cases first. Of that original 77,000 just over 800 remain and these are almost entirely appeals awaiting decisions from higher courts on lead cases, the outcome of which will have a direct bearing on the outstanding appeals.

(ii) At the same time and for newer appeals, we have sought to reduce both the waiting times that appellants have to wait to have their appeal heard and, where cases are adjourned by tribunals, the length of time they remain outstanding. These measures are now reflected in the targets the Secretary of State has set for the Appeals Service Agency and performance will be reported in the Agency's Annual Report. Currently, the national average waiting time for appellants is 13.7 weeks and some 23 per cent. of our outstanding appeals are over six months old, of which 7,600 appeals cannot proceed until lead cases with higher counts are decided. The current number of appeals outstanding and sitting with the Appeals Service is some 77,600. This progress reflects improvements in delivery of our services in all regions although the extent of the gains varies. Particular attention is now being paid to reducing variations in performance aimed at bringing performance everywhere up to the standards of the best of our offices and we have strengthened our direct service delivery teams accordingly.

(iii) To secure these gains, the Appeals Service has had to become a learning organisation. We have secured Investors in People accreditation and place great importance on practical training programmes designed to improve service delivery. We use the European Foundation for Quality Management's Excellence Model to identify internally areas for improvement; we have run customer and staff surveys to tell us where those who use or operate our services believe improvements can best be made; and we make use of direct feedback from individual appellants, their representatives, Members of Parliament or the Ombudsman.

Improvements are being made and will continue to be so.

I hope this information is helpful.

Housing/Council Tax Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the total expenditure is on *(a)* Housing Benefit and *(b)* Council Tax Benefit for pensioners with an income of less than £210 per week. [153789]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* The estimated Housing and Council Tax Benefit expenditure attributable to pensioners—defined as Benefit Units with at least one person aged 60 or over—with an income of less than £210 per week is £3,865 million and £1,140 million respectively, in 1999–2000, in Great Britain.

Notes:

1. These estimates are based on the estimated out-turn expenditure for 1999–2000 and the May 1999 1 per cent. sample which provides information on claimant incomes.

2. The expenditure refers to the benefit paid to claimants irrespective of the source of funding.

3. Figures are rounded to the nearest £5 million.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow registered social landlords to undertake elements of Housing Benefit administration. [156684]

Angela Eagle: We have secured agreement with all interested parties to involve registered social landlords in certain aspects of the Housing Benefit verification process. This builds on our commitment to improve Housing Benefit administration.

Our intention is to run a pilot in a number of areas, and we will shortly be inviting expressions of interests from local authorities in the form of a joint bid from them and their participating registered social landlords. We will set out the criteria for taking part in the pilot and the way in which we intend to evaluate the bids.

Funeral Payments

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes he proposes to make to the rules regarding funeral payments. [156685]

Angela Eagle: Social Fund funeral payments are intended to enable those on the lowest incomes to provide for a simple, respectful funeral where no other family member can meet the cost. We are acting to remove an anomaly in the regulations so that claimants' relatives in receipt of help under the National Asylum Support Service are treated in the same way as those receiving qualifying benefits. Amending regulations to achieve this will be laid before the House shortly.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the most recent figures for confirmed BSE cases broken down by year of birth. [156642]

Ms Quin: The position in Great Britain as at 26 March 2001 was as follows:

Year of birth	*Total number of confirmed cases*
1974	1
1975	0
1976	2
1977	10
1978	6
1979	41
1980	101
1981	261
1982	1,393
1983	4,462
1984	8,067
1985	11,065
1986	19,733
1987	36,876
1988	22,192
1989	12,652
1990	5,647
1991	4,591
1992	3,201
1993	2,454
1994	1,351
1995	379
1996	[1]5
Unknown	43,322
Total	177,812

[1] A fourth case of BSE in an animal born in 1996 was confirmed on 9 February. The animal was born in January 1996, before the feed ban is considered to have been fully effective.

A fifth case of BSE in an animal born in 1996 was confirmed on 22 March. The animal was born in May 1996, before the feed ban is considered to have been fully effective.

The unknown dates of birth relate to cattle born before 1 July 1996 when it became mandatory for cattle to have passports which show their date of birth. In some cases it is not possible to confirm the date of birth of these animals from farm records.

Animal Movement Licences

Mr. Webb: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the application by Bristol Zoo for a licence to move animals on welfare grounds was given priority over other similar applications by farmers in South Gloucestershire; and if he will make a statement. [156136]

Mr. Morley: The application from Bristol Zoo took its place in the queue. A licence has now been issued.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on behalf of pig farmers about the welfare implications for pigs on farms within areas under foot and mouth restrictions; and if he will make a statement. [155622]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* In response to representations from pig farmers, we have arranged for them to be able to take advantage of the wide range of movement schemes which we have recently introduced.

They can also use the welfare disposal scheme and a scheme for the movement of finished animals to slaughter.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome was of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 19 and 20 March; what the Government's voting record was at the Council; and if he will make a statement. [155102]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the EU Council of Agriculture Ministers on 19 March in Brussels.

I gave the Council a full account of the present state of the foot and mouth outbreak in the UK and the measures which we are taking to eradicate the disease. A similar report was made to the Council by the French Minister of Agriculture in respect of the FMD outbreak confirmed last week in France. The European Commission supported the tough measures being taken in both countries, and discussion revealed a consensus in the Council in favour of a policy of eradication by slaughter rather than one based on vaccination.

In relation to BSE, the Commission brought the Council up to date on progress in extending to third countries the rules for removing specified risk material from cattle. Preliminary results were given from the BSE testing programme which was agreed in December.

In a brief discussion of proposals to adjust the EU beef regime, Commissioner Fischler reported some market improvement following the steep drop in beef consumption of recent months. Meanwhile the special purchase scheme had been passed by Management Committee on 19 March and should have an impact in firming up market prices.

In light of discussion of progress on reform of the sugar and cotton regimes, the Council agreed to work to early conclusions, if possible in April. The Commission introduced a report on prospects for the vegetable protein market which would be further examined at the technical level.

Flood Defences

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement on the allocation of statutory responsibilities for flood defence management in the *(a)* south-eastern and *(b)* eastern regions of England; and what plans he has to review flood defence management structures; [155607]

(2) what plans he has to review the funding of flood defence bodies in the *(a)* south-eastern and *(b)* eastern regions of England. [155593]

Mr. Morley: Throughout England MAFF has policy responsibility for flood and coastal defence while operational responsibility falls to the "operating authorities"; the Environment Agency, internal drainage boards and local authorities.

The Environment Agency has a statutory supervisory duty over all matters relating to flood defence and has permissive powers to undertake sea defence works and works on designated main rivers. Internal Drainage Boards have permissive powers to undertake works on ordinary watercourses within their districts while local authorities have similar powers on ordinary watercourses outside those districts. Where defences are privately owned, responsibility rests with the riparian owner. Finally, maritime local authorities have coast protection powers and may also undertake sea defence works.

A review of the funding arrangements for flood and coastal defence is currently under way and is due to report by September 2001. It is possible that the outcome of that review, and of a separate financial management and policy review of the Environment Agency which is also being undertaken, could give rise to the need to adjust the present institutional arrangements.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he plans to compensate landowners for work carried out on their land to maintain and establish flood defences in *(a)* Norfolk, *(b)* Suffolk, *(c)* Cambridgeshire, *(d)* Bedfordshire, *(e)* Hertfordshire, *(f)* Essex and *(g)* each London borough in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99, (v) 1999–2000, (vi) 2000–01 and (vii) 2001–02. [155610]

Mr. Morley: Ministry grants are available to operating authorities but not to private landowners. However, operating authorities may compensate landowners in certain circumstances when undertaking flood defence works. Where such compensation is regarded as a necessary part of grant aided works, Ministry grant is paid towards the compensation costs.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how much was provided for flood control to each of those local authorities affected by floods in 2000; [155606]

(2) how much was provided for flood control to *(a)* Norfolk, *(b)* Suffolk, *(c)* Cambridgeshire, *(d)* Bedfordshire, *(e)* Hertfordshire, *(f)* Essex and *(g)* each London borough in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99, (v) 1999–2000, (vi) 2000–01 and will be provided for in (vii) 2001–02, (viii) 2002–03 and (ix) 2003–04; [155614]

(3) what plans he has to offer compensation for flood defence works carried out by county and district councils and internal drainage boards in *(a)* Norfolk, *(b)* Suffolk, *(c)* Cambridgeshire, *(d)* Bedfordshire, *(e)* Hertfordshire, *(f)* Essex and *(g)* each London borough; [155609]

(4) what percentage of funding for flood defence management in *(a)* Norfolk, *(b)* Suffolk, *(c)* Cambridgeshire, *(d)* Bedfordshire, *(e)* Hertfordshire, *(f)* Essex and *(g)* each London borough was grant specific in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99, (v) 1999–2000, (vi) 2000–01 and will be in (vii) 2001–02, (viii) 2002–03 and (ix) 2003–04. [155608]

Mr. Morley: Local authorities' expenditure on flood defence falls into three categories: the levy they pay to the Environment Agency, special levies paid to internal drainage boards, and the local authority's own expenditure on flood defence works. Government support for local authority expenditure on flood defence is allocated through the flood defence standard spending assessment (SSA), and distributed as revenue support grant (RSG). RSG is not ring-fenced, as it is one of the key principles of the local government finance systems that local authorities should be able to decide how to allocate their own, and their own taxpayers', money, taking account of statutory requirements and local circumstances. These decisions will reflect each authority's policies for which it is accountable

to local people. The SSAs for the local authorities and years specified, is set out in a table which is available in the Libraries of the House.

The Ministry provides grants (and Supplementary Credit Approvals to local authorities) rather than compensation to the Environment Agency, local authorities and internal drainage boards for flood defence capital works that meet economic, technical and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score. Responsibility for decisions on which works to promote and their timing rests with those operating authorities. Information on specific Ministry flood defence grants is not readily available in the form requested and could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Many local authorities incurred costs in responding to flood emergencies in 2000. Eligible costs may be refunded by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions under a Bellwin scheme. To date 14 local authorities have received a total of £3.8 million under the Bellwin arrangements. These are as follows:

	£
Bridgenorth	19,300
Canterbury	51,800
East Sussex	187,200
Elmbridge	65,587
Lewes	179,500
Maidstone	182,767
Newark and Sherwood	8,361
Shropshire	380,000
Tonbridge and Malling	59,026
Wealden	44,887
West Sussex	1,841,600
Woking	129,195
Wyre	19,229
City of York	708,060
Total	3,876,512

With the exception of Newark and Sherwood, which has been paid in full, all are interim payments of 80 per cent. of the total claim. The balance will be paid on the basis of audited accounts. Claims from other local authorities are expected.

CABINET OFFICE

e-business

Mr. Bailey: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what assessment she has made of departmental e-business strategies. [156545]

Mr. Ian McCartney: All main central Government Departments have now produced initial e-business strategies, as required by the e-government strategic framework I published last year. The strategies are published on the web, and links to them can be found at www.e-envoy.gov.uk/estrats.htm.

The strategies represent an important step towards achieving the Government's target that all services should be available online by 2005. They demonstrate the increasing importance of e-government in transforming the quality of services offered to individuals and to businesses.

The Government's objective, though, is to do more than put individual services online, important though that is. It is to transform the delivery of Government services, so that they are based on customer needs rather than the structures of government. The departmental e-business strategies represent the first step towards that larger goal, but require further development if that wider objective is to be met.

Building on the foundation provided by the initial versions, Departments will therefore develop their strategies to address the major challenges of e-government: working across organisational boundaries to deliver joined-up services; transforming the internal efficiency of government by organising to meet consumer needs not producer preferences; putting e-government at the heart of strategic planning; and developing new partnerships in service delivery.

I am today publishing a note which explains the strategy process in more detail on the e-Envoy's website. Copies will also be placed in the Library.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Trust Office

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps the Lord Chancellor is taking to reform the Public Trust Office; and if she will make a statement. [156639]

Jane Kennedy: On 1 April 2001 the Public Guardianship Office will become a new executive agency of the Lord Chancellor's Department. Also from 1 April 2001, the Public Trust Office's Court Funds Office will transfer to the Court Service and its trust work to the Office of the Official Solicitor. The Public Trust Office will cease to exist.

The Public Guardianship Office will discharge the Court of Protection's decisions on behalf of people with mental incapacity. In creating the Public Guardianship Office, the Lord Chancellor wishes to promote and protect the financial and social well-being of people with mental incapacity by providing a seamless service that is responsive to their needs. The Public Guardianship Office will provide a service which will strike the right balance between protecting the vulnerable while avoiding unnecessary State intervention.

The Lord Chancellor will retain ministerial accountability for the new agency's performance. The Chief Executive of the Public Guardianship Office will have clear responsibilities for improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and quality of service. These responsibilities are set out in the agency's Framework Document, which will be published and copies placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

A Corporate and Business Plan setting out the Public Guardianship Office's plans to achieve its aim and objectives over the first three years of its operation will be published and copies placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The following Key Performance Measures have been set to challenge the Public Guardianship Office to provide a high quality and efficient service to its clients while developing increasing professionalism as an organisation.

Public Guardianship Office Executive Agency Key Performance Measures and Targets 2001–02

KPM1:

To develop an effective system for identifying clients needs.

To develop and implement a comprehensive needs assessment system by 31 March 2004.

KPM2:

To increase the proportion of effective visits

To maintain the current level of visits and to develop appropriate criteria as a basis to measure improvements in effectiveness by end June 2001, thereafter to announce challenging targets against which to measure the Public Guardianship Office's performance in increasing the proportion of effective visits.

KPM3:

To increase the percentage of accounts collected on time and reviewed on time, as a basis for effective action to meet clients' needs.

To complete the review of 95 per cent. of accounts received or have requested further information within six weeks of receipt.

To collect 50 per cent. of accounts within two months of the accounting end date, 70 per cent. within four months of the accounting end date; and 100 per cent. within six months of the accounting end date, referring cases to the Court of Protection where necessary or taking other steps to ensure proper accounts are produced on behalf of clients.

KPM4:

To improve investment performance

To ensure that annually 85 per cent. and on a three year rolling basis 80 per cent. of measured funds perform in line with a model performance based upon the Association of Private Client and Investment Managers' (APCIMS) capital indices; or an acceptable performance is achieved, taking into account the client's overall circumstances, including the income generated.

KPM5:

To secure an improved service in: responding to correspondence; payment out; providing information to receivers to enable them to support our clients; closing cases; and to survey at two-yearly intervals to ensure that these are the most important areas for customer care.

Responding to Letter:

Respond to 85 per cent. letters, faxes and e-mails within 15 working days of receipt and 95 per cent. in 20 days.

Payment out:

For 95 per cent. of requests, pay out or despatch direction to external receiver allowing access to funds to use for benefit of client within 15 working days of receipt.

Information to Receivers:

Despatch court orders and directions to applicants, receivers or their representatives in 95 per cent. of cases within 30 days of their being made.

Closing cases:

For 95 per cent. of complete applications for final directions, transfer all of clients' assets to personal representatives within 25 days.

KPM6:

To establish protocols for working with our receivers and our partners setting out the outcomes we intend to achieve jointly for clients.

To establish protocols with the key bodies with whom the Public Guardianship Office has regular dealings by April 2002, setting out the outcomes to be achieved jointly for clients and memorandums of understanding setting out the ways the Office and its partners will work together to achieve those outcomes.

KPM7:

To demonstrate our capability through a basket of measures: percentage of staff having required skills and competencies; percentage receiving training; an effective research programme which underpins planning to meet clients' needs; and development of an automated case management system.

Staff Skills and Competencies:

At least 90 per cent. of permanent staff to have a current Personal Development Plan which identifies their learning and development needs and makes specific plans to develop their skills and competencies to defined standards.

Staff Training:

At least 75 per cent. of permanent staff to receive at least three days training in line with their Personal Development Plan.

Research:

To complete at least one research study by 31 March 2002 and Develop and publish a detailed research plan by 31 March 2002.

Automated case management system (MERIS):

To award the contract for an automated case management system to a supplier before end of third quarter 2001–02; design and development by supplier to commence before the end of the fourth quarter 2001–02.

KPM8:

Cost per unit. To develop an appropriate unit cost per case as a basis to measure improvements in efficiency by end June 2001. To announce targets for 2001–02 requiring improvements in efficiency based on the unit cost.

Civil Procedure Rules

Mr. Doug Henderson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the evaluation of the Civil Procedure Rules. [156636]

Mr. Lock: My Department has today published "Emerging Findings: An Early Evaluation of the Civil Justice Reforms" which sets out the evidence we have so far and plans for further evaluation. The paper shows that the reforms have been generally welcomed and appear to be working well.

The key findings from the report are:

Overall there has been a drop in the number of claims issued, in particular in the types of claim where the new Civil Procedure Rules have been introduced;

Anecdotal evidence suggests pre-action protocols are working well to promote settlement before issue and to reduce the number of ill founded claims;

The system of claimants offers has been welcomed by all interested groups as a means of resolving claims more quickly;

There has been a rise in the number of cases in which Alternative Dispute Resolution is used suggesting that, since the introduction of the Civil Procedure Rules, parties are more likely to try alternative means of settling claims;

The use of single joint experts appears to have worked well. It is likely that their use has contributed to a less adversarial culture, earlier settlement and may have cut costs;

The time between issue and hearing for those cases which go to trial has fallen.

It is too early to provide a definitive view on costs with statistics difficult to obtain and conflicting anecdotal evidence.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

War Pension Disability Orders

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when she expects the Appeals Service to hear the complaint of Mr. P. R. Manifield. [155891]

Jane Kennedy: Mr. Manifield has appealed to the Pensions Appeal Tribunals against a decision of the War Pensions Agency to reduce his disablement benefit. Mr. Manifield's appeal has been listed for hearing at the Pensions Appeal Tribunal in Exeter on 22 May 2001.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what the average time is before *(a)* all types of appeals and *(b)* appeals relating to war pension disability orders are heard by appeal tribunals; and if she will make a statement; [155890]

(2) if she will make a statement on the ability of the War Pension Appeal procedure to deal efficiently and effectively with the cases of ex-service personnel. [155892]

Jane Kennedy: Appeals to the Pensions Appeal Tribunal currently all relate to war pensions entitlement and disability assessments. The average waiting time between the receipt of an appeal by the Pensions Appeal Tribunals and hearing is currently 82 weeks.

Provisions in The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, which came into force in England and Wales on 9 April 2001, will enable appeals to be listed for hearing more quickly and allow for appeals to be dealt with efficiently and effectively.

The introduction of a six-month time limit will mean that the information available to the tribunal to determine the appeal will be more timely. At present there is no time limit for appealing a decision of the War Pensions Agency and in some cases the tribunal have to decide appeals where the decision has been made many years before.

Additionally the tribunal will, from 9 April 2001, be required to consider only those factors pertaining at the time the decision was made. Under the existing rules the tribunal also have to take into account any changes that may have occurred between the decision being made and the date of the hearing. In practice this has meant that the tribunal often had to obtain new evidence which was not considered by the War Pensions Agency in making their decision.

These provisions, along with operational improvements including additional sitting capacity, will help to reduce the waiting times.

Women Judges

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to appoint more women judges. [155973]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor appoints to judicial office on merit from among those who are eligible, suitable and who put themselves forward for appointment. The number of women holding judicial office reflects the number of women practitioners in the legal profession with the appropriate period of experience. In the more senior positions there are now more women judges than every before. As of 31 March 2000, there were 11 women judges in the High Court and above and, of the 12 senior appointments made last year, five were of women. The Lord Chancellor has introduced a number of initiatives to encourage greater numbers to apply for judicial office, and to secure equality of opportunity. For example, he has made information about the appointments procedures widely available; he applies the procedures flexibly in relation to the age and sitting arrangements; he has introduced a work shadowing scheme; and he has reviewed the criteria for appointment. These efforts will continue and be developed with a view to progressive increases in numbers as the pool of suitable candidates grows.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 30 March 2001

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Art Exports

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he intends to undertake reviews of the National Museum of Science and Industry, Geffrye Museum/Horniman Museum/Museum of London, National Maritime Museum, Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection. [156815]

Mr. Alan Howarth: As part of the Department's programme of quinquennial reviews of its public bodies, I am today announcing that this summer we will be starting reviews of the National Museum of Science and Industry, Geffrye Museum/Horniman Museum/Museum of London (jointly), National Maritime Museum, Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection.

The reviews will include an evaluation of the role and functions of these bodies and how those functions can best be carried out, and a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of the way in which they deliver services to their users. We estimate that the reviews will be completed next spring. A copy of the announcement has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Report

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Solicitor-General when the Law Officer's Departments' Departmental report will be published. [156220]

The Solicitor-General: I can confirm that today copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Immigration and Asylum Appeals

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will list the average time taken between the receipt of *(a)* an asylum appeal and *(b)* an immigration appeal to the Independent Appellate Authority and an appeal decision, for the latest period for which figures are available. [156261]

Jane Kennedy: The average time taken by the Immigration Appellate Authority, from receipt to determination in the period 1 April 2000 to 28 February 2001, is 21.2 weeks for an asylum appeal and 28.6 weeks for an immigration appeal.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the average annual cost is of employing *(a)* a full-time adjudicator and *(b)* a part-time adjudicator to hear immigration and asylum appeals. [156262]

Jane Kennedy: The average annual direct cost of an adjudicator, with effect from 1 April 2001, will be £106,201. The fee for a part-time adjudicator is calculated on a pro rata basis from the annual salary cost of a full-time adjudicator. The average cost is therefore identical.

DEFENCE

Northwood

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the HQ at Northwood will close; what sites are being considered as a replacement; and if he will make a statement. [155802]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* I have authorised the start of formal consultations with the departmental trades unions regarding the proposed streamlining and relocation to Portsmouth of elements of the Commander in Chief Fleet's Headquarters. Under these proposals the Commander in Chief Fleet, who also holds key NATO appointments, would remain at Northwood with his national and NATO operations staffs and other site occupants including the Chief of Joint Operations. Northwood will remain a core MOD site for the foreseeable future.

Service Pensions

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has to review the levels of service pensions of men and women who retired before 1975; [156116]

(2) when he will publish the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme; and if he will make a statement; [156114]

(3) what plans he has to increase service pensions to the widows of service men who married after the service man's retirement and before 1978; [156118]

(4) what steps he is taking to address the differences in widows' service pensions between the widow of a service man who retired in the period up to March 1973, and the widow of a service man who retired after April 1973. [156115]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence gave on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 756W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy). The review proposals do not include recommendations to introduce changes to the Armed Forces Pension Scheme retrospectively. This is in line with public sector pension policy maintained by successive Governments.

Police Complaints Authority

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the agreement between the Secretary of State for Defence and the Police Complaints Authority signed on 23 June 1988. [156005]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 29 March 2001]:* Yes.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Peerages

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how many civil servants and at which grades are charged with carrying out the preliminary sift of applications for a people's peerage. [155588]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that a small team of 10 civil servants, led by a member of the Senior Civil Service, has assisted the Commission in sifting applications for recommendation as a non-political peer.

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the President of the Council if the Government will seek to increase the powers of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards *(a)* to provide independent advice to Ministers on their responsibilities under the Ministerial Code, *(b)* to appoint independent investigators of alleged breaches of the code and *(c)* to report to the Prime Minister and the House. [156207]

Mrs. Beckett: The Government's position on the provision of independent advice on allegations of breaches of the Ministerial Code is set out in the Government's response to the sixth report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Miners

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to reinstate the miners sacked in 1984–85 into the Miners' Pension Fund. [156110]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on 27 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 586W.

Intellectual Property

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what new proposals he has to protect and promote British intellectual property. [156075]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 29 March 2001]:* Protection for British intellectual property (IP) is central to our objectives for European and international activities in this area. Towards the end of last year the European Commission adopted an Action Plan on Counterfeiting and Piracy. This promises a Directive aimed at strengthening enforcement of intellectual property rights across the Community through harmonisation of legislation and procedures, and establishing a general framework for co-operation between member states. The Action Plan is in line with work, especially on promoting co-operation between enforcement bodies, which we have already begun here. Internationally we are working closely with our European partners to ensure that IP rights and their enforcement are available to British industry in all members of the World Trade Organisation, especially in our major trading partners, through full implementation of the Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs). Where British interests are disadvantaged by failure to provide the required standards of IP protection we continue to use internationally recognised WTO disputes resolution arrangements.

We are also strengthening measures to protect IP in the United Kingdom. For example, the Government are supporting a private Member's Bill (The Copyright etc. and Trade Marks (Offences and Enforcement) Bill) currently before Parliament that will bring into line criminal provisions in copyright with those in trade marks law, and so make enforcement actions more effective.

Promoting IP and its value to us all is a key task. The Patent Office continues to undertake events and workshops aimed at promoting IP, raising awareness in general and in particular communities such as small businesses and business intermediaries. The aim is to create understanding and respect for IP throughout the society and the community. For example last November a new portal website for IP (www.intellectual-property.gov.uk) was launched that provides information for both creators and users of IP and provides links to many other useful sites. The Patent Office's own recently improved website (www.patent.gov.uk) has won an award in the Government Website Awards announced last week. We have also undertaken research into people's understanding of IP to identify the right messages to improve awareness and are exploring how to improve education about IP in both schools and higher education.

Phoenix Fund

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial targets are to be set for community finance initiatives funded from the Phoenix Fund by the Small Business Service; and if he will make a statement. [156259]

Ms Hewitt: CFIs can take a variety of forms, in a legal and operational structure as well as operation of different lending models. Combined with the fact that the CFI sector within the UK is still developing and a number are still in their formative stages, the imposition of operational financial targets as part of the Phoenix Fund support is not deemed to be appropriate at this time. All supported CFIs are being actively encouraged to work towards operational sustainability and this was considered as part of the application assessment process.

The Small Business Service and HM Treasury are currently working with relevant private sector organisations towards formation of a high quality, professional and adequately resourced Trade Association for the community development finance sector. It is

envisaged that any Trade Association will, once operational, formulate performance indicators to assist members with comparison of their performance to "best practice" and similar organisations. CFIs supported through the Phoenix Fund will be encouraged to seek membership of any such Trade Association.

The purpose of the CFI elements of the Phoenix Fund is to encourage entrepreneurship within disadvantaged groups and communities, through stimulating the growth and development of the CFI sector in the UK. CFIs supported through this programme are required to provide quarterly reports in a format prescribed by the Small Business Service, in order to monitor the impact on the disadvantaged target group or community of each CFI.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria are used to evaluate bids from community finance initiatives for Challenge Fund support from the Phoenix Fund; and if he will make a statement. [156258]

Ms Hewitt: CFI support from the Phoenix Fund is allocated on a competitive challenge basis. The assessment process has two elements being, (i) review by SBS against key criteria stated in the bidding guidance, (ii) an independent assessment panel to advise the SBS Chief Executive on the final award of Phoenix Fund support. In reviewing the bids the panel was concerned with the soundness of each proposal, its impact on entrepreneurship in areas of disadvantage, impact on the growth of the CFI sector in the UK and development of appropriate models and good practice.

Bidding guidance for the first round of Phoenix Fund support for CFIs was issued in June 2000 and copies are held in the Library of the House.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what priority is given to community finance initiatives that are national in scope within the Challenge Fund element of the Phoenix Fund; and if he will make a statement. [156260]

Ms Hewitt: CFI support from the Phoenix Fund is allocated on a competitive challenge basis. The assessment process had two elements being, (i) review by SBS against key criteria stated in the bidding guidance, (ii) an independent assessment panel to advise the SBS Chief Executive on the final award of Phoenix Fund support. In reviewing the bids the panel was concerned with the soundness of each proposal, its impact on entrepreneurship in areas of disadvantage, impact on the growth of the CFI sector in the UK and development of appropriate models and good practice.

Within the context of this challenge process no preference or priority is given to whether an applicant organisation operates at a national or local level. The PAT 3 recommendation which underlies the CFI support programme was to support CFIs in disadvantaged areas and deprived groups. As part of the assessment against key criteria, consideration is given to whether an applicant organisation demonstrates a clear focus on disadvantaged areas or deprivation and how it compares against other applications which have a clear focus on social exclusion and deprived groups.

Coal Health Compensation Scheme

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress there has been on reaching a settlement to enable compensation to be paid to surface only and mixed underground/surface claimants under the Coal Health Compensation Scheme. [156751]

Mr. Hain: The Department accepted liability for surface dust in a minute to Parliament dated 10 July 2000. However, questions remained over the extent of that liability.

The Department's medical advice is that surface-only workers in jobs categorised as 'dusty' may well suffer from chronic bronchitis or temporary exacerbation of asthma because of exposure to the sort of particles which form visible dust. However, it is the much smaller particles of 'respirable dust'—not visible to the naked eye—which cause chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). At the respirable dust levels recorded by the Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM) and using the figures for loss of lung function accepted by the Judge, the Department's medical advice is that there is very little likelihood of men in surface-only 'dusty' work developing COPD, even over a whole working lifetime.

Claimants' solicitors do not share the Department's position. To move matters forward, the Department and the claimants' solicitors are carrying out a joint study on surface dust issues. The results of the study will be put to each side's medical advisers and will help to inform any final settlement.

The study is in two parts:

(i) a study is being carried out of x-ray data from periodic health surveys of an agreed sample of collieries in England, Scotland and Wales; and

(ii) 100 surface only claimants are being put through the MAP in normal priority order, to establish the prevalence of COPD and its causes among this cohort.

On 'mixed' (underground/surface) claims, the Department has reached a negotiated agreement with claimants' solicitors and arrangements are being made to incorporate the claims within the terms of the Claims Handling Agreement so that compensation can be paid out as soon as possible. The position on mixed workers is different from surface only workers. The Department's view is that people with mixed claims may well have legitimate claims for dust-related COPD for the surface element of their claim because their exposure to dust underground will have taken them over the 'threshold' after which further exposure to dust will cause them further incremental disability.

Regional Selective Assistance

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on how much regional selective assistance has been offered to companies investing in the English regions since May 1997. [156753]

Mr. Caborn: A total of £581.6 million has been offered as follows:

	£ million
Region/county	*Grant value*
Eastern	
Bedfordshire	1.4
Cambridgeshire	1.1
Essex	0.4
Norfolk	1.3
Suffolk	0.3
Total	4.5
East Midlands	
Derbyshire	6.6
Leicestershire	0.4
Lincolnshire	1.5
Nottinghamshire	32.2
Total	40.7
London	
North East London	2.6
North West London	3.4
South East London	0.4
Total	6.4
North East	
Cleveland	12.2
Durham	25.8
Northumberland	9.5
Tyne and Wear	106.3
Total	153.8
North West	
Cheshire	22.1
Cumbria	4.8
Greater Manchester	28.0
Lancashire	6.3
Merseyside	89.1
Total	150.3
South East	
East Sussex	1.8
Isle of Wight	3.4
Kent	12.4
Total	17.6
South West	
Cornwall	14.0
Devon	22.0
Dorset	1.6
Total	37.6
West Midlands	
Hereford and Worcester	0.9
Shropshire	0.9
Staffordshire	9.7
Warwickshire	25.5
West Midlands	63.1
Total	100.1
Yorkshire/Humberside	
Humberside	15.5
North Yorkshire	0.3
South Yorkshire	48.9
West Yorkshire	5.9
Total	70.6
Grand total	581.6

Absence Management

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on how employers manage absences. [156752]

Mr. Byers: The Green Paper, "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice", indicated that my Department would be undertaking research on how employers manage absence.

In the absence of that research, the costing of policy options considered in the Green Paper made an assumption about the cost to employers of covering for absences. The specific assumption made was that the cost of a week's absence to an employer was 24 per cent. of labour costs.

Information gathered during the consultation process and emerging findings from research commissioned by my Department, suggest that this assumption was too high. It is important to distinguish situations where an employer covers absence by taking on a temporary replacement from situations where the employer manages absences by internal reallocation of work. The costs of each will be different. Where a temporary replacement is hired, the employer faces the one-off costs of recruitment. In contrast, if work is reallocated, there are no recruitment costs but there are likely to be recurring costs to the business. The decisions employers take on how to cover for any specific absence will depend upon the length of the absence, its nature (whether planned or unplanned), the size and nature of the business, and the skill level the post requires.

The partial regulatory impact assessment (RIA) given in answer to question number 156754 explores these issues further. Full details are given in Annexe 2 of this RIA.

"Work and Parents" Green Paper

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will provide a regulatory impact assessment for those measures that have been announced following the end of the consultation on the Green Paper, "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice". [156754]

Mr. Byers: I am placing a partial regulatory impact assessment in the Library of the House for those measures which have been announced following the consultation on the Green Paper, "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice". A full regulatory impact assessment will be published when the relevant legislation is presented to Parliament.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Foot and Mouth

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the action being taken by his Department to help people affected by the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [156749]

Mr. Darling: My Department has taken urgent measures to ensure that benefit claims from people who have been affected by foot and mouth disease are dealt with quickly and sensitively.

We are preparing an information sheet for people living in affected areas listing the benefits most likely to be available to them, the conditions of entitlement and giving examples of the evidence needed to support their claims to ensure they are completed as quickly as possible.

Jobseeker's Allowance, administered by the Benefits Agency, can help people whose normal work or business has been interrupted or who are workless. We have issued guidance to local Benefits Agency staff to remind them of the flexibilities in the benefit rules which are likely to apply to people making claims in affected areas. We are also giving local decision-makers direct access to specialist advice and guidance to ensure that any queries on claims are resolved without delay and are working closely with colleagues in the Employment Service.

Housing Benefit, administered by local councils, is available to help meet the housing costs of people who rent their homes and who are out of work or have insufficient earnings. Social Fund crisis loans are also payable under normal rules to prevent people in affected areas from suffering hardship. We have taken steps to ensure that sufficient funds to meet such need are available to Benefits Agency districts covering affected areas.

We are receiving regular progress reports from the Benefits Agency on benefit claims in affected areas and are keeping the position under close review.

Departmental Report

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when his Departmental report will be published. [156750]

Mr. Darling: The Social Security Departmental Report, which sets out the Department's expenditure plans for 2001–02 to 2003–04 and the Main Estimate for 2001–02, has been laid before Parliament. A copy has been placed in the Library.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Burma

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning recent attacks upon Rohingya Muslims by Rakhine Buddhist extremists in Arakan State, Burma; and if he will make a statement. [155348]

Mr. Battle: I understand that the violence occurred in Northern Rakhine State, a remote part of Burma. Contacts with UNHCR and INGOs have confirmed reports that there was renewed violence in February 2001, which resulted in loss of life and destruction of homes. Intercommunal tension in Rakhine State is just one example of the suffering of the peoples of Burma. We will continue to press for change in Burma to bring about national reconciliation, full respect for human rights and a return to democracy.

Minister for Europe

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many overseas visits, and to which countries, the Minister for Europe has undertaken on official business since assuming his office. [156762]

Mr. Vaz: The information is in the table.

Overseas travel: Keith Vaz MP—Minister for Europe

Serial number	*Dates*	*Location*
01	14–15 October 1999	Tampere
02	18 October 1999	Hungary
03	19–20 October 1999	Warsaw
04	31 October—01 November 1999	Yerevan
05	08–09 November 1999	Paris
06	15–16 November 1999	Brussels
07	17 November 1999	Strasbourg
08	20–21 November 1999	Florence
09	23 November 1999	Luxembourg
10	09–11 December 1999	Helsinki
11	16–18 January 2000	Rome
12	19–20 January 2000	Athens
13	22 January 2000	Paris
14	24–25 January 2000	Brussels
15	30 January—05 February 2000	India
16	14 February 2000	Brussels
17	18 February 2000	Zagreb
18	28 February—01 March 2000	Washington
19	15–16 March 2000	Berlin
20	23–24 March 2000	Lisbon
21	29–30 March 2000	Brussels
22	10–11 April 2000	Luxembourg
23	15–16 May 2000	Porto
24	18–19 May 2000	Gibraltar
25	23 May 2000	Brussels
26	24–25 May 2000	Spain
27	25–26 May 2000	Lisbon
28	13 June 2000	Luxembourg
29	18–19 June 2000	Porto
30	04–05 July 2000	Malta
31	10 July 2000	Brussels
32	25–26 July 2000	Athens
33	05–06 September 2000	Slovenia
34	07 September 2000	The Hague
35	11–12 September 2000	Sweden
36	18 September 2000	Brussels
37	12–13 October 2000	Biarritz
38	18–19 October 2000	Italy
39	08 November 2000	Latvia
40	09 November 2000	Lithuania
41	19–20 November 2000	Brussels
42	28 November 2000	Slovakia
43	04 December 2000	Brussels
44	07–12 December 2000	Nice
45	15 December 2000	Brussels
46	22 January 2001	Brussels
47	24 January 2001	Prague
48	09 February 2001	Helsinki
49	22–23 February 2001	Stockholm
50	26 February 2001	Brussels
51	28 February 2001	Austria
52	14 March 2001	Cyprus
53	19 March 2001	Brussels
54	22–24 March 2001	Stockholm

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) of 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 112W, for what reason the responsibilities of the Minister for Europe were expanded to include entry clearance. [156355]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Minister for Europe was asked to take on responsibility for entry clearance because he was the best man for the job. His stewardship of the portfolio since then has been an outstanding success, as has been recognised by many Members of this House. At home and overseas he has delivered a huge improvement in service. He eliminated the backlog of replies to Members' letters on entry clearance cases, and has achieved dramatic reductions in waiting times at overseas posts such as Islamabad.

Iraq (Export Controls)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what goods subject to strategic export controls have been approved for export to Iraq in the last three months. [156755]

Mr. Battle: Following consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry recently approved licences to export 30 electronic exploder and four Hook and Line Kits, controlled under the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended, to the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) for use in a humanitarian mine clearance programme in Northern Iraq under the UN Oil for Food Programme. The export of these goods to Iraq has been approved by the UN Sanctions Committee.

East Timor

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy on the deaths of newsmen in Balibo, East Timor in 1975. [156198]

Mr. Battle: The British Government continue to take an active interest in this case. When I met Sergio Vieira de Mello, Head of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), in London on 6 March, I asked him about the UN investigation into the deaths. Mr. de Mello confirmed that the UN police report had been submitted to Mr. Othman, the UN Prosecutor General, who has said that there are grounds to continue with the investigations but that the case is not yet ready for trial. We will continue to monitor developments closely.

Foot and Mouth

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) on what date (i) an official and (ii) a Minister from his Department first informed *(a)* an official and *(b)* a Minister in another EU member state that the UK had its first (1) suspected and (2) confirmed case in the foot and mouth disease outbreak; [156384]

(2) on what date (i) an official and (ii) a Minister in his Department first informed *(a)* an official and *(b)* a Commissioner in the European Commission that the UK had its first (1) suspected and (2) confirmed case in the foot and mouth disease outbreak. [156385]

Mr. Vaz: The Government Chief Veterinary Officer confirmed the presence of foot and mouth on the night of 20 February. The Government were immediately in close contact with the European Commission and other member states. As lead Department, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has since then been in constant contact with European colleagues and the Commission. The FCO has supported through Embassies and Ministerial contacts. The Government have taken every step possible to protect our own industry and farming across Europe.

Mapesbury Communications

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* present and *(b)* former (i) employees and (ii) directors of Mapesbury Communications have served as political aides or advisers to the Minister for Europe. [156077]

Mr. Vaz: None.

HEALTH

Interest-free Mortgages (NHS Staff)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to promote interest-free mortgages to *(a)* ambulance service staff, *(b)* nurses, *(c)* professions allied to medicine and *(d)* other NHS staff, who are based in London. [142201]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service housing co-ordinator in support of the recruitment and retention campaign is developing affordable accommodation for NHS staff. He is examining a range of options for supporting low-cost housing for NHS staff.

Operations

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each health authority in England, the number of operations (i) cancelled and (ii) cancelled with the patient not readmitted within one month, for each year since 1995. [149434]

Mr. Denham: The Department of Health in England monitors performance against the standard covering "last minute cancelled operations" for non-medical reasons which requires patients to be admitted (or readmitted) within one month following such cancellations. Monitoring in England is carried out on a quarterly basis at health authority level, and the results are routinely placed in the Library. The latest results cover the period quarter 3 1999–2000 to Quarter 3 2000–01. Quarterly results from 1994–95 are available in the Library.

Information on cancelled operations for the rest of the United Kingdom should be obtained from the respective Health Departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were available in *(a)* Great Britain and *(b)* each NHS trust in (i) 1979, (ii) 1990 and (iii) each year from 1992 to the latest date for which figures are available. [149433]

Mr. Denham: The average daily number of available beds in England for 1979 and 1990–91 to 1999–2000 are given in the table. The first National Health Service trusts were established in 1991–92. Prior to this, information on bed numbers was collected from district health authorities and not individual units. Detailed information on the average daily number of beds in England is published annually in "Bed Availability and Occupancy, England", copies of which are available in the Library. Questions for Scotland and Wales are matters for the devolved administrations.

Average daily number of available beds in wards open overnight, all specialties, England, 1979 and 1990–91 to 1999–2000

	Total beds
1979	361,670
1990–91	255,479
1991–92	242,677
1992–93	232,201
1993–94	219,476
1994–95	211,812
1995–96	206,136
1996–97	198,848
1997–98	193,625
1998–99	190,006
1999–2000	186,290

Source:
Department of Health form KH03, SH3

Latest figures collected on 1 December 2000 show an increase of general and acute beds. The NHS Plan will provide 7,000 extra beds nationally by 2004, including 2,100 on general and acute wards. Within this expanded bedstock, there will also be a 30 per cent. increase in adult critical care beds over the next three years.

General Practitioners

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many GPs left practice in 2000–01; and how many of these were *(a)* part-time and *(b)* full-time equivalents; [152803]

(2) how many new GPs were appointed in the financial year 2000–01; and how many of these were *(a)* part-time and *(b)* full-time equivalents; [152802]

(3) what the net change in the number of full-time equivalent GPs was between 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [152804]

Mr. Denham: Between 1999 and 2000 there was a net increase of 410 general practitioners or 190 on an estimated whole time equivalent basis. In addition, the number of GP registrars (trainees) continues to rise from its low point of 1,305 in 1996 to 1,659 at 31 September 2000. These are the GPs of the future.

The table gives more details of joiners and leavers. It shows that, 203 unrestricted principal and equivalent GPs joined practice and 1,090 left. Within these totals the table identifies the numbers of full and part-time GPs in each category. It does not however show how many GPs who have stopped working as an unrestricted principal or equivalent continue to practise as, for example, locums, as part of the salaried doctor scheme, or retainers. That information is not held centrally.

Unrestricted Principals and Equivalents (UPEs)[1]: Joiners and Leavers[2]

England			*Number (headcount)*
	1999	*1999–2000*	*2000*
UPEs[1]	27,591	—	27,704
All Joiners	—	1,203	—
of which:			
Full-time	—	723	—
Part-time	—	480	—
of which:			
New Joiners	—	958	—
of which:			
Full-time	—	597	—
Part-time	—	361	—
Rejoiners	—	245	—
of which:			
Full-time	—	126	—
Part-time	—	119	—
Leavers	—	1,090	—
of which:			
Full-time	—	748	—
Part-time	—	342	—

[1] UPEs includes Unrestricted Principals, PMS Contracted GPs and PMS Salaried GPs.
[2] Leavers are defined as UPEs recorded in the 1999 census but not in the 2000 census Joiners are defined as UPEs recorded in the 2000 census but not in the 1999 census although Rejoiners have been employed at some time prior to 1999 and new joiners are doctors who have not previously held a UPE post. Part time is a combination of three-quarter time, half time and job share.
Source:
Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics.

Nurses

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the impact of Project 2000 upon nurse recruitment. [153793]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* Between 1997 and 2000 the number of qualified nurses working in the National Health Service has increased by 17,100.

Nurse recruitment is influenced by a range of factors including pay and working conditions and it is not possible to identify the impact of Project 2000 on this separately.

NHS Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many draft Full Business Cases for NHS hospital trust computer systems *(a)* are now held in each regional office of the NHS Executive and *(b)* were first submitted in (i) 1999, (ii) 2000 and (iii) 2001, broken down by regional office. [153095]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Six draft full business cases (FBC) for National Health

Service hospital trust computer systems are currently held by regional offices. None of these were submitted in 1999, four of the six were submitted in 2000 and the remaining two in 2001. Details are given in the table.

Four regional offices (Northern and Yorkshire, Eastern, London and South and West regional offices) currently hold no draft FBC for NHS hospital trust computer systems.

Regional office	*Number of draft FBCs currently held*	*Trust(s) submitting draft FBC*	*Type of investment*	*Draft FBCs submitted in 2000*	*Draft FBCs first submitted in 2001*
North West	3	Bury Health Care NHS Trust and Rochdale Healthcare NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	Yes	—
		South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records and Picture Archiving and Communication System	Yes	—
		Tameside Acute Services NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	Yes	—
Trent	1	Scunthorpe and Goole Hospitals NHS Trust	Pathology system	—	Yes
West Midlands	1	Wolverhampton Health Care NHS Trust	Radiology/Picture Archiving and Communication System	—	Yes
South East	1	Kettering General Hospital NHS Trust	Electronic Patient Records	Yes	—

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire of 19 January on behalf of his constituent Mr. Ball. [154728]

Mr. Denham: A reply to the right hon. Member's letter was sent on 27 March 2001.

Dentists

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists in Battersea have expanded their practice to treat more NHS patients through the Commitment Payment Scheme since April 2000. [154832]

Mr. Hutton: The information required is not held centrally in the format requested. Information on dental practices is held by health authority.

The number of General Dental Service (GDS) dentists in Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority receiving commitment payments at the different levels for the June 2000 quarter and December 2000 quarter are shown in the table.

	Number of dentists	
Level of Payments	*April to June 2000*	*October to December 2000*
Level 1-£25	24	18
Level 2-£112.50 or £168.75	8	12
Level 3-£222 or £333	17	12
Level 4-£334 or £501	32	30
Level 5-£445 or £667.50	7	12
Level 6-£556 or £834	16	15
Total	104	99

The value of a commitment payment paid to a dentist in the GDS depends on their level of commitment. Those who qualify may get a payment ranging from £25 for those doing some work within GDS to £834 for those aged 45 or over who have the highest levels of commitment.

Doctors and Nurses

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the targets in the NHS Plan for additional doctors and nurses relate to additional whole-time equivalent doctors and nurses; [155399]

(2) if he will place in the Library on the first anniversary of the publication of the NHS Plan and on each subsequent anniversary, figures indicating the Government's progress towards achieving the NHS Plan targets for additional *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses, expressed as whole-time equivalents; [155406]

(3) by what specific date the NHS Plan targets for extra doctors and nurses are to be achieved. [155400]

Mr. Denham: The targets for doctors and nurses in the NHS Plan are all expressed in headcount as was made plain at the time of publication. We will provide 7,500 more consultants, 2,000 more general practitioners and 20,000 more nurses by 2004.

The Department's annual workforce censuses collect headcount and whole time equivalent figures as at 30 September each year and are routinely published and placed in the library.

Looked-after Children

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the statutory right to advocacy for looked-after children. [155467]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Following the recent consultation exercise on social services complaints procedures, we are considering whether it is possible to introduce a statutory right of access to an advocate under the Children Act procedures.

Listening to the voices of looked-after children and young people is an integral part of the Quality Protects programme. The programme encourages the growth of high quality independent advocacy services in every council and allocates special grant funding for this

purpose. There are already many good examples of advocacy in social services and we recognise how vital it is to listen to children and young people.

The local authority circular (LAC(2000)22), issued on 13 November 2000 continues to place listening to children as a priority area for 2001–02 and requires local councils to involve young people collectively and to enhance their individual voices through, for example, the development of independent advocacy services. In addition, local councils are encouraged to speed up the complaints procedures, so that children's concerns can be dealt with promptly and sympathetically.

Paramedics

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the pay of paramedics. [155952]

Mr. Denham: All ambulance staff on national terms and conditions, including paramedics will receive an above inflation increase of 3.7 per cent. from 1 April 2001. Increases of 3.7 per cent. are also made to on call, standby and London allowances. Advance letters promulgating the pay award were issued to National Health Service employers on 1 March to allow increases to be paid in April salaries.

Drugs

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the Government's response to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs report on Reducing Drug Related Deaths. [156547]

Ms Stuart: The Government are publishing their response to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs report today. Copies will be placed in the Library. This is the first stage of our response—we are also preparing an Action Plan to reduce drug misuse related deaths which we intend to publish this summer. This action plan will set targets for agencies and Government departments.

Child Welfare Guidance

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will issue guidance to local authority social services departments on the *(a)* residence and *(b)* family circumstances under which a local authority is financially responsible for a child whose mother has been murdered by his father. [156008]

Mr. Hutton: Under Section 17(1) of the Children Act 1989 the duty of every council with social services responsibilities is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and, so far as is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families, by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs. Section 23(2) of the Children Act requires such councils to provide accommodation and maintenance for any child whom they are looking after by placing them with a family; a relative; or any other suitable person, on such terms as to payment as the council may determine. The Benefits Agency may have a role to play in providing financial assistance for a person caring for a child in such circumstances.

Ten volumes of guidance accompanied the Children Act. The "Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families," published in 2000, provides vital new guidance in assessing the development needs of children and the capacity of their families to respond to these needs in the short and longer term. This guidance was developed to assist councils with social services responsibilities to assess and provide effective services for children in need and their families.

It is not therefore anticipated that further guidance is necessary.

NHS Plan

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received on the cost of production and distribution of the NHS Plan document; [155912]

(2) what the cost is of *(a)* publication and *(b)* distribution of the NHS Plan Document; and if he will make a statement. [155752]

Mr. Denham: To my knowledge no representations have been received on the cost of production and distribution of the NHS Plan document.

The publication and distribution of the NHS Plan cost £175,050 and £268,856 respectively.

WALES

Opinion Polling

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what *(a)* quantitative and *(b)* qualitative analytical work his Department has commissioned from GGC/NOP since 1 May 1997; and what was (i) the cost of the contract and (ii) the specific nature of the work commissioned. [155669]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* The Wales Office has not commissioned any quantitative or qualitative analytical work from GGC/NOP since it was established on 1 July, 1999.

Information for the period 1 May 1997 to 30 June 1999 is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what precautions are taken by his Department's vets and officials to avoid spreading foot and mouth disease when they move from farm to farm. [154995]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* All officials and contractors must observe stringent cleansing and disinfection procedures when entering or leaving a premises where disease has been confirmed or suspected. Any official or contractor who enters a premises where disease has been confirmed may not enter another premises which contains susceptible species for a period of three days. In certain areas of the country, and in very limited circumstances, this period has just been reduced

to 24 hours. In these cases, the risk of spreading foot and mouth disease from the person concerned is far less than the risk that would result from the delayed identification of other infected premises.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department was first informed of the possibility of a suspected case of foot and mouth disease at Heddon-on-the-Wall, Northumberland. [154956]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The Ministry first became aware of a suspected case of foot1and mouth in pigs at a farm in Heddo-on-the-Wall on 22 February and confirmed disease on the following day.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the recommended permitted time is from the culling of an animal to the disposal of its carcase. [153953]

Ms Quin: Our objective is to slaughter affected animals within 24 hours of disease having been confirmed, and then to dispose of the carcases within a further 24 hours. There have been problems in achieving these targets, primarily in areas of high disease incidence particularly with the disposal of carcases. Extra operational support has been brought in, in particular logistical help from the armed forces to improve the planning, co-ordination and management of the slaughter and disposal process.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason it is taking five days for pigs in some areas to be slaughtered after being diagnosed as infected with the foot and mouth virus. [155077]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* We are not aware of any occasion where it has taken five days to slaughter pigs after disease has been confirmed. If the hon. Member can provide me with details of cases he has in mind, we will look into the matter further.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the reason is for the length of time taken for tests on livestock for foot and mouth disease to be completed and reported. [154994]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* Currently, well over 90 per cent. of foot and mouth cases are being confirmed on the basis of clinical evidence by the veterinary officer who inspects the animals concerned. Where it is necessary to take samples for testing, these are collected, packaged and despatched to the Institute for Animal Health (IAH) at Pirbright in Surrey. The IAH carry out an ELISA test which takes about 5–6 hours to complete. Positive results are then faxed to MAFF's Emergency Control Centre in London for immediate action. The ELISA test can give false negative results and so all negatives are checked by attempting to isolate the foot and mouth virus in a cell culture. This process can take 4–5 days to complete.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the amount of information available to farmers concerning the foot and mouth disease outbreak; and what steps he is taking to ensure that farmers are kept fully informed. [155018]

Ms Quin: Since the beginning of the outbreak Ministers have held regular, wide ranging meetings with farming and other organisations to ensure they are kept informed of developments. These meetings have provided the Ministry with direct feedback on the information that farmers need to help them cope with the outbreak.

MAFF has a foot and mouth website which is updated at least twice a day to provide the latest news and information. A helpline is open seven days a week from 8 am to 11 pm to answer queries from farmers and members of the public. We have also produced a series of fact sheets on foot and mouth disease which have been sent to every farmer in England, Scotland and Wales. Supplies are held in Animal Health Offices and copies placed in Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what consultations he has held with the Department for Education and Employment about *(a)* closure of schools and other education institutions, *(b)* enforced absence of pupils and the provision of education by other means and *(c)* staff absence, owing to residence in areas affected by foot and mouth disease. [154674]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 21 March 2001]:* From the beginning of the outbreak Ministry officials have maintained close contact with officials from the Department for Education and Employment, for example over the advice which the Department for Education and Employment provided to local education authorities on school closures, and staff and pupil absences resulting from the outbreak.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if foot and mouth disease can be spread by exposure to plants and grains; and if he will make a statement. [154949]

Ms Quin: Plants and grains do not become contaminated if they grow on land which had previously been grazed by animals affected by the disease. Their surfaces can become contaminated if they have been in physical contact or close proximity with an infected animal.

MAFF has posted on its website a general assessment of the implications of the foot and mouth outbreak for the grain trade. No movement of grain is permitted from UK farms where foot and mouth is suspected or has been confirmed. There are no restrictions on the drilling of crops on premises where disease is known or thought to exist. There are, however, restrictions on the movement of plant and machinery to or from such premises.

Sir John Morris: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he has established the cause of the current foot and mouth outbreak. [155040]

Ms Quin: Detailed epidemiological investigations are being undertaken into the source of the outbreak. Initial findings suggest that the earliest outbreak was at a pig premises in north-east England and that infection spread from there through the movement of animals, particularly sheep, before the first case was found in Essex on 19 February. However, it is still unclear how the infection entered the United Kingdom. Information on the initial epidemiological findings will be published.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to bring in extra veterinary surgeons from other countries to assist with the foot and mouth disease outbreak. [154950]

Ms Quin: Over 100 veterinary staff have arrived or are due to arrive from the official veterinary services of 11 different countries. There are now over 1,200 veterinarians involved in controlling the foot and mouth disease outbreak.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department was first notified of a possible outbreak of foot and mouth disease at Wick Farm, Laye-de-la-Haye, Essex; when the outbreak was confirmed; when the slaughter of livestock was *(a)* commenced and *(b)* completed; when the destruction of carcases was (i) started and (ii) completed; and if he will make a statement. [154720]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The information requested is as follows:

8 March 2001—A MAFF Veterinary Officer visited Wick Farm, Layer-de-la-Haye, Essex as part of a foot and mouth disease tracing from an export animal collection centre in Kent.

9 March 2001—Foot and mouth disease confirmed.

9–10 March 2001—All susceptible livestock slaughtered.

11 March 2001—The fire was started. The carcases would have been destroyed within 24 hours. The fire remained under supervision throughout.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will request the suspension of non-essential maintenance work by utility companies which involves work on farm land during the outbreak of foot and mouth disease; and if he will make a statement. [154789]

Ms Quin: The utility companies have suspended non-essential work within foot and mouth infected areas.

Advice and precautions to be exercised by people working in the countryside has been posted on MAFF's website www.maff.gov.uk. Central to this advice is that people should follow strict cleansing procedures which would include leaving vehicles outside the farm, disinfecting boots and wearing boots or clothing supplied by the farm. People working in the countryside should ensure that all mud, slurry and manure is washed off before they leave the premises.

It is essential that all visits to farms and possible contacts with animals are recorded. The records should include the date and time of the visit. Should disease occur on a farm then these records will be used to trace movements and possible spread of the disease.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his departmental policy was during 2000 in respect of the disinfecting of lorries used for movement of animals, between such movements. [154666]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2001]:* The rules covering the cleansing and disinfection of vehicles used for animal transport were consolidated in the Transport of Animals (Cleansing and Disinfection) (England) (No. 2) Order 2000 (SI 2000/1618), which came into force on 6 July 2000. This Order requires that, subject to certain exemptions, livestock transports should be cleansed and disinfected after each use. It also requires livestock transports that have become soiled, which may give rise to a risk of transmission of disease since last being cleansed and disinfected, to be cleansed and disinfected again before they are next used.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when farmers will be compensated for the problems faced due to the foot and mouth epidemic. [154030]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on 13 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 565W.

The Department aims to pay compensation for animals slaughtered to control foot and mouth disease as soon as possible after valuation, confirmation of slaughter and checking of claims. As at 3.30 pm on Friday 23 March, 121 claims which total £12.7 million have been paid and a further 138 claims which total £10.5 million have been approved and will be paid shortly.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what level of compensation he will give to farmers affected by the recent foot and mouth outbreak, with particular reference to *(a)* farmers having infected animals slaughtered, *(b)* farmers affected by the ban on movement and *(c)* farmers suffering loss of income through lack of bed and breakfast bookings; and if he will make a statement. [154285]

Ms Quin: Compensation is payable for the market value of animals slaughtered to control foot and mouth disease. It is not payable for the consequential losses for example caused by movement restrictions. There are no plans to make such payments in response to the current outbreak, but the situation will be kept under review. On 22 March we opened the Livestock Welfare (Disposal) Scheme to deal with livestock facing serious welfare problems as a result of foot and mouth disease control measures. Where the welfare issue can not be resolved by other means, livestock farmers may enter the animals into this voluntary scheme for removal and disposal at the Government's expense, and receive a payment.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has also announced measures to assist businesses affected by the outbreak. The Taskforce which he is chairing will continue its work and the Government will want to consider any further response in the light of the latest developments.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if Lacock falls within a restricted foot and mouth area. [155332]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* Lacock falls within the foot and mouth infected area defined in the Foot and Mouth Disease Declaratory (No 30) Order 2001. A copy of the Order and a map of the infected area has been posted on the Ministry's website http://www.maff.gov.uk/.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice his Department is giving to farmers about drilling crops on holdings that *(a)* have been or *(b)* may have been affected by foot and mouth; and if he will make a statement. [155334]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* MAFF has posted on its website a general assessment of the implications of the foot and mouth outbreak for the grain trade. No movement of grain is permitted from UK farms where foot and mouth is suspected or has been confirmed. There are no restrictions on the drilling of crops on premises where disease is known or thought to exist. There are, however, restrictions on the movement of plant and machinery to or from such premises.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department was first notified of a possible outbreak of foot and mouth disease on Boydale's Farm, Neatherfield, Essex; when the case was confirmed; when the slaughter of livestock was *(a)* commenced and *(b)* completed; when the destruction of carcases was (i) commenced and (ii) completed; and if he will make a statement. [155376]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The information requested is as follows:

14 March 2001—A MAFF Veterinary Officer visited Boydale's Farm as a result of an animal movement tracing.

14 March 2001—Disease confirmed.

14–15 March 2001—Livestock slaughtered.

15 March 2001—Fire started. The carcases would have been destroyed within 24 hours. The fire remained under supervision throughout.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what investigations he has carried out, with what results, into the sources of meat used in meals served by schools in *(a)* Sunderland and *(b)* Gateshead from which the outbreak of foot and mouth disease may have emerged; and if he will make a statement. [154713]

Ms Quin: Investigations into the source of the foot and mouth outbreak are continuing. When we are in a position to draw firm conclusions they will be published.

Veterinary Investigation Centres

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the veterinary investigation centres which were closed between 1980 and 1997. [155602]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 27 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the letter from the Chief Executive of the Veterinary Laboratories Agency which lists the number of closures between 1980 and 1997.

Letter from Steve Edwards to Mr. Richard Livsey, dated 30 March 2001:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your request for a list of Veterinary Investigation Centres (VICs) that were closed in each year between 1980 and 1997.

The attached table lists the VICs that were closed between these dates as well as new ones opened.

In 1995 the VICs were renamed regional Laboratories (RLs) when they merged with the Central Veterinary Laboratory to become the Veterinary Laboratories Agency.

Centres were closed and new ones opened as follows:

Centre	*Closed/opened*
1980	—
Aberystwyth	—
Bangor	—
Barton Hall (Preston—moved from Liverpool)	
Cambridge	—
Cardiff	—
Carmarthen	—
Gloucester	—
Langford (Bristol)	—
Leeds	—
Lincoln	—
Moulton (Northampton)	—
Newcastle	—
Norwich	—
Penrith	—
Reading	—
Shrewsbury	—
Starcross (Exeter)	—
Sutton Bonington (Loughborough)	—
Thirsk	—
Truro	—
Weybridge	—
Winchester	—
Worcester	—
Wye (Kent)	—
Total	24
1981	
Weybridge	Closed
Total	23
1982	
Chester (Sub centre of Shrewsbury)	Opened
Total	24
1983–1985	—
Total	24
1986	
Cardiff	Closed
Chester	Closed
Gloucester	Closed
Leeds	Closed
Moulton (Northampton)	Closed
Total	19
1987–1990	—
Total	19
1991	
Bangor	Closed
Lincoln	Closed
Wye (Kent)	Closed
Total	16
1992	—
Total	16
1993	
Cambridge	Closed
Norwich	Closed
Worcester	Closed
Bury St. Edmunds	Opened
Luddington (Stratford-upon-Avon)	Opened
Total	15

Centres were closed and new ones opened as follows:

Centre	*Closed/opened*
1994	
Reading	Closed
Total	14
1995–2001	
Aberystwyth	—
Barton Hall (Preston)	—
Bury St. Edmunds	—
Carmarthen	—
Langford (Bristol)	—
Liddington (Stratford-upon-Avon)	—
Newcastle	—
Penrith	—
Shrewsbury	—
Starcross (Exeter)	—
Sutton Bonington (Loughborough)	—
Thirsk	—
Truro	—
Winchester	—
Total	14

Abattoir Closures

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what studies he has undertaken to assess the effects of closure of abattoirs on *(a)* direct farm sales and farmers' market sales, *(b)* the viability of independent butchers, *(c)* the viability of (i) small, (ii) medium and (iii) large livestock farms, *(d)* the animal welfare implications and the costs of transporting livestock extra distances to abattoirs and *(e)* the number of jobs lost through closure. [151821]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2001]:* The Ministry has undertaken no studies to assess the above effects of abattoir closures.

As announced in the Rural White Paper published on 28 November, Agriculture Departments in England, Scotland and Wales have agreed to transfer £8.7 million to the Foods Standards Agency for the three financial years 2001–02 to 2003–04; this will enable the FSA to implement the principal recommendation of the Taskforce chaired by Colin Maclean, to revise the method of charging for Meat Hygiene Service inspections in abattoirs and cutting plants.

Vets

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many vets were employed by his Department in *(a)* 1971, *(b)* 1975, *(c)* 1980, *(d)* 1985, *(e)* 1986, *(f)* 1987, *(g)* 1988, *(h)* 1989, *(i)* 1990, *(j)* 1992, *(k)* 1994, *(l)* 1996, *(m)* 1998, *(n)* 2000 and *(o)* 2001. [155623]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The number of veterinary surgeons (full-time equivalents) employed by the State Veterinary Service since 1979, the earliest date for which we have accurate figures, is given in the table. The hon. Member may wish to know that since 1980 the State Veterinary Service has changed several times. The Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL), which previously formed part of the State Veterinary Service, became the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) in April 1990. The CVL figures are incorporated in this return for the years 1 January 1980 to 1 January 1990. From 1 June 1990 the figures do not include the CVL. The Veterinary Investigation Service became part of the VLA on 1 October 1995 and is not included in these figures from that date. In 2000, there were 99 veterinarians employed by VLA. Much of the information presented was previously given in the answer of 27 February 1997, *Official Report*, columns 323–24W.

Of the 285 full-time equivalent veterinarians employed by the State Veterinary Service in 2001 as a whole, 220 veterinarians are employed as field veterinary officers. The work of these officers is supplemented by about 100 Temporary Veterinary Inspectors (TVIs) from the private sector in normal times.

Year	*Number of vets*
1979	597.5
1980	580.5
1985	527.5
1986	506.5
1987	464.5
1988	444.5
1989	422.0
1990	430.5
1992	414.5
1994	408.3
1996	301.2
1997	289.5
2000	284.0
2001	286.0

Livestock Farms

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many livestock farms there were in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155740]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* There were 815 main agricultural holdings in the St. Ives constituency with livestock (cattle, sheep, pigs or goats) in the June 2000 Agricultural and Horticultural census. Parliamentary constituency level data are not available for June 1992 or June 1997.

Pig Movements

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if healthy pigs can be moved to abattoirs for killing *(a)* under the Welfare Destruction Scheme and *(b)* for normal food purposes; and if he will make a statement. [155621]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* Pigs and other livestock experiencing serious, insurmountable welfare problems due to foot and mouth disease control measures would be eligible for the Livestock Welfare (Disposal) Scheme (LWDS). Livestock entered into LWDS would normally be slaughtered in specially designated abattoirs but, where this is not possible they would be killed on-farm. Through the Slaughter Under Licence Scheme, around 80 per cent. of typical slaughter levels of pigs for normal food purposes are currently being achieved.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the average income per farm for *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the region including the Lewes constituency in each year since 1979 was in current prices. [155600]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The information requested is given in the table. The Eastern region is the smallest regional level covering the Lewes constituency for which figures are available. However, the East covers a large area of England from Lincolnshire to Hampshire and therefore is not necessarily representative of farming in the Lewes constituency.

Average net farm income for all types of full-time farm businesses in the United Kingdom and the East (current prices)[1]

£000/farm

	UK	East
1979–80	6.7	9.4
1980–81	7.0	10.1
1981–82	10.0	11.1
1982–83	11.3	14.8
1983–84	10.7	16.5
1984–85	11.8	18.2
1985–86	6.7	5.4
1986–87	10.0	13.5
1987–88	10.4	5.9
1988–89	12.0	7.9
1989–90	15.1	18.7
1990–91	13.7	19.0
1991–92	14.8	20.2
1992–93	19.6	23.5
1993–94	20.7	25.5
1994–95	23.7	33.5
1995–96	31.9	46.8
1996–97	24.6	36.6
1997–98	10.7	16.3
1998–99	7.3	13.2
1999–2000	5.7	n/a
2000–01[3]	5.4	n/a

n/a = Not available

[1] Estimates for the Eastern region before 1988–89 and for the United Kingdom throughout the period, exclude horticulture.

[2] There have been a number of methodological changes which mean that the data are not directly comparable over the full period. A significant change is the move from an 'as received' to an 'as due' basis for livestock subsidies effective from 1994–95.

[3] Forecast.

Source:

Figures for the UK are derived from information from the Farm Business Surveys supplied for 'Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom'. Figures for the Eastern region are published in 'Farm Accounts in England'

Foot and Mouth (Compensation)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what powers his officials have to speed up the destruction of livestock affected by foot and mouth disease, and in particular to deal with cases whereby owners have delayed settlement of compensation. [154317]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The power to slaughter animals affected with foot and mouth disease is contained in the Animal Health Act 1983. The Act does not specify how slaughter should be carried out, but, in the vast majority of cases animals are slaughtered very quickly following confirmation of disease.

An Order has been made to change the valuation procedure for animals slaughtered for foot and mouth disease. This Order gives farmers the option of receiving payments at standard rates or of having animals valued by a valuer. This is intended to help speed up the valuation process and so ensure that animals can be slaughtered as quickly as possible. Where matters are delayed because an owner has disputed the valuation, all animals clearly affected with the disease are slaughtered without any further delay. The valuation of these animals is resolved after slaughter.

There have been some localised problems. Officials are working with a number of experts, including those from the armed forces to improve the planning, co-ordination and management of the slaughter and disposal process.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement on the procedures for compensating farmers whose stock have had to be destroyed because of foot and mouth disease; [154315]

(2) if he will investigate the administration mechanism which applies where agreement has not been reached as to the amount of compensation to be paid to stock owners for animals destroyed because of foot and mouth disease. [154316]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 March 2001]:* The normal process of paying compensation involves an independent valuation of the animals which are to be slaughtered. Valuers are employed by the Ministry for this purpose, and where appropriate this can mean a specialist in the particular class or breed of animals involved.

If the owner disputes the valuation prior to slaughter, he may call his own valuer so that evidence is available when the matter goes to arbitration.

We have introduced arrangements to streamline this process by using a flat rate method wherever possible. The farmer will however retain the right to seek a specific valuation.

If agreement can not be reached quickly on the value of animals due to be slaughtered, all animals that are clearly affected with the disease are slaughtered without any further delay. The valuation of these animals is resolved after slaughter.

Procedures are in place to fast track the processing and payment of claims, as soon as they are received. We aim to pay compensation within a week of slaughter taking place.

Pig Swill

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ban the feeding of pig swill to pigs. [155078]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister announced on 27 March that we could consult on the principle and detailed application of a ban on the use of pig swill. Copies of the consultation document are available in the Libraries of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Spending Plans

Mr. Purchase: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out detailed future spending plans for his Department. [156816]

Mr. Prescott: I have today published my Department's Annual Report for 2001, and copies have been placed in the House Libraries. The Report sets out the Department's achievements over the last year and its detailed plans to continue to meet our over-arching aim of improving everyone's quality of life, now and for the future.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many responses were received to the public consultation on proposals to permit technetium-99 radioactive discharges from licensed nuclear reprocessing sites. [156398]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency published a consultation document on 30 November 2000 outlining proposals for the future regulation of technetium-99 discharges from the British Nuclear Fuels plant at Sellafield. The Agency has advised that it received 97 responses to its consultation which ended on 5 March 2001.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with *(a)* MAFF and *(b)* the Environment Agency, in respect of the environmental hazards posed by the burial of animal carcases arising from the animal slaughter undertaken because of the spread of foot and mouth disease. [156403]

Mr. Meacher: My Department is working in close co-operation with MAFF and the Environment Agency to ensure the fulfilment of the environmental requirements of Article 3(2) of the Animal Waste Directive (90/667/EEC) on the burial of animal carcases. Each proposal for the burial of carcases is the subject of a site-specific risk assessment carried out by the Agency. No carcase burial has been carried out at a site where, in the view of the Agency, there is an undue risk of environmental pollution (eg contamination of groundwater).

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will include Stafford Borough Council in the list of authorities able to give relief from business rates to rural businesses affected by the foot and mouth outbreak. [156255]

Mr. Meacher: Any local authority can give discretionary hardship rate relief and the Government underwrite 75 per cent. of the cost. As part of the package of measures to help business meet the costs imposed by the effects of the foot and mouth outbreak, Government have agreed to increase their support by underwriting 95 per cent. of the costs of hardship rate relief in 151 rural local authorities for properties below £12,000 rateable value. The list of rural local authorities, which does not include Stafford Borough Council, is based on sparsity of population, a standard definition of rurality

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish a summary of the measures he is taking to promote economic recovery from the effects of foot and mouth disease. [156201]

Mr. Meacher: I set out a package of short term practical measures to help rural business in my statement to the House on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 191–210, which included the deferral and rearrangement of payments to Customs, Inland Revenue and of business rates. I also announced a new scheme to enable rural local authorities to offer discretionary hardship rate relief of which further details were given in my answer to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) on 26 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 425–26W. The Rural Task Force is continuing to look at the scope for additional measures to help rural businesses severely affected by the effects of foot and mouth disease.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what basis he set the limit of rateable value for businesses able to claim serious hardship as a result of foot and mouth disease. [156117]

Mr. Meacher: There is no such limit. All businesses irrespective of their size that are adversely affected by the foot and mouth outbreak, or are suffering hardship for other reasons, may be granted rate relief at the discretion of local authorities. The authority granting rate relief on these grounds is required to fund 25 per cent. of the cost of providing that relief with central government meeting the rest.

On 22 March, the Government announced an increase in the central government contribution from 75 per cent. to 95 per cent. of the cost of giving hardship rate relief to small businesses which are suffering from the adverse effects of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. This financial help is being made available to local authorities and targeted at vulnerable small businesses, where rates liabilities represent a greater proportion of turnover and profits than for larger firms.

This additional funding is available for relief granted in 151 rural local authorities in England to properties with a rateable value of up to and including £12,000. This will embrace 77 per cent. of the total number of 494,000 business properties located in these areas. This level of rateable value is used in targeting relief on small businesses in other parts of the rating system. Discretionary relief is made available under the village shop rate relief scheme for properties within that threshold, and it is also used to define a small property outside London for the purposes of the transitional relief scheme introduced following the revaluation on 1 April 2000.

Access to Ports Services

Mr. Purchase: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish a consultation paper on the proposed European Directive on access to ports services; and if he will make a statement. [156825]

Mr. Hill: I have today launched a consultation paper on the recently published European Commission Communication on Ports, which included a Proposal for

a Directive on Access to Ports Services. The consultation seeks views on the Communication and, in particular, on the potential impact of the proposed Directive.

The consultation paper has been sent to some 300 people and organisations including ports, port users, port service providers, trade associations, trade unions and others with an interest in the ports industry. It is also available on the DETR website and copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House. The deadline for responses is 30 June 2001.

The Commission's proposals raise a number of important issues including:

Whether the proposed Directive helps to further the government's aims of a successful, sustainable and safe ports which benefits its customers and the wider UK economy;

Whether the proposed directive would help to achieve the Commission's objectives in an appropriate and proportionate way;

Whether the proposed directive takes sufficient account of the structure of the UK ports industry; and

Whether the proposed Directive adequately addresses the issues of public funding and state aid.

Considerable clarification of the proposed Directive, and the intention behind specific requirements, will be needed before an accurate assessment can be made of the full potential impact on the port sector and its users.

The responses received as a result of this exercise will be used to inform a detailed Regulatory Impact Assessment on how the proposed Directive might affect the ports industry and to formulate the Government's response to the Commission on its Communication.

Sellafield MOX Plant

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 12 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 11W, on the Sellafield MOX plant, if he will list the consultants which have been chosen to undertake the review of the revised BNFL economic case for SMP; and if he will place a copy of the BNFL submission in the Library. [151603]

Mr. Meacher: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 28 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 629–30W. I shall publish the name of any consultants once they are appointed.

Byker Incinerator

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the documents that have been used to identify the sites where Byker ash has been deposited. [155392]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The Environment Agency used the following documents to identify the sites where ash from the Byker Reclamation Plant has been deposited:

(a) Newcastle City Council's response to the Agency's letter of 2 February 2000 seeking details of the dates, locations and quantities of ash used;

(b) Correspondence between the Agency and the City Council clarifying details; and

(c) Copies of the records kept by the City Council under the duty of care imposed by section 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

The Agency advise that they are unable to release the documents referred to in (a) and (b) because of the need to avoid prejudicing their current prosecution of the City Council and Contract Heat and Power Ltd. I am arranging for copies of (c) to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sites which have *(a)* received and *(b)* been cleared of Byker ash. [155378]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The Environment Agency sought details from Newcastle city council of the sites which had received ash from the Byker Reclamation Plant; and these sites are listed. I have been informed that the ash has now been cleared from all of these sites. However, while the city council's records indicated that ash had been sent to the path beside Feversham School, site inspections by the Agency and the city council did not identify any ash at that site.

Paths/Bridleways

Blayney Row, Newburn
Coronation Road, North Walbottle
Dinnington Recreation Ground
Feversham School, Walbottle
Reigh Burn and Coach Lane, Throckley
Stamfordham road (link with North Walbottle road)
Three Hills, Hazelrigg
UFAMS, Newburn
Walbottle Dene, Walbottle
Jesmond Dene
Welbeck road (derelict land)
Leightwood Avenue, Scotswood

Allotments

Blayney Row, Newburn
Blucher Terrace, Walbottle
Braxton B, Walker
Christen road, Gosforth
Coxlodge
Denton Bank
Denton Dene
Fenham Model
Hulne Terrace, Lemmington
Jesmond Premier/Vale
Keeledale Pigeons, Walker
Little Moor (off Jesmond Dene road)
Ridgewood Crescent
Salters Lane, S. Gosforth (off Hollywood Avenue)
St. Michaels A, Walker
St. Michaels B, Walker
Union Hall road, Lemmington
Walkergate Hospital, Walker
Walkergate 3A (Welbeck road)
Walkergate 3B (Spinney Terrace)
Westmacott street, Newburn
Whinneyfield road, Walker
Moorside, Fenham
Nu's Moor, Cowgate
Tweedstreet
Hexham Avenue, Walker
St. Gabriels, Heaton

Farms

Anfield Plain
N. E. Mason Farm and Bigg Waters, Brunswick.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many tonnes of Refuse Derived Fuel pellets from the Byker waste plant were delivered to the Cruddas Park residential and shopping complex in Newcastle in each year between 1979 and 2000; and what investigations have been undertaken into the combustion, air emissions and ash-handling at the Cruddas Park complex. [155343]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The manufacture of fuel pellets at the Byker Refuse Derived Fuel plant ceased in December 1998. I understand that approximately 1,000 tonnes per annum of refuse derived fuel, from the Byker plant, was burned at Cruddas Park between 1989 and 1996. I will write to the hon. Member with specific details as soon as more information is available.

The only investigations into the combustion, air emissions and ash-handling at the Cruddas Park complex were carried out by the operator at the commissioning stage in 1989. I understand that these records no longer exist.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) of 1 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 253W, on waste disposal, if he will list the incinerators which exceeded authorised emission limits, indicating the number of times they exceeded the limits for each type of breach; and if he will list successful prosecutions by the Environment Agency in relation to these breaches. [155393]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 23 March 2001]:* The data upon which the answer was provided for my hon. Friend are presented in the following tables.

The Agency successfully prosecuted Sheffield city council, in respect of its Bernard Road municipal waste incinerator, for failure to comply with an enforcement notice served on 11 January 1999. Following a succession of breaches, the Notice required the Operator to reliably comply with the emission limits into air by 31 March 1999. The Operator was unable to reduce the number of breaches to a level acceptable to the Agency and therefore failed to comply with the Notice. The Operator was successfully prosecuted in Sheffield magistrates court on 8 December 1999. The breaches of emission limits were principally in relation to carbon monoxide although releases of nitrogen oxides and hydrogen chloride also exceeded the limits. The breaches were of short duration and unlikely to have given rise to any measurable environmental impact.

The Environment Agency initially categorises incidents in accordance with environmental impact on four levels, major, significant, minor or none. The enforcement response is driven in general by this judgment of severity. Most breaches of authorisation have minor or no impact and in these cases prosecution has only been used as a last resort where other more proportionate methods, for example serving enforcement notices have not proved successful. However, the Environment Agency appreciates that repeated minor breaches can demonstrate a lack of control and is revising its guidance accordingly. Under this guidance prosecutions will normally be pursued for minor incidents where the operator has shown a history of non-compliance sufficient to call into question the effective management of the site/operation or to prevent effective regulation by the Agency.

1 January 1996 to 31 December 1998

Air	*HCl*	*SO_2*	*NO_x*	*CO*	*Particulate matter*	*Temperature*	*Iodine*	*Metals*	*HF*	*Dioxins*
Dudley MES	58	1	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0
Wolverhampton MES	28	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Cleveland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Coventry	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Tyseley	90	0	23	19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nottingham	13	2	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Sheffield	7	4	7	42	2	0	0	0	0	0
Stoke MES	12	1	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0
Edmonton	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lewisham, SELCHP	93	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bolton (not operating)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	302	11	34	65	16	0	0	0	0	0
Annual average[1]	101	4	12	22	6	—	—	—	0.3	—

[1] Data rounded up to nearest whole number except HF

1 January 1999 to 31 December 1999

Air	*HCl*	*SO_2*	*NO_x*	*CO*	*Particulate matter*	*Temperature*	*Iodine*	*Metals*	*HF*	*Dioxins*
Dudley MES	54	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wolverhampton MES	23	13	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cleveland	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Coventry	8	0	12	33	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tyseley	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nottingham	6	8	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheffield	17	8	6	64	1	0	0	0	0	0
Stoke MES	19	5	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0

1 January 1999 to 31 December 1999

Air	HCl	SO_2	NO_x	CO	Particulate matter	Temperature	Iodine	Metals	HF	Dioxins
Edmonton	7	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lewisham, SELCHP	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bolton (not operating)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	142	42	29	107	3	0	0	1	0	0

1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000

Air	HCl	SO_2	NO_x	CO	Particulate matter	Temperature	Iodine	Metals	HF	Dioxins
Dudley MES	12	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wolverhampton MES	1	1	1	4	2	0	0	0	0	0
Cleveland	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Coventry	7	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	0	0
Tyseley	5	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nottingham	7	6	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheffield	15	3	5	22	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stoke MES	9	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Edmonton	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lewisham SELCHP	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bolton	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	60	13	27	41	5	0	0	0	0	0

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sites which received Byker incinerator ash for use *(a)* in building bricks, blocks, paving stones and building materials, *(b)* in public and private roads and streets, *(c)* in compost, potting soil, growing medium and fertiliser and *(d)* on farms, livestock/poultry holding sites and feedstuffs companies, indicating the dates on which materials were received and the quantities involved. [155337]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* I have separately provided the hon. Member with a list of the sites which have received ash from the Byker Reclamation Plant (ie paths/bridleways, allotments and farms). I have been advised by the Environment Agency that it has no knowledge of ash from the Plant being used in *(a)*; no knowledge of its use in *(b)* other than paths/bridleways; and no knowledge of its use in *(c)* other than where it has become entrained in soil on allotments at which ash has been used for path construction.

In relation to *(d)*, the Agency understands that poultry may have been kept by the plot holders at some of the allotments at which ash was received. Ash was also received at the following farms:

N E Mason Farm, where 80 tonnes was deposited in 1996–1997; and

Anfield Plain, where 30 tonnes was deposited (year not known).

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many foreign-registered heavy goods vehicles were involved in road accidents in Britain in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999 and *(e)* 2000. [155989]

Mr. Hill: Data on foreign-registered vehicles involved in road accidents are not available.

GM Maize (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the GM maize plantings in Shropshire by Ordnance Survey grid reference; and if he will make a statement. [155968]

Mr. Meacher: EU Directive 90/220, on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to the environment, recognises two types of release. The first, known as Part B releases, are carried out for research purposes and must be notified to the Government. Their location must be advertised locally and made publicly available through the register of releases held by my Department. The second type of release, known as a Part C release, is for commercial purposes. Such releases do not have to be notified to the Government, as the crops have undergone detailed safety assessments at European level and been approved for commercial use. However, where such releases are carried out as part of the farm scale evaluations or as part of the National Seed List trials then their location is notified to Government and made publicly available.

The public register of releases shows that no GM maize is presently being grown in Shropshire under Part B consents. I also understand that no National List trials of GM maize are presently taking place in Shropshire and that no GM maize is presently under cultivation as part of the farm scale evaluations. However, the locations of the next round of GM maize sites for the evaluations will be announced shortly by my Department. The sites are likely to be sown from the end of April. Details of their locations, including Ordnance Survey grid references, will be placed on our website at www.detr.gov.uk. We will also write to parish councils in whose area an evaluation is to be sited to provide information about the release.

Department Policies (Luton, South)

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Luton, South constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [156165]

Ms Armstrong: The principal funding that this Department has provided to Luton borough council from 1997–98 is shown in the table. These figures include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Luton, South. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

The transport allocations shown are for the Luton/Dunstable conurbation, which includes part of South Bedfordshire district. Similarly, the Single Regeneration Budget partnership operates across the conurbation—the figures given are an estimate of the amount going into Luton.

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Revenue Support Grant	75.478	81.382	82.804	89.299	—
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	41.033	42.769	46.379	[illegible]67	—
Local Government Reorganisation Supplementary Credit Approval	3.575	2.160	0.186	—	—
Housing Investment Programme	3.337	2.978	1.843	5.920	2.952 + (MRA of 5.691)
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	6.939	6.262	5.889	5.597	—
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.481	1.664	1.843	—	—
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.250	0.106	—	—	—
SRB funding	1.430	1.570	2.000	1.250	2.900
New Deal for Communities Funding	—	—	—	0.300	0.100
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding	—	—	—	—	0.754
ERDF funding	—	—	—	—	—
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.224	0.268	0.307	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.224	0.268	0.307	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	2.704	0.913	3.730	2.574	4.919

[1] Where known

[2] The NDC funding is for the Marsh Farm estate, a project in the Luton, North constituency.

[3] Not yet known—13 wards in Luton have been designated for assistance under the new Objective 2 Programme (2000–06). Formal approval of the programme is expected soon.

Roadway Drainage

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidelines he issued and responsibilities he has for ensuring that roadway drainage systems and ditches are maintained, particularly in relation to rural roads in England, Wales and Scotland. [156074]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 29 March 2001]:* Guidance on the maintenance of drainage systems and ditches on all local authority roads in England is contained in the local authorities' Code of Good Practice for Highway Maintenance. The responsibility for maintenance of these roads rests with the local highway authorities.

The Secretary of State is directly responsible for trunk roads and this responsibility is exercised through the Highways Agency. Appropriate guidance has been issued to the Highways Agency's contractors.

Road maintenance in Wales and Scotland is the responsibility of the devolved administrations.

Departmental Policies (Hazel Grove)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hazel Grove constituency, the effects on Hazel Grove of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [156178]

Ms Armstrong: The principal kinds of funding which this Department has provided to Stockport in 1997–98 to 2000–01 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowings approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much money has been spent on Hazel Grove. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are invested.

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Revenue Support Grant[1]	63.8	73.0	75.5	72.5	78.7
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[1]	63.4	66.2	71.9	81.5	79.3
Housing Investment Programme	4.9	4.6	4.8	7.2	10.5
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	—	—	7.7	—	—
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.6	1.9	1.9	—	—
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.2	—	—	—	—
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.7	0.5	0.6	—	—

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.9	0.5	0.6	—	—
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	1.4	0.7	0.8	1.9	3.2
Capital Challenge:					—
Supplementary Credit	0.7	0.5	—	—	
Basic Credit Approvals	—	1.5	1.0	—	—

[1] These figures have not been adjusted to make year on year comparisons possible

Heathrow Airport

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the underground railway being built at Heathrow Airport between Terminal 4 and the proposed Terminal 5. [156170]

Mr. Hill: No London Underground railway is currently being built between Terminal 4 and the proposed Terminal 5 at Heathrow. The proposed extension of the Piccadilly Line to the proposed fifth terminal at Heathrow was considered at the Terminal 5 Inquiry. The Inquiry Inspector's report has been received and a decision on Terminal 5 will be issued as soon as possible consistent with full and careful consideration of the report.

Business Rates (Tourism)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to delay the introduction of supplementary business rates on businesses in the tourism industry. [156332]

Ms Armstrong: In our Green Paper, "Modernising Local Government Finance" (September 2000) we sought views on the details of a scheme which would give local authorities limited freedom to vary the business rate in their areas. A summary of the responses to the Green Paper has been published on the DETR website. We are currently considering the issues raised in the responses with representatives of business and local authorities.

Departmental Policies (Sandwell)

Mr. Bailey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the borough, the effects of his Department's policies and actions on the metropolitan borough of Sandwell since 2 May 1997. [156379]

Ms Armstrong: The principal funding that this Department has provided to Sandwell since 2 May 1997 is shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

SRB

There are currently five SRB schemes in Sandwell:

a merged SRB Rounds 1, 2 and 3 scheme which covers the entire borough, with broad based regeneration objectives, which commenced in 1995

a Round 4 scheme which is targeted at Smethwick, which commenced in 1998

a Round 6 scheme, Sandwell Learning Plus, which aims to promote lifelong learning in Sandwell and which also covers the entire borough, and which commenced in 2000.

SRB funding targeted at Sandwell under these schemes over the period April 1997 to March 2001

£ million

Sandwell SRB Rounds 1, 2 and 3	28.885
Smethwick SRB Round 4	3.750
Sandwell Learning Plus SRB Round 6	0.350
Total	32.985

Key outputs resulting from the schemes over the period

	Sandwell SRB Rounds 1, 2 and 3	Smethwick SRB	Sandwell Learning Plus SRB
Jobs created	1,006	115	—
Residents accessing employment through training, advice etc.	2,429	419	—
Number of business start-ups	234	33	—
Private sector leverage	£48,494,000	£3,750,000	—

Note:

There are no "headline" outputs from the Sandwell Learning Plus scheme yet as it commenced in December 2000 and is still in its development phase. One of the main objectives of the scheme is to increase the number of adults in Sandwell studying for a qualification from the current level of 17 per cent. to 30 per cent.

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Revenue Support Grant	133.47	146.27	153.25	150.62	160.34
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	64.12	66.51	71.80	80.88	78.68
Local Government Reorganisation Supplementary Credit Approval	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Housing Investment Programme	9.04	7.98	8.75	24.02	8.36
Additional PSRG	—	2.64	3.775	—	—
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	47.27	43.41	41.77	40.62	—

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Capital Receipts Initiative	1.89	6.54	6.63	—	—
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.3	0.26	—	—	—
Major Repair Allowance	—	—	—	—	19.77
SRB funding (see previous)	—	—	—	—	—
New Deal for Communities funding	—	—	0.4	2.5	5.2
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding	—	—	—	—	4.03
ERDF funding (Obj 2)	1.99	3.19	2.56	4.10	1.97
Transport Supplementary Grant	1.82	1.15	0.95	—	0.45
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	1.82	1.15	0.95	1.43	1.20
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	1.34	1.33	1.57	6.54	9.46
Rural Bus Challenge Grant[4]	—	—	—	0.42	n/k
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant[5]	—	.08	.07	.08	0.11
Capital Challenge (Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	0.95	3.37	4.72	—	—

Notes:
[1] Where known
Revenue Support Grant:
[2] The amounts of Revenue Support Grant and Income from the National Non-Domestic Rates shown for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are the revised amounts allocated under "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98 Amending Report 1999" and "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998–99 Report 2000" respectively.
Housing:
The housing subsidy figure for 2000–01 is still provisional.
The reduction in HIP resources for 2001–02 is due to the introduction of the new Major Repair Allowance i.e. a new way of allocating resources for works to Council stock; the table shows Sandwell's indicative figure for 2001–02.
We have no data for Loan Charges Defective Housing.
[3] PSRG = Private Sector Renewal Grant Resources (programme ended in 1999–2000)
ERDF:
Future budgets are allocated on a competitive basis and we cannot predict how much will be drawn into the area at this time from the new programmes. (Note the figures quoted for 2001 are from old programme projects spending in the final year.)
Transport:
[4] Rural Bus Challenge figures represent awards—actual spend profiles for the schemes awarded funding may cover more than one year.
[5] Rural grants paid to West Midlands PTA/E
[6] Not available

Economic and Physical Regeneration

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what ways the region-by-region allocation of the Department's funds for economic and physical regeneration initiatives is influenced by the availability of previously developed land and buildings. [156197]

Ms Armstrong: A formula was used to allocate 80 per cent. of the Land and Property Programme for 2001–02 to the Regional Development Agencies. The allocation criteria was designed to reflect the economic, social and physical needs within each region, and the anticipated level of support from local business to build upon public sector investment. Seven equally weighed indicators were used in the formula:

GDP per capita;

Those not in employment;

The number of people living in the most deprived local authority districts;

The amount of derelict land;

The amount of previously developed land as a proportion of all urban land;

The number of housing transactions; and

The level of VAT registrations and survival rates of business.

Departmental Policies (North Cornwall)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Cornwall constituency, the effects of North Cornwall of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [156122]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The principal funding that this Department has provided to North Cornwall district and Restormel borough councils and to Cornwall county council in the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 is shown in the tables. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on North Cornwall constituency. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

North Cornwall District Council

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Revenue Support Grant[1]	3.435	3.162	3.262	3.231	3.544
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[1]	2.468	2.524	2.738	3.072	3.040
SSA Reduction Grant (SSA Review)	0	0.040	0	0	0
Housing Investment Programme	[2]1.024	0.944	1.018	[2]2.300	[2]3.018
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	1.908	1.665	1.435	[2]1.295	—

North Cornwall District Council

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*[1]2001–02*
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.170	0.549	0.553	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.026	0.025	0	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.005	0.005	0.005	[4]0.005	[4]0.005

Restormel Borough Council

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*[1]2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant	4.386	3.784	3.836	3.672	4.057
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	2.863	2.870	3.110	3.476	3.477
SSA Reduction Grant (SSA Review)	0	0.252	0.055	0	0
Housing Investment Programme	[2]1.047	1.005	1.007	[2]2.123	[4]1.063
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	2.383	2.514	2.053	[3]n/a	[3]n/a
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.212	0.630	0.564	n/a	n/a
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.080	0.080	0	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.007	0.007	0.007	[4]0.007	[4]0.007

Cornwall County Council

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*[1]2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant	129.412	133.560	139.493	135.599	146.727
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	93.491	98.020	107.287	122.050	120.054
Transport Supplementary Grant	3.474	1.205	1.631	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	3.474	1.205	1.631	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0.875	0.994	2.472	7.138	14.920
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	0	0	0.157	0.845	n/a
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	1.098	1.115	1.221	1.559
Capital Challenge (Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	2.057	2.830	3.013	0	0

Notes:

[1] The amounts of Revenue Support Grant and income from National Non-Domestic Rates shown for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are the revised amounts allocated under "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98 Amending Report 1999" and "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998–99 Amending Report 2000" respectively.

[2] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from the previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98.

[3] Single Housing Pot introduced from 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP.

[4] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02, with the introduction of a new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in a sound condition. North Cornwall's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £1.793 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation above. Restormel is a transfer authority and is not entitled to MRA.

[5] Restormel borough council completed the transfer of its housing stock in February 2000.

[6] Rural Bus Challenge figures represent awards—actual spend profiles for schemes may cover more than one year.

[7] Where known.

[8] Provisional.

[9] Estimated.

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)

Parts of the constituency are included in two SRB schemes. Funding provided for these schemes since 1997–98 is included in the table.

£ million

SRB scheme	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*[1]2001–02*
Cornwall Developing in Partnership	1.196	1.218	1.466	1.323	1.540
RADICAL	0.050	0.021	0.029	n/a	n/a

[1] Where known.

European Funding

North Cornwall constituency was included in the South West Objective 5b programme that closed for new applications at the end of 1999. Major projects in the constituency which have received funding since 1997–98 include Bodmin Town Centre Environmental Enhancements (£0.2 million grant), Newquay Town Centre Enhancements (£0.2 million), Bude-Stratton Business Park (£0.3 million) and Bude Canal Sea Lock (£0.2 million).

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have been designated an Objective 1 area, of which North Cornwall constituency is a part, and stands to benefit from £315 million of European Funds over the next seven years.

Non-native Species

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the review of non-native species policy outlined in the Government's rural White Paper will commence. [156758]

Mr. Meacher: A review group, consisting of Government and non-Government organisations, will start work early next month to carry out the review of non-native species policy. The review process will:

Evaluate the effectiveness of current statutory or non-statutory procedures for dealing with the introduction and establishment of non-native species and identify examples of current best practice within the United Kingdom and abroad.

Identify the main vectors for the introduction and spread of non-native species.

Put forward practical and proportionate costed proposals for improving measures to limit the ecological and economic impact of non-native species in Great Britain and recommend measures to limit the impact of the introduction of native species beyond their natural range. These could include proposals for statutory or non-statutory measures in areas of research and monitoring, trade, and control of non-native species.

Identify appropriate organisations to take forward any measures recommended.

The review should be completed by the end of 2001.

Water Industry

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's review of competition in the water industry in England and Wales. [156760]

Mr. Meacher: Following further work on the options for extending competition in the water industry in England and Wales, the Government have decided to boost the opportunities for competition. Our proposals will bring customers the prospect of more choice, keener prices and better services. We propose to license new entrants into the market for production and retail activities, while the incumbent water companies will remain vertically integrated statutory undertakers, retaining their important strategic water resource and environmental duties. Companies will be given clearer rights to enter the water market, providing the opportunity for innovation and efficiency gains to give customers better deals. We will continue to ensure that public health, the natural environment, and the high quality of drinking water is safeguarded, and that water services remain affordable for customers. We will publish a consultation paper on the proposed legislative and regulatory framework in the summer.

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on arm's length management of local authority housing in response to the consultation paper, "Arms Length Management of Local Authority Housing". [156817]

Mr. Raynsford: I am today placing in the Library of the House the text of guidance on arm's length management of local authority housing and on the availability of the additional resources made available in the spending review. This will very shortly be made available on the Department's website, and printed copies will be available in due course.

I am grateful to those who responded to the consultation paper; I am placing a summary of responses in the Library of the House. We have made a number of changes to the proposals set out there in the light of comments.

Many authorities asked for a pre-allocation of resources so that they could proceed to plan and to consult their tenants in the knowledge that, if they meet all the requirements, a known amount of additional resources will be available. We will be setting up such a system, and will be making the resources available over two years so that authorities will have longer to spend the resources they have been allocated. The guidance suggests that authorities wishing to seek resources for 2002–03 should aim to let the Department have an early indication of their intention to seek a place on the list by July 2001 and full supporting information by the end of September.

Many authorities have expressed concern that the requirement to obtain a 3* (excellent) rating from the Housing Inspectorate is very demanding. We are, however, quite clear that additional resources should be linked to the highest standards of service. But we recognise that those authorities that develop the first arm's length proposals will face a particularly challenging task, and are prepared, for 2002–03, to make a part payment to those authorities that demonstrate that services are well on the way to achieving a 3* rating. In such cases a 2* (good) rating together with an assessment of "likely to improve" or "will improve" will attract 50 per cent. of the full amount subject to an agreed plan to achieve 3* standard. The full amount will be payable once the 3* standard is reached.

We have made a number of other changes to the proposals in the consultation paper to reflect concerns expressed in responses and to give further detail on some points. In particular, the guidance makes clear that there will be some flexibility in the limit of 12,000 dwellings for an individual company; that tenant representatives on company boards should be elected; and that there should be clearly defined responsibilities between a local authority and a company in relation to the authority's strategic functions.

I believe that arm's length management is an exciting new opportunity for authorities and tenants. I am encouraged by the enthusiasm with which the idea has been received, and I hope that many authorities will give it serious consideration. The Department will be working closely to establish template documentation with those who are looking to be the leaders in this field.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Physical Education

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students graduated from a physical education teaching course in each year since 1995. [154481]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers of people obtaining qualified teacher status in England who had physical education as a recorded subject in their teaching courses are as follows:

Year	BEd	PGCE
1995	737	721
1996	747	678
1997	847	711
1998	684	848
1999	678	769

Provisional

The numbers of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train as teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in Inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

Education (St. Ives)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many vacancies for teachers there were in the St. Ives constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001. [155741]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is not held centrally. The number of vacancies at January each year and the vacancy rate for the local authorities Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, in which the constituency of St. Ives lies, are given in the table.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

Year	Number of vacancies	Vacancy rate (Percentage)
1992	3	0.1
1997	10	0.3
2000	11	0.3

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train as teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in Inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of full time students stayed in education in the St. Ives constituency after the age of *(a)* 16 and *(b)* 18 in (i) 1992, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 2001. [155743]

Mr. Wicks: At the heart of our drive to improve participation and attainment is the new Connexions Service which we will be phasing in from April this year. The service will provide information, advice, support and access to personal development opportunities for all 13–19 year olds, whatever their needs and circumstances, to keep them learning. Latest figures show that the numbers of 16 to 18 year olds not in education, employment or training in England fell by 28,000 from 185,000 in 1998 to 157,000 1999.

Data on the percentage of students continuing in post-compulsory education at age 16 are not calculated for areas smaller than LEAs, and participation rates by LEA are only available for 16 and 17 year olds.

The percentage of 16 year olds in full-time education for Cornwall LEA, which includes the constituency of St. Ives, was 78 per cent. in 1992–93, 75 per cent. in 1997–98 and 76 per cent. in 1998–99, the latest year for which figures are available.

Post-16 Education (Romsey)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of full time students remained in education in the Romsey constituency after the age of *(a)* 16 and *(b)* 18 years in the last year for which figures are available. [155851]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* At the heart of our drive to improve participation and attainment is the new Connexions Service which we will be phasing in from April this year. The service will provide information, advice, support and access to personal development opportunities for all 13–19 year olds, whatever their needs and circumstances, to keep them learning. Latest figures show that the numbers of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training in England fell by 28,000 from 185,000 in 1998 to 157,000 in 1999.

Data on the percentage of students continuing in post-compulsory education at age 16 are not calculated for areas smaller than LEAs, and participation rates by LEA are only available for 16 and 17-year-olds.

In 1998–99 (the last year for which figures are available) the percentage of 16-year-olds in full-time education for Hampshire LEA, which includes the constituency of Romsey, was 70 per cent.

Teacher Vacancies (Romsey)

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many vacancies for teachers there were in the Romsey constituency in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2001 at (i) Key Stage 1, (ii) Key Stage 2 and (iii) Key Stage 3. [155862]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* The information requested is not held centrally. The number of vacancies in January each year and the vacancy rate for the local authorities Hampshire and Southampton, in which the constituency of Romsey lies, are given in the table:

Southampton and Hampshire

	Number of vacancies	Vacancy rate (Percentage)
1992	53	0.5%
1997	76	0.7
2000	167	1.8

The number of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) in the maintained schools sector in England at January 2000 was 404,600, the highest for 10 years and 6,900 higher than January 1998.

There was a growth of 2,300 in the number of people recruited to train as teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in Inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if proposals for write-off of student loans for student teachers initiated by his Department are planned to extend to all shortage subjects. [155870]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* Detailed proposals for the write-off of student loans are still being developed by my Department. Current plans are that they will not extend beyond trainee teachers in shortage subjects—for secondary schools, these are Maths, Science, Technology, Modern Languages and English.

Higher Education Students

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of higher education students had independent status in each of the past five years. [155873]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 March 2001]:* In England and Wales students eligible for support under the Education (Mandatory Awards) Regulations or the Education (Student Support) Regulations were assessed for contribution on the basis of the income of, for dependent students, themselves and/or their parents and, for independent students, themselves and/or their spouse.

The proportion of students who had independent status in each of the past five years is shown in the table.

Percentage

Academic years	*Proportion of eligible students with Independent Status*[1]
1994–95	23
1995–96	23
1996–97	22
1997–98	21
1998–99	
Mandatory Awards Scheme students[2]	18
Student Support Scheme students[3]	19
All students	18

[1] Independent students are assessed for a contribution towards support based on their own income and that of their spouse. A student is regarded as independent if he/she is aged 25 or over on the first day of the academic year for which they are applying; if both parents have died; if he/she has been self-supporting from earnings for 3 years; or if he/she is irreconcilably estranged from his/her parents.

[2] Students who entered higher education up to 1997–98 and those who entered in 1998–99 to whom existing arrangements applied.

[3] Students starting their course in 1998–99 under the new arrangements. Data include an estimated 600 students who, because they did not expect to receive a contribution to their fees from public funds, did not make an application to their authority.

Source:
F503G survey

Sport (Further Education)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he issues in respect of participation in sport in further education colleges and sixth forms in addition to the academic timetable. [155910]

Mr. Wicks: We have offered no specific guidance to further education colleges or to schools with sixth forms on the place of sporting activities for their students.

Day Places

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many day places were available for *(a)* children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and *(b)* autistic children in the United Kingdom (i) from 1990 to 2000 and (ii) in 2000–01. [155954]

Jacqui Smith: Information is not collected on the available places for children with particular categories of special educational needs. This would be impracticable because the majority of these children are educated in mainstream schools which respond to the unique needs of each of their pupils. Special schools will often also commonly include a diverse range of pupils.

School Admissions Policy

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if grammar schools are permitted to object to appeal panels which consider issues other than those defined by the school's admission policy; and if appeal panels are able to consider levels of prior and projected academic attainment of pupils. [156001]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 29 March 2001]:* Appeal panels should consider whatever evidence is presented to them by appellants in support of their case. They may also request from the admission authority whatever additional information they themselves consider necessary to aid them in reaching their decision. Although there are statutory matters that must be taken into account by the appeal panel, such as the school's admission criteria, they may consider that other factors are also relevant to an individual case; this is for them to decide. The decisions of appeal panels must be complied with by all parties to the appeal; they can be challenged only through the courts. Guidance on appeal panel procedures is given in our Code of Practice on School Admission Appeals, to which all involved in the admissions process must have regard.

Threshold Assessment

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost is of recruitment, training and management of the Threshold Assessment; and what the cost is of delivery of the assessment as a service to schools. [156099]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 29 March 2001]:* The DfEE holds a contract with Cambridge Education Associates for the provision of threshold assessors and external advisers.

The value of the contract in each year of operation is subject to the volume and quality of assessor and adviser activity. The first threshold round will be much larger

than in following years because of the large number. We expect the costs to come down significantly in future years.

In the first 18 months of operation we expect the total contract costs to be in the range of £22 million to £24 million. Around half of this relates to adviser provision and half to assessors, and includes start-up and administration costs.

The DfEE also holds a contract with Centre for British Teachers for the training and accreditation of threshold assessors, external advisers and performance management consultants; and the training of headteachers in the introduction of the threshold and new performance management arrangements.

The value of the contract in each year of operation is subject to the volume and quality of the training provided. Costs for the first round of training will be significantly higher, as they include set up costs and cover the vast majority of training required to introduce the new arrangements. Again, we expect costs to come down in future years.

In the first phase of operation we expect the overall cost to be in the range of £12 million to £14 million, including start-up and administration costs.

Astra Pension Scheme

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will ensure that the calculation by the State Pension Scheme Office of the Guaranteed Minimum Pension for members of the Astra Pension Scheme is completed as a matter of urgency. [156109]

Mr. Wicks: The National Insurance Contributions Office is in contact with the trustees of the Astra Group Pension Scheme and is dealing with these calculations as a matter of urgency.

Departmental Policies (North Cornwall)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Cornwall constituency, the effects on North Cornwall of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [156124]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the North Cornwall constituency and Cornwall LEA.

Sure Start

Sure Start Kerrier was established in Camborne in September 2000 to provide support services to families using the facilities and expertise provided by the Children's Society, Cornwall Association for the Blind, and the local Education Action Zone. As well as offering advice on general family problems, specialists offer guidance on playgroup locations, speech and learning difficulties, as well as providing a playbus and sensory trail for blind children.

Beacon Schools

Delabole Community primary school—was awarded Beacon status on 1 September 2000 for leadership and management, early years provision, literacy and numeracy, geography, parental and community involvement, and special educational needs.

Schools with specialist status designated since 1997

Launceston College—technology college

Newquay Tretherras school—technology college.

School Achievement Awards

Eleven schools in the constituency were among 51 in Cornwall to be allocated a total of £343,750 in March 2001. Awards were around £5,000 for a typical primary school and £25,000 for a typical secondary school. Staff at the 11 schools received Improvement Awards because pupil performance in 2000 was substantially better than in 1997, or because schools had come out of special measures.

Education Action Zone

Camborne, Pool, and Redruth Success Zone includes one special school, 26 primary, and three secondary schools. It commenced in May 2000, and is intended to raise standards, motivate pupils, reduce exclusions, and involve parents directly in their children's education.

Key activities include: a new Early Years curriculum, greater parental involvement and guaranteed child care provision. Increased computing for Key Stage 1,2, and 3 pupils. Development of community learning centres. New approaches to teaching and learning and a new career structure for "para-professionals". Key partners in the Zone include Barclays Bank, Cornwall and Devon Careers, Cornwall Social Services, the local education authority, and 49 national and local businesses.

Class Size Plan

The September 2000 figures show that there are now only 255 (1.7 per cent.) pupils remaining in infant classes of 31 or more. The figure in January 1997 was 4,667 (29.5 per cent.).

Cornwall Performance Data

Percentage

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Key Stage 2, percentage of pupils achieving level 4				
English				
LEA	67	66	73	76
England	63	65	71	75
Maths				
LEA	67	62	72	72
England	62	59	69	72
Science				
LEA	74	74	82	85
England	69	69	78	85
GCSE—percentage of pupils achieving 5+A-C grades*				
LEA average	48.8	51.1	51.6	52.6
England average	45.1	46.3	47.9	49.2
5+A-C grades*				
LEA average	91.4	93.2	92.7	92.4
England average	86.0	87.5	88.5	88.9
No passes				
LEA average	4.0	2.6	3.4	3.3
England average	7.7	6.6	6.0	5.6
Average point score				
LEA average	n/a	39.9	40.2	40.5
England average	n/a	37.0	38.1	38.9

A/AS Level and Advanced GNVQ

	1998	1999	2000
Average points for 2 or more A/AS levels			
LEA average	17.8	18.9	17.8
England average	17.8	18.2	18.5
A/AS average per entry			
LEA average	5.2	5.3	5.1
England average	5.4	5.5	5.5

A/AS Level and Advanced GNVQ

	1998	1999	2000
Average point score GNVQs			
LEA average	10.1	10.5	10.5
England average	9.6	9.9	10.1

Funding per pupil

In Cornwall LEA, funding per pupil has increased by £370 in real terms between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

Cornwall LEA Capital funding

£000

Credit approvals	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	Total
ACG	6,372	6,251	6,573	7,445	7,100	33,741
SCA	355	724	520	280	—	1,879
PFI Credits	—	—	—	51	—	51
Grants	—	—	—	—	—	—
NDS	1,019	1,501	2,803	5,923	—	11,246
NDS Condition Funding	—	—	—	—	1,291	1,291
NGfL	—	979	651	1,763	—	3,393
VA Grant	225	176	160	388	532	1,481
Devolved Formula Capital	—	—	—	3,828	2,060	5,888
Science Lab	—	—	—	275	275	550
Access Initiative	—	—	—	—	465	465
Energy	—	145	—	—	—	145
AMP Support	—	—	80	—	—	80
SEED Challenge	—	—	—	274	310	584
Class Size Initiative	—	55	834	340	—	1,229
Outside Toilets	—	538	—	—	—	538
Schools Security at 75 per cent.	137	171	175	176	125	784
SSLU's	—	—	—	106	92	198
Total	12,250	20,849	11,796	10,540	8,108	63,543

Space for Sport and the Arts scheme

Kilkhampton Junior and Infants and Warbstow County Primary are to benefit from this scheme, details of which were announced on 27 March 2001. A joint DCMS and DfEE national initiative offering up to £130 million means that these two schools can now develop plans to meet local community needs for sport, arts, and social activities that will benefit pupils, teachers and their communities. A further six schools throughout Cornwall have also been included in the scheme.

Classroom of the future

Cornwall LEA was allocated £624,000 in February 2001. The project will be based at Camborne School and Community College, but will be accessible electronically and physically to all schools in the Camborne, Pool, Redruth (CPR) Success Zone. The project offers a space mission control centre and real time night astronomy during daylight hours in the UK—through remote control of satellites on the dark side of the planet and international links. Collaboration is taking place with the National Space and Science Centre in Leicester. Input is also promised from the Royal Navy.

New Deal for Schools allocations for schools in the North Cornwall constituency

Year/School	Project details	Grant awarded (£000)
1998–99		
Bodmin Community Primary	General building repairs	66
Camelford Primary	Upgrade classroom block	51
St. Petroc's CE Primary	General improvements	15
1999–2000		
Bodmin Community College	Fire precautions	43
Budehaven Community	Fire precautions	33
Budehaven Community	Structural repairs	32
Launceston College	Fire precautions	37
Launceston College	Structural repairs	32
Launceston College	Replace temporary classrooms	473
Summercourt Primary	Fire precautions	2
Treviglas Community College	Fire precautions	24
Treviglas Community College	Dust extraction	32
Wadebridge School	Fire precautions	32
Newquay Tretherras	Fire precautions	46
Sir James Smith Community	Fire precautions	25
Sir James Smith Community	Replacement of time expired temporary classrooms	28
Sir James Smith Community	Replace failing window walling	23

New Deal for Schools allocations for schools in the North Cornwall constituency

Year/School	*Project details*	*Grant awarded (£000)*
2000–01		
Blisland Community Bodmin Community Primary Boscastle Community Cardinham School	Part of 36 school package for primary fire precautions	[1]69
Berrycoombe School Bodmin Community Primary Junior Bodmin Community College Camelford Primary Indian Queens Primary St. Merryn School	Part of 16 school package for playground repairs	[1]139
2000–01		
Bodmin Community College	Part of 13 school package for structural repairs	[1]435
Trevisker Primary	Part of 8 school package for electrical works	[1]210
Berrycoombe School St. Mary's CA Primary Bude Infant St. Columb Minor School Trenance Infant Beacon Infant and Nursery	Part of 37 school package for flame failure devices on school kitchen ovens	[1]115k

[1] Denotes total allocations made to Cornwall LEA for package projects covering a number of schools throughout Cornwall, including those shown in the constituency

Further Education

Student numbers at all FEFC funded institutions where home postcode is in the Local Authority District of North Cornwall.

1996–97 to 1999–200

	16–18		*Adult*	
	Full-time	*Part-time*	*Full-time*	*Part-time*
FEFC funded				
1996–97	616	398	180	5,089
1996–98	587	379	210	4,831
1998–99	583	346	249	4,538
1999–2000	621	336	251	4,444
Non-FEFC funded				
1996–97	30	92	29	318
1997–98	29	120	43	340
1998–99	30	141	76	658
1999–2000	30	143	111	534

Modern Apprenticeships

Information on Modern Apprenticeships for all English constituencies will be placed in the Library by the end of March.

New Deal for Young People

In the North Cornwall constituency, 1,219 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 745 have found jobs, 609 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The working age employment rate in Cornwall in autumn 2000 was 71.8 per cent., below the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 75.6 per cent., in autumn 1998 70.9 per cent., and in autumn 1999 69.9 per cent. These figures are volatile at this level, and our best interpretation of the trend in the employment rate for Cornwall since 1997 is that it has been broadly flat.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 8.2 per cent. in February 1997 to 5.0 per cent. in February 2001 in the North Cornwall constituency.

School Achievement Awards

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools have won school achievement awards; and if he will make a statement. [156759].

Ms Estelle Morris: About 7,000 schools have won Achievement Awards worth about £5,000 for a typical primary school and about £25,000 for a typical secondary school. These will enable schools to pay bonuses to staff teams.

About 5,000 of these schools have been awarded improvement awards. There have been some amendments to the original list of improvement awards because of a statistical error in the calculation of the 1997 average point score for Key Stage 2 tests. The final lists have been placed in the Library. The lists also update answers previously given to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) about School Achievement Awards on 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 160W, 165W and 168W, and provide rankings of improvement award winners by the differences between their average point scores in 1997 and 2000. Schools that had improved, but with the statistical change would not have merited an improvement award, will not lose financially as a result of these changes.

Schools (Finance)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to standardise the financial information required of schools. [156546]

Ms Estelle Morris: I am pleased to announce that we have today, in partnership with Ofsted and the Audit Commission, published a consultation document seeking

views on the introduction of consistent financial reporting for schools maintained by local education authorities in England. The exercise closes in July. Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Library. Copies can also be obtained from the DfEE's publications centre and on-line from the Department's Consultation Unit website www.dfee.gov.uk/consultations.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Code

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Prime Minister when the Government will respond to the recommendations of the Third report of the Select Committee on Public Administration, 'The Ministerial Code: Improving the Rule Book'. [156208]

The Prime Minister: The Third Report of the Public Administration Select Committee, "The Ministerial Code: Improving the Rule Book", was published on 14 February. The Government will respond in due course.

TREASURY

Taxation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the amounts *(a)* in current prices, *(b)* in constant 2000–01 prices and *(c)* as percentages of personal income, taken by (i) income taxes, (ii) national insurance contributions, (iii) value-added tax, (iv) other central Government indirect taxes, (v) the aggregate of (i) to (iv), (vi) average council tax payments and (vii) the aggregate of (i) to (iv) and (viii) for (1) a single person, (2) a married couple without children, both working and (3) a married couple with two children, husband in work, wife not working, in each case at 50, 75, 100, 150 and 200 per cent. of average earnings for the financial year 2000–01, taking account of changes announced in his Budget Statement and previously announced changes and for each of the years (v) 1996–97, (w) 1997–98, (x) 1998–99, (y) 1999–2000, (z) 2000–01. [153381]

Dawn Primarolo: The available information, which shows income tax (including Child Benefit and Working Families Tax Credit from its first full year of implementation) and National Insurance Contributions, at multiples of median full-time earnings of all employees is given in the table. The figures are shown in current prices and as percentages of income, for the years 1996–97 to 2001–02, and take account of changes announced in the Budget. Estimating the impact of indirect taxes on these very specific family types is meaningless because spending patterns vary considerably between households of the same type and income. The level of council tax payments will also vary depending on where families live.

The figures use median all-employee earnings. However, the data are only available since 1983. Looking over a longer time period, using male mean earnings, the series shows that the direct tax burden on a single earner family on average earnings and with two children in 2001–02 will be the lowest since 1972.

	Multiples of median earnings				
	50%	*75%*	*100%*	*150%*	*200%*
Single person					
1996–97					
£ per week					
Gross income	153.98	230.97	307.96	461.94	615.92
Income Tax	16.58	35.06	53.53	90.49	135.94
NICs	10.52	18.22	25.92	40.62	40.62
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	10.8	15.2	17.4	19.6	22.1
NICs	6.8	7.9	8.4	8.8	6.6
Tax and NICs	17.6	23.1	25.8	28.4	28.7
1997–98					
£ per week					
Gross income	160.37	240.55	320.73	481.10	641.46
Income Tax	16.63	35.07	53.51	90.40	137.78
NICs	11.08	19.09	27.11	41.54	41.54
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	10.4	14.6	16.7	18.8	21.5
NICs	6.9	7.9	8.5	8.6	6.5
Tax and NICs	17.3	22.5	25.1	27.4	28.0
1998–99					
£ per week					
Gross income	166.35	249.53	332.70	499.05	665.40
Income Tax	17.22	36.36	55.49	93.75	142.81
NICs	11.52	19.83	28.15	43.38	43.38
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	10.4	14.6	16.7	18.8	21.5
NICs	6.9	7.9	8.5	8.7	6.5
Tax and NICs	17.3	22.5	25.1	27.5	28.0
1999–2000					
£ per week					
Gross income	172.23	258.34	344.45	516.68	688.90
Income Tax	16.69	36.49	56.30	95.91	146.93
NICs	10.62	19.23	27.85	43.40	43.40
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	9.7	14.1	16.3	18.6	21.3
NICs	6.2	7.4	8.1	8.4	6.3
Tax and NICs	15.9	21.6	24.4	27.0	27.6
2000–01					
£ per week					
Gross income	179.98	269.96	359.95	539.93	719.90
Income Tax	17.53	37.33	57.13	96.72	152.41
NICs	10.40	19.40	28.40	45.90	45.90
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	9.7	13.8	15.9	17.9	21.2
NICs	5.8	7.2	7.9	8.5	6.4
Tax and NICs	15.5	21.0	23.8	26.4	27.5
2001–02					
£ per week					
Gross income	188.07	282.11	376.15	564.22	752.30
Income Tax	17.85	38.54	59.23	100.60	159.93
NICs	10.11	19.51	28.91	47.72	48.80
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	9.5	13.7	15.7	17.8	21.3
NICs	5.4	6.9	7.7	8.5	6.5
Tax and NICs	14.9	20.6	23.4	26.3	27.7
Two earner married couple, no children					
1996–97					
£ per week					
Gross income	153.98	230.97	307.96	461.94	615.92
Income Tax	0.00	12.07	28.96	64.95	101.90
NICs	5.64	13.34	21.04	36.43	51.83
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	0.0	5.2	9.4	14.1	16.5
NICs	3.7	5.8	6.8	7.9	8.4
Tax and NICs	3.7	11.0	16.2	21.9	25.0
1997–98					
£ per week					
Gross income	160.37	240.55	320.73	481.10	641.46
Income Tax	0.00	11.72	28.83	64.86	101.74
NICs	6.12	14.13	22.15	38.19	54.23

	Multiples of median earnings				
	50%	75%	100%	150%	200%
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	0.0	4.9	9.0	13.5	15.9
NICs	3.8	5.9	6.9	7.9	8.5
Tax and NICs	3.8	10.7	15.9	21.4	24.3
1998–99					
£ per week					
Gross income	166.35	249.53	332.70	499.05	665.40
Income Tax	0.00	12.16	29.88	67.23	105.49
NICs	6.40	14.71	23.03	39.67	56.30
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	0.0	4.9	9.0	13.5	15.9
NICs	3.8	5.9	6.9	7.9	8.5
Tax and NICs	3.8	10.8	15.9	21.4	24.3
1999–2000					
£ per week					
Gross income	172.23	258.34	344.45	516.68	688.90
Income Tax	0.00	10.94	29.59	69.20	108.81
NICs	4.02	12.63	21.25	38.47	55.69
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	0.0	4.2	8.6	13.4	15.8
NICs	2.3	4.9	6.2	7.4	8.1
Tax and NICs	2.3	9.1	14.8	20.8	23.9
2000–01					
£ per week					
Gross income	179.98	269.96	359.95	539.93	719.90
Income Tax	2.37	15.94	35.07	74.66	114.26
NICs	3.20	11.80	20.80	38.79	56.79
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	1.3	5.9	9.7	13.8	15.9
NICs	1.8	4.4	5.8	7.2	7.9
Tax and NICs	3.1	10.3	15.5	21.0	23.8
2001–02					
£ per week					
Gross income	188.07	282.11	376.15	564.22	752.30
Income Tax	2.56	16.28	35.70	77.08	118.46
NICs	2.58	10.81	20.21	39.02	57.83
Percentage of gross earnings					
Income Tax	1.4	5.8	9.5	13.7	15.7
NICs	1.4	3.8	5.4	6.9	7.7
Tax and NICs	2.7	9.6	14.9	20.6	23.4
Single-earner married couple, two children					
1996–97					
£ per week					
Gross income	153.98	230.97	307.96	461.94	615.92
Income Tax	11.41	29.89	48.37	85.33	130.78
NICs	10.52	18.22	25.92	40.62	40.62
Child Benefit (CB)	19.60	19.60	19.60	19.60	19.60
Percentage of gross earnings					
Net income tax	7.4	12.9	15.7	18.5	21.2
NICs	6.8	7.9	8.4	8.8	6.6
Net income tax + NICs—CB	1.5	12.3	17.8	23.0	24.6
1997–98					
£ per week					
Gross income	160.37	240.55	320.73	481.10	641.46
Income Tax	11.35	29.79	48.23	85.12	132.50
NICs	11.08	19.09	27.11	41.54	41.54
Child Benefit (CB)	20.05	20.05	20.05	20.05	20.05
Percentage of gross earnings					
Net income tax	7.1	12.4	15.0	17.7	20.7
NICs	6.9	7.9	8.5	8.6	6.5
Net income tax + NICs—CB	1.5	12.0	17.2	22.2	24.0
1998–99					
£ per week					
Gross income	166.35	249.53	332.70	499.05	665.40
Income Tax	11.74	30.87	50.00	88.27	137.33
NICs	11.52	19.83	28.15	43.38	43.38
Child Benefit (CB)	20.75	20.75	20.75	20.75	20.75
Percentage of gross earnings					
Net income tax	7.1	12.4	15.0	17.7	20.6
NICs	6.9	7.9	8.5	8.7	6.5
Net income tax + NICs—CB	1.5	12.0	17.3	22.2	24.0
1999–2000					
£ per week					
Gross income	172.23	258.34	344.45	516.68	688.90
Income Tax	12.90	32.71	52.51	92.12	143.14
NICs	10.62	19.23	27.85	43.40	43.40
Child Benefit (CB)	24.00	24.00	24.00	24.00	24.00
Percentage of gross earnings					
Net income tax	7.5	12.7	15.2	17.8	20.8
NICs	6.2	7.4	8.1	8.4	6.3
Net income tax + NICs—CB	–0.3	10.8	16.4	21.6	23.6
2000–01					
£ per week					
Gross income	179.98	269.96	359.95	539.93	719.90
Income Tax	17.53	37.33	57.13	96.72	152.41
NICs	10.40	19.40	28.40	45.90	45.90
Child Benefit (CB)	25.00	25.00	25.00	25.00	25.00
Working Families Tax Credit	82.27	48.62	14.96	0.00	0.00
Percentage of gross earnings					
Net income tax	–36.0	–4.2	11.7	17.9	21.2
NICs	5.8	7.2	7.9	8.5	6.4
Net income tax + NICs—CB	–44.1	–6.3	12.7	21.8	24.1
2001–02					
£ per week					
Gross Income	188.07	282.11	376.15	564.22	752.30
Income Tax	7.85	28.54	49.23	90.60	156.57
NICs	10.11	19.51	28.91	47.72	48.80
Child Benefit (CB)	25.85	25.85	25.85	25.85	25.85
Working Families Tax Credit	79.98	44.81	9.64	0.00	0.00
Percentage of gross earnings					
Net income tax	–38.4	–5.8	10.5	16.1	20.8
NICs	5.4	6.9	7.7	8.5	6.5
Net income tax + NICs—CB	–46.7	–8.0	11.3	19.9	23.9

Notes:

1. Income tax payments are calculated on the basis that the households receive no tax reliefs other than the standard allowances and only have income from employment. All earners, including wives, are assumed to pay Class 1 National Insurance contributions at the contracted-in rate.

2. Earnings are taken to be the median gross weekly earnings of all full-time employees on adult rates with pay unaffected by absence. (Median earnings are more representative of the population as a whole than mean male full-time earnings.)

3. A family with two children is assumed to have both children aged under 11.

4. In line with the convention in the Tax Benefit Reference Manual, Child Benefit is treated as negative income tax.

5. Working Families Tax Credit is included from its first full year of implementation in 2000–01.

6. For the two earner family it is assumed that earnings are split 60%:40%.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will answer the Question tabled by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton for answer on 9 March (Ref 153381). [156436]

Dawn Primarolo: I have done so today.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Passport Agency

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the name of the United Kingdom Passport Agency; and when he will publish the Agency's framework document. [156761]

Mr. Straw: Following a Quinquennial Review in January 2001, an announcement was made that Ministers had agreed that the Passport Agency should retain its status as an Executive Agency for another five years and that it should continue to manage the Criminal Records Bureau. The Agency will be changing its name to reflect its broader responsibilities and will now be called the Passport and Records Agency. The Agency's Framework document has been published today. Copies of the revised document will be placed in the library.

Immigration

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will make authorisations under section 19D of the Race Relations Act 1976 (as amended) in respect of the carrying out of immigration functions. [156766]

Mrs. Roche: I have today placed a copy of the authorisation made under section 19D of the extended Race Relations Act in the Library, together with a brief explanatory note. Decisions on immigration and asylum applications will continue to be made on the merits of each individual case in accordance with immigration legislation and policies approved by Ministers. The authorisation mainly concerns the process by which such decisions are reached, and covers the following areas:

Examination of passengers by the Immigration Service at ports of entry;

Persons wishing to travel to the United Kingdom (to enable the operation of a flexible immigration control, including pre-clearance overseas);

The setting of removal directions;

Asylum work streaming;

Permission to work in relation to the British Universities North America Club programme, the Japan Youth Exchange Scheme and certain British Dependent Territories citizens;

Translation of documents.

Additional authorisations will be made by Ministers as and where necessary, including, where justified by intelligence or statistical evidence of a threat to the immigration control by those seeking to enter the United Kingdom by deception, specific authorisations to immigration officers at ports to examine passengers more closely in limited circumstances on the basis of ethnic or national origin. The Race Monitor to be appointed under section 19E of the Race Relations Act (as amended) will report to Parliament via the Secretary of State on the likely effect of authorisations made by Ministers and on how they are operated in practice by officials.

National Technical Assistance Centre

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the development of the National Technical Assistance Centre. [156765]

Mr. Straw: I announced my intention to establish a Government Technical Assistance Centre, using £25 million of Capital Modernisation Funding, in a written reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 1W.

The facility will now be known as the National Technical Assistance Centre (NTAC). This is to reflect clearly that it will provide technical assistance to law enforcement agencies nationwide. NTAC will be a 24 hour centre operated by the Home Office on behalf of all the law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies, to process lawfully intercepted communications and lawfully acquired material and make it intelligible to intelligence analysts. It will also support criminal investigations through the provision of evidential material derived from electronically protected data.

Although, for reasons of physical security, NTAC will be located within the headquarters of the Security Service, the Home Office will retain responsibility for the day-to-day management of NTAC beyond when it acquires an initial operating capability. Once the operation of NTAC is firmly established, that decision will be reviewed.

NTAC will handle material obtained under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and be subject to review by the Interception of Communications Commissioner and the Intelligence Services Commissioner. It will also be subject to the safeguards contained in that Act.

NTAC may also process material lawfully acquired under the Security Service Act 1989, the Intelligence Services Act 1994 and the Police Act 1997 for which it will be subject to review by the Intelligence Services Commissioner and the Surveillance Commissioners. It will also be subject to the scrutiny of the courts in respect of its handling of lawfully seized material and material lawfully acquired through the exercise of other statutory powers.

The first head of NTAC will be Assistant Chief Constable, Ian Humphreys, who has joined the Home Office on secondment from Kent County Constabulary where he was Head of Criminal Investigation.

Active Community Grants

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will announce the Active Community grants to voluntary and community organisations for 2001–02. [156764]

Mr. Boateng: I am today announcing grants of over £18 million that have been allocated to boost the work of 149 voluntary and community organisations across the country.

For 2001–2002 a total of £18,060,937 will be awarded to cover a wide range of volunteering and employee volunteering schemes, and community development projects. Forty-seven organisations will receive grants for the first time.

The amount available for these grants has been increased by £8 million over the next three years, with organisations sharing an extra £1 million this year, a further £3 million in 2002–03 and an extra £4 million in 2003–04.

A list of the successful applicants has been placed in the Library.

Intrusive Surveillance

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who will authorise the use of intrusive

surveillance by Her Majesty's Prison Service under Part II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000; who in the Prison Service may apply to use the power; and if he will make a statement on the use of intrusive surveillance in private prisons. [156763]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Secretary of State will authorise the use of intrusive surveillance carried out by Her Majesty's Prison Service under Part II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) on application by persons holding an office, rank or position in Her Majesty's Prison Service itself. In practice, the Governor in charge of the relevant prison will make the case for such an application to be made. This case will be submitted to a Senior Civil Servant with operational experience within Prison Service Headquarters who will be a Gold Commander (in the case of a hostage situation) or, otherwise, an Area Manager or the Head of Security, one of whom will formally make the application to the Home Office. This process will be laid down in the Security Manual followed by Her Majesty's Prison Service. Within the Home Office, applications will be scrutinised by a dedicated warrants unit, headed up by a Senior Civil Servant charged with providing advice to the Secretary of State. A full audit trail will be available to the Chief Surveillance Commissioner who has a statutory responsibility to oversee the use of intrusive surveillance by Her Majesty's Prison Service.

Intrusive surveillance may be used in private prisons, and will be regulated by Part II of RIPA. A Senior Civil Servant with operational experience at Gold Commander, Area Manager or Head of Security level within Prison Service Headquarters will make an application to the Home Office in response to a case made by the Director of the relevant prison. Authorisations will be given by the Secretary of State. Private prisons are contractually obliged to follow the procedures set out in the Prison Service Security Manual which will set out how the application process will operate.

Volunteering

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to encourage and enable people aged 50 years and over to volunteer and become involved in their communities. [156756]

Mr. Boateng: I have received the report of the advisory group of experts, drawn mainly from the voluntary sector and chaired by my noble Friend Baroness Greengross of Notting Hill, whom the Government asked last year to develop a plan to enable those aged 50 and over to become or continue to be involved with their local communities.

The report recommends the establishment of an independent Experience Corps Company to take forward action. The Government warmly welcome this proposal and will be providing funding of £19 million over the next three years to facilitate it. We will be working with Baroness Greengross; as the company Chairman, to develop an agreed way forward. A copy of the group's report has been placed in the Library.

Police Numbers (Wales)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* funded and *(b)* actual police officers were in post in each of the Welsh constabularies on (i) 31 March 1997 and (ii) the latest date for which figures are available. [154812]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The information requested is set out in the table. The figures for funded officers have been provided by the Chief Officers of Police of the four Welsh forces.

The Chief Constable of North Wales Police has devolved decisions on police numbers to divisional commanders and therefore cannot provide information on funded numbers. However, it is the policy of the force to replace all leavers with new recruits.

	31 March 1997		*31 January 2001*	
Force	*Funded officers*[1]	*Actual number of officers*[1]	*Funded officers*[1]	*Actual number of officers*[1]
Dyfed-Powys	1,007	1,005	1,067	1,063
Gwent	1,241	1,243	1,270	1,265
North Wales	n/a	1,369	n/a	1,432
South Wales	2,994	2,976	3,036	3,103
Total	n/a	6,593	n/a	6,863

[1] All figures are full-time equivalents.

Departmental Policies (North Devon)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Devon constituency, the effects on North Devon of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [155904]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the House of Commons Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the North Devon constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

North Devon district council was awarded approximately £153,000 for a 13-camera system covering crime hotspots in the Barnstaple area, including two car parks that are not covered by the current CCTV system. The scheme aims to significantly reduce violent crime, disorder and vehicle crime, also reducing the number of repeat victims and generally improving the quality of life for local residents.

Youth Offending

Devon Youth Offending Service (YOS) was one of the initial pilot areas for Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and also piloted Parenting Orders and Child Safety Orders. The Devon YOT is one of the largest in the country and is divided into a three team structure: North Devon (North Devon, Torridge, West Devon districts); East Devon (Exeter, Mid Devon, East Devon districts); South Devon (Teignbridge, South Hams districts). With regard to habitual re-offending it is still early days for measurement, but a re-offending figure of 9 per cent. with all Final Warnings has been achieved since June 2000, (compared with a figure of 40 per cent. for all cautions over the previous two years). In addition a drop of 23 per cent. in youth crime for the period of October to December 2000 has been recorded. Intervention with young offenders is occurring earlier resulting in the teams having worked with over 1,000 young people by the end of this financial year against approximately 450 in the last full year pre YOT (1998).

Overall youth crime in Devon is lower than the National and Regional average with one offence per one 106 of the 10–17 year old population. There was a reduction in 10 out of the 13 categories of crime from quarter 2 to quarter 3 2000–2001. Racially aggravated youth crime is very low (only nine offences) despite a Devon and Cornwall Constabulary figure that has grown by over 100 per cent. in the last year post recommendations following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry encouraging greater reporting of racial incidents.

The YOS has installed a dedicated Information Technology (IT) network and database—"Youth Offending Information Systems" (YOIS). Over 2,500 records have been inputted onto this system. Full data return have been made to the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for all three first quarters. An electronic 'ASSET' assessment tool has also been installed and electronic case management training is scheduled for 2001.

The YOS has successfully integrated into the strategy groups of all eight District Crime Reduction Partnerships. The YOS is also involved in the Cornwall and Devon 'CONNEXIONS' pilot with 'personal advisers' working in all three units. This scheme is a Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) and Government initiative to provide young people between the age of 13–19 with advice regarding education and careers and is based in schools, particularly targeting those at risk of underachieving. The YOS Manager is on the new Devon Drug Action Team and YOS team staff are involved with all eight district Drug Reference Groups/Drug Strategy Groups. Staff from all three teams have been trained in Restorative Justice techniques, victim awareness and Cognitive Behavioural work. The Devon YOS are currently operating with an average arrest to sentence time for persistent young offenders of 65 days (below the Government target of 71 days and the second best figure in the country). The YOS are implementing five YJB grant aided projects: 'Mentoring' (North Devon); 'Restorative Justice', 'Intensive Supervision and Support', 'Parenting' and 'Bail Supervision and Support' across all three YOS teams.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of North Devon to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website. (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average time taken was to make *(a)* an initial decision and *(b)* a final decision on asylum applications, in total and for (i) individual and (ii) family applications last year; what the average time for initial decisions was in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [155574]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* The majority of new substantive family applications lodged between 1 April 2000 and 31 December 2000 had an initial decision within two months.

Information regarding the average time taken to make an initial decision is not available for the whole of 2000. The table provides an average for the period of October to December 2000. The average decision times have been calculated using all decisions made for which data are available, including a number of cases decided under the backlog criteria, as well as new cases. These data are still subject to revision following quality checking. Data for earlier months are not available.

Information relating to the final decision is not available.

Average time to initial decision[1,2] for the period October 2000 to December 2000[3]

	Months
All initial decisions[3,4]	14
of which:	
Family	5
Individual	14

[1] The average length of time (in months) is calculated from date application is lodged to the date of ipitial decision, and relates to the month in which the decisions were made.
[2] Figures are estimates based on cases for which information is recorded.
[3] Based on data from ACID (Asylum Cases Information Database).
[4] Excluding dependants.
[5] Provisional Figures.

Average time to initial decision[4], in months, 1991–1999[1,2,3]

Year of decision	All applications	Applications lodged pre July 1993	Applications lodged post July 1993
1991	16	16	n/a
1992	20	20	n/a
1993	20	20	n/a

Average time to initial decision[4], in months, 1991–1999[1,2,3]

Year of decision	All applications	Applications lodged pre July 1993	Applications lodged post July 1993
1994	17	26	6
1995	18	41	9
1996	17	52	11
1997	22	64	14
1998	17	78	12
1999	35	91	16

n/a = Not applicable

[1] Excluding dependants.

[2] Figures are estimates based on cases for which information is recorded.

[3] Based on data from Refugee Index.

[4] The average length of time (in months) is calculated from date application is lodged to the date of initial decision, and relates to the year in which the decisions were made.

[5] As at the end of December 1999, excluding cases waiting an initial decision.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to achieve his targets for the time taken to process asylum applications *(a)* for initial decisions and *(b)* final decisions; and if he will make a statement. [155575]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 26 March 2001]:* In line with the 1998 White Paper, we expect to be making 60 per cent. of initial decisions in new substantive asylum cases within two months from April 2001.

The Court Service is aiming to complete 65 per cent. of asylum appeals through both tiers of the Immigration Appellate Authorities within four months from April 2001.

Chief Constables

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* general guidance and *(b)* specific instructions are issued to chief constables on the contacts they may have with hon. Members in the run up to a General Election by (i) him and (ii) other organisations. [155733]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No such guidance or instructions are issued by the Home Office. I understand that the President of the Association of Chief Police Officers has written to Chief Constables' colleagues requesting that they facilitate visits to forces and local police stations by parliamentary candidates during a general election campaign.

Asylum Support

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the review into the workings of the asylum support system will be concluded; and if he will make a statement. [156092]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 413W.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are being supported by NASS in each area of the country; and if he will make a statement. [156089]

Mrs. Roche: The number of asylum seekers (including dependants) allocated support by National Asylum Support Service (NASS), as at the end of February 2001, were as follows:

Region	Allocated accommodation	Allocated voucher support only	Total
East Midlands	1,200	220	1,420
East of England	40	810	840
Greater London	420	8,120	8,540
North East	4,010	30	4,040
North West	5,100	220	5,320
North Ireland	40	—	40
Scotland	2,280	160	2,440
South Central	270	1,530	1,790
South West	520	180	700
Wales	30	70	100
West Midlands	2,330	210	2,540
Yorkshire and Humberside	5,180	100	5,280
Total	21,410	11,630	33,040

[1] Indicates between 1 and 4. All figures rounded to the nearest ten so may not add up to totals.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the fraudulent use of vouchers will be part of the review of the working of the voucher support system; and if he will make a statement. [156090]

Mrs. Roche: A number of respondents to the review of the operation of the asylum voucher scheme have commented on the fraudulent use of vouchers and their comments will be taken into consideration.

Thouria Zaghali

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department received an application from Mrs. Thouria Zaghali (reference B469820–2) for leave to settle in the United Kingdom as the spouse of a British citizen; and when he will take decision on the application. [156085]

Mrs. Roche: Mrs. Zaghali's current application for leave to remain was made in December 1999. It has now been decided to grant her leave to remain on the basis of marriage.

Passports

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to establish a more secure method of delivering passports to UK citizens who have had their passports renewed. [156000]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 22 March 2001]:* The United Kingdom Passport Agency regularly reviews the methods it uses to send passports to its customers. The vast majority of the five million passports the Agency issues annually by first class post arrive safely at their destinations. The Agency has no plans to change its present arrangements, but is working closely with the Royal Mail to improve security of passports in the post.

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his current policy is with regard to the licensing under the Animals (Scientific

Procedures) Act 1986 of the production of monoclonal antibodies by the ascites method; and if he will make a statement. [156757]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We announced in November 1997 our decision to phase out the licensing under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 of monoclonal antibody production using ascitic mice unless exceptional scientific justification exists. Under this policy, new licences are not issued unless clear evidence is presented that in vitro attempts at production have failed or that the use of animals is justified for specific diagnostic or therapeutic products. An outright ban is not possible without primary legislation, and it is recognised that monoclonal antibodies have particular value in the diagnosis of infectious diseases and in the treatment of some types of cancer.

Only three new authorities have been issued for this work since this policy came fully into effect on 1 January 1999. I shall personally consider any future proposal to grant a licence using this procedure.

Departmental Policies (North Cornwall)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the North Cornwall constituency, the effects on North Cornwall of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [156125]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the North Cornwall constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Restormel borough council in partnership with Devon and Cornwall Constabulary were awarded £70,000 under round 1 of the CCTV Initiative for a mobile scheme consisting of one vehicle and two cameras. This will compliment the existing town centre schemes at Newquay and St Austell allowing crime and anti-social issues to be targeted in a borough council area which is predominantly rural.

Targeted Policing Initiative

Devon and Cornwall Constabulary were awarded £950,000 under round 2 of the Targeted Policing Initiative for a project to reduce violent crime linked to alcohol abuse (Operation Amethyst). The project will provide immediate support to victims of domestic violence at hospital Accident and Emergency Departments. It will tackle on and off licensed premises selling alcohol to those under the legal age limit. A media campaign will be launched to publicise the negative effects of alcohol. Youth workers will be provided to work with those people misusing alcohol. Other aims of the project include: creating an Alcohol Assessment Stabilisation Programme in conjunction with an arrest referral scheme; management of the licensing environment; creation of a Safety Advisory Group to provide guidance and advice, and provide education about alcohol.

Reducing Burglary Initiative

Devon and Cornwall Constabulary in partnership with North Cornwall District Council were awarded approximately £5,000 for a project in Launceston aimed at elderly residents. The proposed interventions include training for dealing with callers, a media campaign, life-line alarms and other security upgrades and community awareness training.

Youth Offending

North Cornwall is covered by the Cornwall Youth Offending Team (YOT). The YOT directly provides assessment and intervention work in support of: final warnings; bail support and supervision services; supervision of youth court orders and throughcare and post release supervision for young people sentenced to custody. The YOT also provides responsible officers for child safety and parenting orders. The YOT also manage the delivery of services supplied by other agencies including: drugs misuse assessment and intervention accessed through the RAPIDLY project, which is funded with the assistance of the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Health Action Zone; and the Hot Spot project dealing with young fire setters, which operates as a collaborative venture involving the Fire Service, Dreadnought and Social Services. The YJB are contributing approximately £197,000 to the RAPIDLY project. This project aims to reduce youth offending by rapid intervention with persons who are offending through substance misuse. The objective is to reduce young people's involvement in substance abuse, directly and indirectly related to youth offending, improve their health, education and employment. The level of intervention varies ranging from information and education, counselling and an activity based programme to medical treatment. The YJB is also contributing £125,000 to a Bail Support Scheme. This project aims to enable more young offenders to remain in the community or in non-secure accommodation prior to sentencing.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of North Cornwall to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 49,690 by the end of February 2001; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

CABINET OFFICE

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the regulatory impact assessments published during the latest six month period. [156748]

Mr. Stringer: The Government are committed to ensuring that regulations are necessary, give effective protection, balance cost and risk, are fair and command public confidence. In accordance with this, we require Departments to produce and publish Regulatory Impact Assessments for all regulatory proposals likely to have an impact on business.

I have presented to Parliament today a Command Paper listing Regulatory Impact Assessments published between 1 July and 31 December 2000. Copies of those listed have been placed in the House Libraries. This is the fourteenth such Command Paper.

Drug Addicts

Mrs. Gorman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will estimate the number of drug addicts in the UK. [156203]

Mr. Stringer: The number of problematic drug users—usually characterised as 'addicts'—in the mid-to-late 1990s, has been estimated at 266,000 for England, Scotland and Wales.

Foot and Mouth

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what discussions she has had with *(a)* the Prime Minister and *(b)* other Cabinet colleagues on whether the foot and mouth epidemic would justify declaring a state of emergency; and if she will list the dates of such discussions. [156205]

Marjorie Mowlam: Under Exemption 2 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, information about internal discussions is not disclosed.

Absenteeism

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 12 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 472W, if she will reconcile her statement concerning the classification of the requested data by public and private sector with the answer from the Chancellor of the Exchequer of 20 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 196–97W. [155397]

Marjorie Mowlam: The answer I gave to the hon. Member on 12 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 472W, was partly inaccurate. The correct position has been set out in a letter to him dated 20 March 2001 from the Director of Social Statistics in ONS, *Official Report*, column 197W.

Chief Scientific Adviser

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the role of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser in the work of the Hawley Group. [154517]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The Chief Scientific Adviser has been kept fully informed of key developments stemming from the work of the Hawley Group.